

# 'Better than fantastic'

young people talk about youth development



Ausyouth#  
Supporting youth development across Australia

# 'Better than fantastic'.

Young people talk about youth development

May 2002

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## FOREWORD

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Ausyouth is a national project providing a range of services to promote, coordinate and facilitate youth development as an approach and practice across Australia. The project is funded by the Commonwealth Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and contracted through the Youth Bureau, Department of Family and Community Services.

Ausyouth believes that young people have much to say about the youth development programs and activities involving them. The direct voice of young people adds significant weight to the identification and implementation of good practice in youth development programs and activities, and in gaining support for community investment in youth development.

The “What Young People Say” stream of Ausyouth’s work has been designed to provide opportunities for young people to comment on their experiences of youth development. Two separate companion publications document the two different processes used to enable young people’s voices to be heard:

- Have your say – a series of focus workshops held with different groups of young people involved in youth development activities from around Australia; and
- ‘Better than Fantastic’. Young people talk about youth development – a series of in-depth individual interviews with young people with various youth development program experience.

The workshops and interviews focus specifically on good practice in relation to youth development program implementation and the outcomes for young people from their involvement in youth development activities. All participation by young people in these processes has been voluntary.

Ausyouth gratefully acknowledges the willingness and enthusiasm of the young people involved in contributing to this work. The support of a number of youth development program leaders and coordinators in facilitating the organisation of workshops and meetings is also gratefully acknowledged.



# INTRODUCTION

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The strength of the youth development approach is evidenced by the outcomes for young people from their involvement in youth development programs and activities. These outcomes focus on enhancing young people's existing capacities and capabilities reflecting individual growth and skill development. They contribute to the enrichment of young people's lives and increase the likelihood of active citizenship and improved well being now and in adulthood. By reflecting good practice in youth development, organisations and programs create an environment in which the outcomes for young people are fostered and strengthened.

To gain a deeper understanding of what these outcomes mean to young people that can further inform good practice and encourage investment in youth development, it is important that young people are provided with opportunities to talk about their experiences and the impact on their lives from their perspectives.

This publication draws on individual in-depth interviews with nine young people, documenting their stories and focussing on their experiences and perceptions regarding the influence of youth development on their current and future circumstances. The links between the young people's experiences and the publication *Good Practice in Youth Development. A Framework of Principles*<sup>1</sup> provides an introduction and context to the stories. From the personal stories a number of common themes emerge, highlighting the significant outcomes for these young people of their involvement in youth development programs and activities and the value of investing in youth development. There is much to learn from what young people have to say about youth development.

This document is intended for those currently involved in and investing in youth development or with an interest in doing so. It represents one of several contributions to the current Australian knowledge base in youth development.

## What is youth development?

Youth development is much more than young people's gradual progression through a pre-defined series of steps in gaining particular skills. Youth development occurs when there is committed engagement between young people and the community; it is a conscious enterprise to achieve specific outcomes through a process that is empowering for all involved. It both complements and extends the academic focus of traditional education systems to emphasise the development of skills for life, such as communication, teamwork, leadership, confidence, managing difference, responsibility and service to the community.

Youth development offers mutual benefit to young people and their communities, not just in the future but here and now. Youth development programs and activities are offered over a sustained time period and seek to achieve outcomes focussed upon:

- personal/individual development, including teamwork and leadership skills; and
- skill development through activities that are structured and sequential in their learning outcomes; and
- strengthened connection with community through relationships, participation and contribution to community.

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<sup>1</sup> Ausyouth (2001). *Good practice in youth development. A framework of principles – A discussion document*. Adelaide: Ausyouth.



## INTRODUCTION

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The intention of youth development is to enable the achievement of specific outcomes for young people:

- active, empowered citizenship;
- enhanced self-identity and self-efficacy;
- commitment to voluntary action and the responsibilities of choice;
- enhanced self-esteem, self-reliance and self-confidence;
- acknowledgment and acceptance of differing views and ways of doing things;
- effective membership and leadership of team and group;
- enhanced skill development;
- participation in different and challenging activities and experiences; and
- connection and contribution to the community (Ausyouth, 2001, p. 12).

Achieving quality outcomes in youth development has now become a priority focus with mounting efforts to document and evaluate program activity, and research the impact of youth development on young people and communities.

### What do young people think?

An underpinning principle of youth development is the participation of young people in all aspects of program planning and implementation and the structures of their organisation. This includes the evaluation of youth development work. Therefore, the Ausyouth project, "Young people talk about youth development," is a formal endeavour to gain a richer understanding of young people's experiences through asking them to reflect on and evaluate their involvement in youth development. This document shares the outcomes of in-depth interviews with some young people about their experiences and perceptions of the influence that youth development programs have had on their current circumstances and futures. The project is an initial exploration of:

- the outcomes of youth development programs for young people's lives,
- good practice in youth development programs from young people's perspectives, and
- the individual and community benefits of investing in youth development activities.

Participants were recruited by approaching: 1) provider organisations who invited young people they believed would be interested in sharing their personal stories<sup>2</sup>, and/or 2) young people known to Ausyouth through their involvement in Ausyouth's activities. It was intended that participants would come from a diversity of locations, programs and experiences. Nine young people were approached and readily agreed to participate through in-depth interviews using a "mini-life history narrative" method. This style of qualitative research is resource intensive and usually involves small numbers of participants who provide richly detailed information. These young people are from five states of Australia, nine different youth development program providers and have fifteen months through to eleven years of experience in youth development programs.

