

## Back on Track

THE final year of study is not something most school-leavers would elect to do twice.

So spare a thought for Melbourne's Kieran Joiner, who was forced to spread his Victorian Certificate of Education over two years due to illness.

It has been a rough ride for the Croydon Hill's resident since he was diagnosed with Crohn's disease a week after his 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, in 2004. Kieran said he can still clearly remember the doctor's words - "chronic illness" – and feeling the "scary shock" of realising his condition had no cure and would be a life-long affliction. He missed the last term of school as he lay in bed trying to regain his strength and the third of his body weight he lost in the three weeks before he was diagnosed.

The severity of his disease also resulted in long absences from school during the following two years. But Kieran was determined to complete his schooling and secure a career as a mechanical engineer, so with the backing of Norwood Secondary College he elected to spread his studies over two years. The move paid off, with Kieran topping the class and being awarded the school's prize for physics, one of the three subjects he studied in 2007.

Unfortunately he was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome at the start of last year, which impacted on his chemistry, visual communications and design, and English studies. "I tried to push myself to get to every class but I had to pull back with the fatigue," Kieran said. "That was tough to do because if I do something I'm one of those people who like to do it well. "I would get up and just make it through school then collapse on the couch at home, so I didn't have a lot of time for homework."

On top of this, Kieran suffered a flare-up, but said it was the fatigue that had him contemplating throwing in his studies mid year. "But then I just got to a point where I came to the realisation that you can only do your best, and that helped calm me before exams."

With the support of his teachers, Kieran made it through the exams, stopping for approved rest periods so he could rest and take refreshments. His perseverance paid off, with his final score easily securing him a place in mechanical engineering at Swinburne University of Technology. He was also awarded the school's prize for chemistry, as well as the 2008 Endeavour Award, announced at the valedictory dinner. "I thought I would be in tears about it but when it came to the moment I had the biggest smile on my face; you couldn't wipe it off. It was great to be recognised."

The award was for overcoming adversity, and helping the community, exemplified by the fundraising day Kieran organised at his school last October, which raised more than \$2000 for Crohn's & Colitis Australia. "I really wanted to help out because the government doesn't do much for fundraising, it's more the people connected to it. I just wanted to make a difference and raise awareness so we can get more research happening."

And the good news continued, with recent tests showing Kieran's health was improving. "To be told I was finally in remission after everything I had been through in the past four years – it was like starting a new chapter in my life."

The 19-year-old said his experiences had taught him that a chronic illness need not prevent you achieving your goals, and advised others to continue "striving for your dream".

"Don't let anyone tell you that you can't. Just don't stress about things piling up. You can only handle one thing at a time."