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<sup>2</sup> All provider organisations in this document are associated with state government sponsored youth development programs in at least one state. Some of the stories, however, refer to young people's involvement in the larger, long standing youth development programs offered by a number of these provider organisations.



## INTRODUCTION

Each young person's interview was reviewed and developed into a "story" that brought forth their identity, unique personal characteristics and offered a description of their particular experiences and the impact these had, and were continuing to have, on their lives. Each story is a combination of young people's own words and the researcher's understanding and interpretation. Initial story drafts were returned for participants to review and edit, before being discussed with the researcher to produce an agreed and co-authored document. Finally, all stories were analysed to identify both common and unique themes, which have then been discussed in relation to the principles and intended outcomes of youth development with the focus on how these are evident within the everyday experiences of young people's lives.

Ausyouth sees that this initial project might be further extended in the future to include a wider variety and greater number of young people. For example, within the limited timeframe of the project it was not possible to ensure appropriate inclusion of Indigenous young people through following required cultural protocols; this absence is both acknowledged and regretted.

### Good practice in youth development

Youth development programs and activities have received increasing acknowledgment and support at national and state levels in Australia. Recognition and development of programs that identify with and are committed to enacting youth development have grown over recent years. The Commonwealth has endorsed a youth development strategy and several states have established specific state government sponsored youth development programs.<sup>3</sup>

This interest and activity has raised issues of 'good practice.' The Ausyouth (2001) "Good Practice in Youth Development. A Framework of Principles" document describes youth development as:

*Providing all young people with positive experiences and opportunities which enhance their strengths and capacity and which affirm them as contributors to their communities and shapers of their own future. Through youth development, communities are able to recognise, value, support and encourage young people's contributions. (p.2)*

Good practice in youth development is framed by two overarching principles - "empowerment" and "conscious enterprise":

*Empowerment is both a goal and a process for youth development. Empowerment is supported by participatory approaches, by the development of skills and understandings, by diversity of experience and by progressive opportunities for personal development and leadership. The empowerment of young people and their communities is critical to the approach for Australia. (Ausyouth, 2001, p.15)*

*Youth development is a conscious enterprise: a deliberate means of pursuing positive outcomes for young people through processes and activities which are structured and intentional. Conscious enterprise is based on the premise that specific outcomes must be actively pursued and that the achievement of the outcomes is too important to be left to chance. (Ausyouth, 2001, p.16)*

The overarching principles are supported by fourteen underpinning principles that guide the policies and practices of provider organisations<sup>4</sup> and communities in which youth development programs and activities occur. To set the context for the young people's reflections on their experiences of youth development, each of these principles is described below. Where applicable, quotes from project participants are included to highlight and illustrate aspects of the principles, although the focus of the young people's interviews was on their experiences rather than the good practice principles.

<sup>3</sup> State government sponsored youth development programs are programs that have been specifically established, implemented and funded by state governments as youth development programs. Currently there are four such programs: Cadets WA, the Victorian Youth Development Program, the Queensland Youth Action Program and the South Australian active8 Premier's Youth Challenge.

<sup>4</sup> Provider organisations are the organisations, agencies and departments that provide structured youth development programs and activities.



## INTRODUCTION

### **Underpinning principles of good practice in youth development**

**Having a strengths-based orientation** – Youth development assumes that young people start from a position of strength and ability. Therefore, program philosophy and policy is designed to enhance and build from existing foundations, through the provision of learning opportunities and experiences. *“They encouraged you if you were good at something. If you weren’t good at something [yet], then they really helped you gain new skills”* (Kim Pengelly). Evaluation of programs and research into the outcomes of youth development aim to identify what young people and communities bring into the program, how they build on each other’s capacities and what they are then able to achieve together.

**Participation** – Participation in youth development refers to involvement in key decision-making, not just participation in the program or activity. *“Young people have a hell of a lot to offer. But it is an issue of who will let them, and give them a chance...to change that. To an extent it is a give and take thing. You have to have enough faith in us – and that will change things”* (Simon Gauci). As key stakeholders, young people need opportunities to be active in designing all aspects of programs, as well as informing the policies and practices of organisations involved in youth development. Support is an integral part of the process, both for organisations as they learn more about youth participation work, and young people as they step into youth participation roles.

**Inclusivity** – Having a proactive orientation to cultural diversity and inclusivity is a hallmark of positive youth development. Diversity is defined broadly to include gender, geographical location, cultural identity, (dis)ability, socio-economic status, etc. Inclusivity means ensuring the involvement and considering the needs of a range of stakeholders, such as young people, community members, organisations and their staff – both volunteer and paid. *“We met people from all different walks of life...[as well as different contexts], country towns like us, big towns and the city...some were speaking different languages. It was good having all of those different people whacked in the same spot at the same time and having to communicate”* (Leigh Spriggs). The aim is for youth development programs and activities to be accessible to all young Australians, address the barriers to participation, and reflect the varied needs and interests of young Australians.

**Experiential models of learning** – Youth development is an active engaged process where knowledge moves from being theoretical to ‘hands-on.’ *“You need to have experience to get the realism”* (Simon Gauci). Young people are offered multiple opportunities to apply knowledge within real world contexts through fun and positive activities that develop self-esteem, confidence, leadership, self-responsibility and team skills. However, as young people enter programs with existing skills and varying levels of competence, organisations need the capacity to create learning situations that accommodate this. Given the “real world” context, organisations need to provide safe and healthy learning environments that pay attention to risk management.

**Respecting community voice and identity** – If organisations involved in youth development include a diverse range of community members and stakeholders in policy development and programs, a parallel expectation is that they will respect community voice and identities. It is these factors that shape young people’s values and beliefs and influence their decisions to actively contribute to their communities.



## INTRODUCTION

**Communities valuing and engaging with young people** – *“They have let us into their community and made us part of their home, so we should do the same for them – we bring them into our community”* (Simon Gauci). Youth development seeks to foster an exchange where young people’s contributions are acknowledged and valued. Young people both give to and give back to communities at both local and wider levels. They are active participants in community life and community building. Good practice in youth development promotes this approach and fosters opportunities for young people and communities to experience, witness and celebrate young people’s contributions.

**Partnerships** – Youth development programs and activities seek to build young people’s appreciation of and capacity to work in partnership. Therefore, organisations involved in youth development activities support this occurring when they also engage in partnership processes. Through partnerships, resources can be utilised more effectively and duplication avoided. A broader range of ideas and skills become available, which, if successfully harnessed through quality processes, can assist organisations in maximising outcomes for partners, young people and communities.

**Quality outcomes** – A commitment to continuous improvement and regular review of program processes is characteristic of youth development programs and activities that aim to achieve quality outcomes. The outcomes sought include providing young people with opportunities to extend their learning to a wide range of life contexts, and to use their creativity, ingenuity and capacity for both individual and group decision-making. *“It’s not just First Aid skills that you are taught, it’s like life skills”* (Victoria Bell).

**Encouraging and respecting choice** – Having the opportunity to make choices and to experience their consequences is an important principle of youth development. *“You set your own goals in your own time, and you achieve them in your own way, that’s a big bonus. It’s paced at your own learning levels”* (Aaron Wardle). Organisations and programs model this approach and provide opportunities for young people to experience choice making, both within programs and through participation in program design, monitoring and evaluation at the organisational level. In addressing choice, provider organisations acknowledge the need for programs that meet the range of different needs and interests of young people.

**Recognising all stakeholders’ contributions** – Stakeholders in youth development will participate and contribute in different ways according to their needs, interests, knowledge and skills. They may do this as paid or voluntary staff, supporters of, or participants in programs and activities. For example, some young people step into leadership roles, taking over what are often adult tasks: *“Responsibility also goes out of the school...at home you organise what you are going to do,”* like organising plans for next lessons, developing fund raising strategies and planning trips/camps (Chris Stewart). All contributions require appropriate acknowledgment and recognition by organisations.

**Ethical, honest promotion** – The integrity of youth development programs depends on the match between how they are promoted and what they actually deliver. Young people expect a good match: *“the program sounded like fun.... I hoped it was like people said”* (Melissa Jewel). It is important that promotional strategies have a focus on content, not just presentation, so that young people will be in the position to make informed decisions about their participation. From an ethical perspective, promotion and sponsorship of youth development should exclude sponsors whose activities and products may be harmful to young people.



## INTRODUCTION

**Meaningful opportunities for service to the community** – Young people’s contributions to community are enhanced and personally meaningful when they are responded to positively and viewed as valuable. Young people *“do have something to contribute”*. The message should be *“you are important, what can you tell us”* (Simon Gauci). Volunteer work in the community that occurs via youth development programs and activities benefits both young people and the community. It provides *“people to help with public duties”* where young people gain *“the reward of being able to help out other people”* (Victoria Bell).

**Recognition of learning outcomes** – *“Everything we do is recognised. We got awards for [just] being in the program for a whole year. Even if you go in the Anzac Day March around the city, you get certificates for that”. Why is this important? “It gives you something to work for”* (Melissa Jewel). A feature of youth development programs and activities is their planned and sequential approach to skill development. This opens up possibilities for both formal and informal recognition of personal achievement and skill attainment that acknowledges the steps taken along the way, as well as the larger goals young people seek to accomplish. Organisations can utilise existing systems and develop their own in order to recognise the achievements of both participants and involved staff, and foster a culture of success and positive acknowledgment.

**Strengthening social networks** – *“It’s like a big family, and you have your ups and your downs and you may have arguments with someone but you always solve them and they are always there to help you out if you have problems”* (Victoria Bell). Not only do youth development programs and activities aspire to build expanded social networks for young people beyond their immediate family and social circles, but also to promote interconnections between community and organisational networks. This cannot be taken for granted and requires focussed attention in order that cooperation and collaboration occurs for the mutual benefit of young people, organisations and communities.

When attention is paid to all of these principles, there is a greater likelihood that the intended outcomes of youth development for young people will be realised.

The young people’s stories that follow in the next section capture the experience of their involvement in diverse youth development organisations, programs and activities through their eyes. The stories clearly highlight what works well and what is considered important from a young person’s perspective.

In the final section of this document connections are drawn between the theory of youth development, good practice principles and young people’s experiences. Whether and how well desired outcomes for young people are achieved are reflected in the discussion of themes that emerged from the young people’s stories.



## A life more visible

Rachel High, Pt Augusta, South Australia: Duke of Edinburgh's Award

*"Accepting the way you are...that's what makes any of us, us. I always think that way. I think it's very important to think that way."*



Acceptance of self is a developmental challenge. Self-acceptance means coming to appreciate yourself on both the inside and the outside – what the world sees on the surface and what they come to know about you as a whole person. It means a sense of confidence in your abilities, your place in the world and your identity. Each person faces this challenge as part of his or her journey in life. Yet, some people are presented with more obstacles than others as they move toward self-acceptance.

Rachel High was born with Down Syndrome. This is what the world saw - a girl that was slightly different, a bit awkward; a girl who they struggled to fully accept or see as a desirable friend. Her peers considered her to be "gawky". In the eyes of her peers and community, Down Syndrome masked the face and personhood of Rachel High.

From the very early days, Rachel enjoyed the pleasure of achieving. She and her parents had made many efforts to involve her in community activities so she developed an identity that stood apart from being a young woman living with Down Syndrome. There were Brownie badges, swimming for the Special Olympics and end of year performances of schools shows and dance classes. Further opportunities to meet this need to achieve presented themselves in two forms: the Duke of Edinburgh's Award<sup>5</sup> and Restless Dance Company<sup>6</sup>.

As a country participant, Rachel became an independent member of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and her mother arranged local tutors and community groups with whom Rachel could work so as to achieve the criteria for each of the bronze, silver and gold awards over the next 7 years. Rachel jointly planned her program – designing it around her interests or things she hoped to do or know more about it. Thus began a merged journey of both intended and hoped for, as well as unexpected developments in Rachel's life.

When Rachel was 17, Restless Dance Company performed at her school. Her peers witnessed people with disabilities performing in ways that they themselves would not imagine doing. They recognised that some of these people looked like

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5 The Duke of Edinburgh's Award is an international "leadership in action" program available to all young people aged between 14 and 25. Being voluntary, flexible, non-competitive, balanced, progressive, challenging and most of all, enjoyable, it provides an opportunity for young people to achieve personal excellence and build self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, self-motivation and respect for others via their involvement in service, skill, physical recreation and expedition activities: <http://www.dukeofed.org.au/>

6 Restless Dance Company is based in Adelaide and combines the skills of up to 20 people with and without a disability. It creates dance theatre for performances in theatres, schools, the community and interstate. Collaboration is the key feature of the company's work, combining creative forces with some of Australia's most innovative artists in its productions: <http://ausdance.anu.edu.au/profession/groups/restless/>

Rachel and began to talk to her about it. Restless Dance Company captivated Rachel. She had long had a dream, "a vision of me joining something...of being a stage actor...and to dance on stage". Restless provided the beginning of yet another pathway. Thus began Rachel's life of travelling – she knows every town between Port Augusta and Adelaide from the countless return trips over the last few years to attend rehearsals with Restless and the growing number of activities that started to enter her life.

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award provided a structure into which Rachel could take her existing strengths and pursue goals with greater purpose. There were concrete outcomes along the way, as each small goal achieved worked toward the grander goal of each award. This motivated her to be more committed to work at them, even if involved in things that stretched her abilities. Rachel revelled at times in taking things she didn't like so she could "turn them into favourites".

Some of Rachel's initial goals included things that others may take for granted or find easy, such as working in the school canteen, learning to play the piano with two hands, developing her cooking skills, putting up a tent and sleeping in it at night, or riding a horse. But through the process Rachel asked herself to face fears and get outside her comfort zone – being close to horses, being in the dark without a light, and spending extended time away from her family. The goals became more complex and lengthy to achieve. Risk – both physical and emotional - became a factor.

Many of the goals that Rachel chose brought her into greater contact with a more diverse range of people and entered her into a "public life". Restless Dance Company was not the only context in which she performed to an audience. Rachel has taken her story and message to a national conference as a guest speaker, been selected as an "Inspiring woman" and featured on an Internet site, photographed with state celebrities promoting positive causes, and been recruited to join and perform with other theatre companies. She has been involved in a raft of local events that have been documented in school newsletters and community newspapers over several years. People who do not know her personally will stop her in the street – Rachel had emerged. People noticed and commented upon her skills, ideas, determination and positivity.

The gawky girl with the disability is an identity that has long faded. Through her journey, Rachel the person has become more visible – and she was not who people thought she may be. "I always find myself as a risky person, I love taking risks [now]". She has

emerged as an accomplished artist, a courageous and articulate young woman who is not afraid to take her message to the people she believes most need to listen – including meeting with the Prime Minister to promote the importance of the arts in order to complete her Duke of Edinburgh gold award.

When Rachel began the Duke of Edinburgh Award, she wanted to gain more confidence, make new friends, experience more outdoor activities, learn how to go away on camps and develop her abilities to perform as an artist. She developed a “have a go” attitude and has also developed skills that enable her to support others in their own journeys. The program has “changed my life – having friends around me, learning how to meet people and make new friends.” She risked having a wider audience witness her growing skills and confidence. This spurred her on to both continue and expand what she imagined doing with her life until she “didn’t feel at all nervous” when on stage or with new people.

It has not been all a glowing story. There have been struggles and disappointments along the way. Rather than being demoralised Rachel’s attitude is to accept limitations and to honour efforts: “I always think that other people have problems at times, so if you have a problem, like I can’t dive, I think it doesn’t matter...in the end”.

## A life more visible

And back to self-acceptance, “I had to learn to love the way I am...the Duke of Edinburgh things helped...[for example] being on the horse and learning bravery, that was an amazing thing – it was a surprising thing for me”. In reflecting on living her life differently, Rachel commented “if I hadn’t done Duke of Edinburgh I would be living a boring life – I may still be swimming or doing some other things, but would still have a boring life...I would have been more solemn...[my friends] like me now, find me vivacious...I have a certain positivity...life can be easy”. The Award has helped her set a new goal, to be a secretary and an actor.

Rachel now divides her time between her commitment to the arts through rehearsals and being co-tutor with her dance company, and volunteering her time in the community doing secretarial and child care work at the local special needs centre. Her current visions: to “take more control of my life - that is very important. I’m helping to grow more independence and move into my own house”. But also, “script writing is a favourite, I want to develop some scripts”.



# Travelling at the speed of knots

Aaron Wardle, Sydney, New South Wales: Scouts Australia

*"Scouts allowed me to follow my dream."*



Scouts is one of the oldest and largest youth development organisations and has flourished across the world.<sup>7</sup> Aaron's story is clear evidence that being a member of Scouts opens you up to a network of possibilities that defy the common community perception that you will simply attend a local group and learn about tying knots and going camping. In fact, listening to Aaron's experiences, it becomes apparent that Scouts is like a theme park, except that you get to create the ride.

Aaron was very shy as a child. Sports were of little appeal to him and he had few strong interests. His parents decided to respond to a Scouting advert in the local paper and, with curiosity, Aaron joined just as he turned 8. "Scouts were the first thing I got attached to in my life and I have been with them ever since".

During his early years, Scouting was about fun, adventure and new experiences – all valuable things in and of themselves. As he progressed from Cub Scouts into Scouts, Aaron did all the things you would expect – regular weekly meetings, learning about the environment, personal safety, going on local camps, exposure to boating and a large range of other activities. As a 9 year old Cub Scout he was introduced to the performing arts through the Scouts infamous "Cumberland Gang Show" – a full scale production of musical comedy attracting audiences of over 7,000 people in Sydney that is designed and performed by Scouts and volunteers, and produces its own CD/Video.

This led to him discovering hidden talents in singing and performance, skills that were fostered and enhanced through the training and support he gained in the show: "Every item in the show is a journey with the character that you play. Performing live on stage is definitely an experience that builds your confidence".

## Travelling at the speed of knots

Slowly and surely, confidence continued to show up in his life – beyond his and his family's imagination of what sort of person he would become. It was not too long before spending extended time away from his family became an exciting rather than an uncertain prospect. Aaron went on his first two week national jamboree<sup>8</sup> to Perth when only 12 years old. "I became so enthralled by the jamborees and I was really enjoying these challenges, opening up and meeting people from around the world. It was a big achievement going away to different places for long periods of time and leaving your family behind". In fact, he had so good a time that when away for three weeks the following year at the New Zealand jamboree he forgot to communicate with his family. He didn't send one postcard home – a fact swiftly pointed out to him upon his return!!

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<sup>7</sup> The aim of Scouting is to encourage the physical, intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual development of young people so that they take a constructive place in society as responsible citizens, and as a member of their local, national and international communities: <http://www.scouts.com.au/main.html>

<sup>8</sup> A jamboree is a large camp bringing together many thousands of Scouts from across the country or on an international basis, and with an enormous range of activities on offer.

Although disinterested in sports, Aaron was keen on tackling the adventures and challenges offered in the great outdoors. Why was this so attractive and motivating? "The friendships and excitement are very empowering and important in maintaining commitment. Furthermore, you look to the greater goal of completing each component of the award scheme, being recognised for having completed your objective despite the hard work and involvement necessary. You gain a great sense of self-satisfaction in achieving the task, and that was one of my major attractions".

Aaron believes the advantage of Scouts is its diversity: "It's a great organisation in that it has a wide range of varied activities which you can select from, trained leaders who are always available, and lots of resources. You can choose whatever direction you wish to take in Scouting and all of these great opportunities are open to everyone regardless of your current skills. It's paced at your own learning levels and you venture into new activities and have as much fun as you can. They are all achievements you can gain personally, and in your own time, without the competition associated with sport".

There is always support within Scouts and ample occasions to develop and strengthen teamwork, leadership skills and your own self-confidence – other important objectives in Scouting. The competition then is really with yourself, with the freedom to choose what you want to try.

This freedom of choice with myriad opportunities created an unexpected turning point in Aaron's life. Along with the encouragement to engage in service to the community (which has been considerable for Aaron), performing arts and the outdoor camping and boating adventures, he had the opportunity to fly; in fact, to learn **how** to fly.

"Scouts own their own aircraft and have trained pilots who are leaders, or other volunteers in the movement who give up their time to help Scouts learn how to fly a plane. That is basically how it started. Our group went down one day and had the experience of flying in a plane. As I progressed through the Venturer section (for 14-18 year olds) one of the award components was 'Pursuits' and I thought it would be a really great idea to continue flying". Two months after his 16th birthday Aaron did his first solo flight, experiencing the freedom, excitement and empowerment of knowing "your decisions are now going to have a direct impact on this aircraft - there is a lot of enjoyment there".

Flying gave a fresh dimension to the meaning of "knots" within Scouting. Aaron combined his love of school subjects such as geography and physics with his Scouting experiences to evolve an entirely new future for himself... becoming a commercial pilot!! Scouting has made a direct link to where he is in life right now, "it allowed me to follow my dream....That is something about Scouting, no matter what field you want to take...your leadership through Scouts and all the skills that you learn have an input into your personality and the direction of your own future". Aaron is currently enrolled in the 2nd year of his aviation degree at the University of NSW.

However, this was not the only place that Aaron has flown at the speed of knots. His skills and opportunities for leadership have also taken off. "I had no inkling that I was going to be a major leadership identity in Scouting". But this is exactly what has happened and Aaron ties this all to Scouts. He was in the Student Representative Council all the way through high school, being elected School Captain in Year 12. Scouts nominated him and then he was chosen by the Commonwealth Government as one of 9 young people from Australia to attend the 2000 "Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Youth Networking Conference" in Thailand. He has received awards from the local council, and most recently was appointed deputy-chair of the recently established National Youth Council (Scouts Australia), having a direct role in the future direction and promotion of the organisation.

## Travelling at the speed of knots

All of these things have not distracted Aaron from his commitment to being a regular part of local Scouting groups. He gives back to the organisation that has offered him so much by volunteering his time as an Assistant Scout Leader and being a role model and inspiration for younger children. "It is great being able to go out there and relax and work with younger people in society and teach them skills that you learnt at that age....I can't see myself leaving Scouts... because I am enjoying it so much. I love working with the younger people".



## From nobody to 'Head Girl'

Diana Juskov, Perth, Western Australia: Emergency Services Cadet Corps

*"At first I was really a nobody...at school and now I'm head girl, which is really unbelievable for me because I don't really have any experience. I suppose people saw things in me that I didn't. Sometimes you don't really want to see things, I don't want to see me as a leader. I'd rather other people do that – but it's just the way it is."*



It is hard to imagine Diana as a nobody, yet she insists that was how her life was early in high school. She had done very well in primary school and was involved in gifted and talented programs, but things went “off the rails” when she hit high school. She found it difficult to adjust and wondered if she tried too hard to do well, to meet her aspirations. “I was really shy but I always wanted to be different, I was looking for a challenge really, I knew I could do it [but] I got so paranoid about things”.

Diana did stand out, but not how she intended. There were notes home from teachers about how she was “misbehaving”. She saw the teachers as just hassling her. At home, she thought she was allowed to go anywhere and everywhere she wanted. Although her actions were loud, her words were quiet, as mostly she listened to her friends rather than being a talker and leader. All of her capabilities were overshadowed by behaviour that just rubbed people up the wrong way. It was in this way that Diana saw herself as a nobody.

In choosing Year 9 subjects she unexpectedly found the challenge she needed – being in the Emergency Services Cadet Corps (ESCC) youth development program.<sup>9</sup> At first, Diana “thought it would just be camping all the time, missing out on school, doing a lot of physical stuff and doing outdoor stuff – like the guys, and I wanted to be like the guys”. She didn’t think it would have much influence on her, just that “it would get me physically stronger”.

## From nobody to ‘Head Girl’

From these humble beginnings Diana’s world took on a different shape, like a switch being turned back on, and she started to recover the sense of direction she had previously experienced: “I don’t know if it was like a childhood dream [but] when I was in Year 5 I **really** wanted to be a psychologist. I was so intrigued, interested in the mind, I still am really. I’d check out psychology books. If I didn’t understand the words I would look them up in the dictionary. I really like the mind and the way people think”. As her work in the ESCC progressed, she had more to think about and wondered how she would combine her growing interest in outdoor activity, community work and psychology - a question that remains an ongoing dilemma.

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<sup>9</sup> The Western Australian Emergency Services Cadet Corps, part of Cadets WA, aims to encourage young Western Australians to participate in the acquisition of skills and knowledge about the role and functions of the State’s emergency services agencies and develop values of duty, loyalty and service to the community, school and Emergency Services Cadet Corps: <http://www.cadetswa.wa.gov.au/cadets/emergency.html>

An early challenge involved thinking about her group of friends. One attraction of the program was that “it was different because my friends weren’t doing it...When I joined the ESCC it kind of made me realise where I was. I had to change how I did things. The first thing I did was change my group of friends because they were letting me down – always misbehaving in more ways than one. So I changed...to those that liked school, who really got into it and encouraged each other. That was really hard for me because the group I hung around with before were really forceful. But now I see they are the ones who have dropped out of school already. They’re the ones who are not doing anything, but I’m still studying and I like it. I know I can get somewhere when I get older. I don’t think I would have direction if I hadn’t got involved in the ESCC”.

This sense of direction has become increasingly evident to Diana and those around her. It is more than finding herself chosen as Head Girl at school. Diana has loaned her talents to being a leader within the ESCC, even if it does feel like it happened by default. “Some people think that leaders are people who have the loud voices, but I was never like that. I was the one always encouraging. And my teacher said that is the way to be a leader. I didn’t see it at first...only the year after [my first year in the ESCC] when people looked at me and said ‘How do you do this? How do you do that?’ I was kind of being like a teacher”.

She has become heavily involved in a range of community work: helping collect clothes for people who are homeless, running community events, holding art exhibitions for people whose artwork doesn’t get shown, and conducting forums where young people can talk about contemporary issues, eg illegal immigrants. “It’s not really an issue that people think young people are concerned about, so we give them a chance to tell us their point of view, talk about it and debate it. It makes you feel like you are part of important issues”.

As her leadership opportunities grew through her ESCC experiences, so did her confidence. “I’m really confident now. If you had asked me about doing this [project] two years ago I would have said no, straight out no. But I’m really confident now. I can talk to people. I’m not really shy”. Her self-confidence has been coupled with an understanding of others beyond the theory in those psychology books she borrowed from the library. It has become an everyday practice. “I’m listening to my Mum a lot and understanding about her. When she doesn’t let me go out now I know...she’s scared that something will happen to me. You start having understanding of parents, family and friends. You don’t think everything revolves around you”.

Diana can identify the applications of her learning to other parts of her life, that it is not always direct, but more like a metaphor. "You learn about responsibility [in the ESCC], how to take charge of yourself. You might be up on a mountain and you're not strapped on properly on your harness. That might be nothing to some [people], but when you're out there looking for a job it teaches you to be careful. You start thinking that looking for a job is like being on that mountain...you have to be strapped on properly". Navigating new territory, whether it is a mountain, a new learning environment or the job market, requires preparation, checking you have everything you need and remembering everything that will ensure you make it through to the end.

## From nobody to 'Head Girl'

Diana's thoughts on how her life may have been if she hadn't experienced the ESCC are: "I definitely would not be Head Girl. I would be failing school". The nobody image has been long left behind. Diana has become unique and different. Although she has gained a strong sense of self-satisfaction she is quiet about her achievements on a broader scale while abounding in enthusiasm about her experiences. "Some people say I get too enthusiastic about it [ESCC], but if I didn't I wouldn't be here. I would just think it's another subject". She hopes her influence on others is positive, that they try new things and learn to know people before making judgements, regardless of how different others may be.

If given the chance, what would Diana tell Year 8 students about the Emergency Services Cadet Corps? "It's nothing you have experienced before. It's nothing you expected it to be, because it's better. It's a huge challenge. There's no word to describe it. It's better than fantastic. And you'd be sorry if you didn't join it because you'd always be wondering, 'What if?'"



## Humour and humility

Leigh Spriggs, Western Wimmera, Victoria Police Youth Corps

*"You've got to be a comedian...you can't be too serious about yourself."*



When you meet Leigh Spriggs, it becomes quickly apparent that although the humour is dry and his tongue is often in his cheek, the humility is genuine. He may have grown far more confident over the last three years, and believe he is even a “loudmouth” at times, but boasting is not on the agenda: “You can’t do that, it gives me the itch”.

Leigh prefers to be quiet about his achievements and how they are acknowledged. “You can’t get too worried about those sorts of things. It happens and hopefully people remember you for it but you can’t keep reminding them of it, unless they’re your mates. I remind them [my mates] of all the good things they’ve done. If they get a bit big headed, then I’ll say, ‘yeah, but I beat you there mate - you’ve got to give me a bit of credit for that.’ But that’s the only time”.

## Humour and humility

Leigh was one of 15 students in the first youth development program run at his school, during Years 9 and 10, with the Victoria Police Youth Corps (VPYC) as the provider organisation;<sup>10</sup> it was the first rural program for the police. The deputy-principal and two policemen, one from Leigh’s town and another from a nearby town coordinated the program. “It was something different to do from what is around here [and] all expenses were paid. I didn’t really know anything about it but you might as well have a go”. In fact, how it would go and what would happen was uncertain for everyone concerned. Although he dryly added, “we knew that at the end we were going to have to do drill. They told us about that many times!”

Leigh was not sure how the program would influence him or what benefits it would offer. He considered “it was just going to be another class that we go to, waste time in until we finish our schooling career and we can leave” – said with a sly grin. The main experiences he hoped for were to meet new people. “That’s really valuable when in a small rural town. I like living out here, but if you want to meet new people, you have to be prepared to travel”.

Although travelling and meeting new people was not new to Leigh, the VPYC offered him more opportunities than he would have otherwise had, both within and subsequent to the program. “We met people from all different walks of life” as well as different contexts - “country towns like us, big towns and the city. It was different being right there with different people. Some were speaking different languages. It was good having all of those different people whacked in the same spot at the same time and having to communicate”.

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<sup>10</sup> The Victoria Police Youth Corps, part of the Victorian Youth Development Program, aims to improve relations between youth and police, and provide practical education on issues such as the role police play in the community. Visits to police training centres, decision-making, conflict resolution and camps/expeditions are central elements of the program with opportunities to develop teamwork, self-reliance, determination and cooperation.

Leigh did not see himself as a leader prior to the program. He had a sense of teamwork, communication skills, how to help someone when you had a difficulty and an attitude of not getting overly stressed about things. "You can't get too worried about things....Our parents are like it and we end up a lot like it. I think we have a lot of that attitude in anything". These were skills fostered by living in a small rural community where people pitch in to help others out in times of trouble, such as repairing bushfire damage.

The VPYC program became a forum through which Leigh's potential could be expressed. "I was told when I was younger I should be a politician when I leave school". In VPYC "there is a push for leadership". Leigh identifies confidence, independence and leadership as the biggest growth areas for him through the program. "When I was younger I was pretty shy, compared to what I am now". Last year he and another student were selected to represent the school at an agricultural summit for high school students. "That trip, only having one other person [that I knew] and everyone else you had to walk up and say how are you going", that was when his shift in confidence became very real to him. He realises that he is now much more comfortable with being out of familiar territory, able to do things for himself and communicate effectively with new people.

Regarding leadership, Leigh's humility in the face of what has actually happened becomes evident again. Leigh puts it this way: "I've become a bit more of a leader". Yet, he has recently been chosen as the "School Captain" - an honour that carries with it the position of President of the Student Representative Council. He also won a scholarship with the Victorian Police that supports students during their Year 11 and 12 studies. This is no small feat for a young man who had doubts about continuing through to Year 12 at all.

According to his school principal, it has been wonderful "to see him come out of the ruck and be there...[to] get much more confident. Leigh is able to articulate his ideas, sit down and discuss them with adults...he can do that pretty well now". This is also apparent in non-school activities. Leigh is active in the local shooting club, the only member younger than 30. Not long ago he returned from the north-west school shooting championships with a 3rd place in the Junior

Boys, then 6th at state school championships. He is comfortable holding his own in adult environments, as well as fitting in with his peers. He can take part in both individual and team activities and is at ease with being his own person, rather than trying to live up to other people's ideas of who he should be: "Confidence has really come out in the last couple of years...before that there was all that shy business".

And what would his life have been like if he had not been exposed to a youth development program: "I'd probably be the same person. I mightn't have had as much leadership...parts of my life I would have built on, just little bits of myself, not all of me...leadership ...my teamwork has built up now....I already had [some of] these skills but I have refined them".

Leigh expresses these enhanced qualities through his unique sense of humour and stories. For example, "I play football. I'm not the captain but I'm the little bloke of the team pretty much....I'm a rover and play in the centre so I run everywhere and don't shut up all game [talking to and encouraging my team mates]....They always listen to me and joke about things after the game".

## Humour and humility

How does Leigh explain people's respect for him? "I guess my sense of humour comes in....You have to be easygoing to be a leader. You have to say that this should happen, but if something doesn't happen there is no point worrying about it....You say 'OK, you didn't do it, we will go do it now.' Something like that, you don't get too worried about it....You can't be too serious about yourself, that's stupid". Leigh also happily pays himself out: "People in other towns say, 'You never shut up Spriggysy, you're a loudmouth' and tease me. You've got to be a comedian".

Although maintaining humility, Leigh has become quietly self-assured as his vision of himself and his world has expanded. Prior to the VPYC program "I had always wanted to be a farmer ever since I was a little kid. I always wanted to do it – that was where I was heading, what I thought I would do once finished at school....I wanted the big farm, [to] own a large property that you can just buy a new tractor here or a new this there without having to go to the bank manager and ask for money...[even] if you have a bad year".

The VPYC experience has not thrown him off this course. He sees it as adding value and possibility to his life, as there is more than farming in his sights, although it still holds a high priority. "[I am] going to go back farming...eventually....I see more of the bigger picture now...it's wider...not a tunnel. I can go there, there, there and there...it's a big delta".



## Yes, and...

Melissa Jewel, Brisbane, Queensland: Surf Life Saving Queensland

Melissa has a favourite saying:

*"Winners say it is difficult, but it is possible.*

*Losers say it is possible, but it is too difficult."*



For Melissa, this characterises the “yes, and...” approach she now takes toward her life. Although naturally determined, most of her energy at age 14 went into running training and her close group of school friends. Life was mapped out: “I was going along wanting to be a sports teacher and I had my friends...I just thought this was easy. I just have to go to uni, be a sports teacher and cruise along”.

Unless she is cruising around on a Surf Living Saving (SLS) boat,<sup>11</sup> this word no longer applies to the life she has chosen. She has not lost her goal of keeping up sport and becoming a teacher, it is just that she wants more in her life and is convinced that can and will happen.

Melissa heard about the school’s two-year Youth Action Program through feedback from friends who had been in it. “It sounded so fun and there seemed to be ‘no strings attached’ – you just get what you put in with no obligation to go on and do anything with it”. She thought “it would help with becoming a sports teacher, learning about leadership, being in groups, working with other people...and making more and new friends”.

So began Melissa’s entry into extended camps three or four times a year, with regular opportunities to attend weekend SLS activities. She found her “expectations were exceeded!! There were so many people there...I spoke to all these people....On camp I ended up having conversations about things I never thought I would...with people that I thought I would never talk to....I was having personal jokes at school with people that I normally wouldn’t say hello to.... Teachers too – I got to know them so well...its good to share that experience with them”.

“We only know each other in one way really....You don’t just see them at school, you see them coping with things that they are having trouble with. You see how they can persevere” when they are faced with challenges. At these times, “you can really see their strengths. They say ‘oh can you help me?’ They want your help”.

## Yes, and...

You “definitely [learn about] leadership, especially with this other award we can do to be a Training Officer. Because we did it last year we have all the experience and can take a whole group of students ourselves and train them. That is **incredible** leadership. That is just what I want to do in being a sport teacher. It’s really testing though”.

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<sup>11</sup> Surf Life Saving Queensland Youth Action Program, focuses on the development of young people’s skills and knowledge with the view to saving lives in and around the aquatic environment. It aims for young people completing the SLS youth action program to develop a sense of leadership, community service, work ethos and responsibility.

In learning more about her peers' complexities she gained the same opportunity. "I suppose it works the other way too. People see me differently. Some of the Year 11s might think of me as just a loudmouth with my friends. Now they can see I am helping them when they are in my group and I am leading them, then they see me as more responsible and I certainly don't appear like that at school! Its good, its definitely good, I still joke around like an idiot - that's all in good fun. But I can be serious, I can be quite responsible when I want to be".

Important learning occurred for Melissa through the program. She found that some of her comments were not always appreciated or taken as intended. Her close friends were brave enough to be honest with her, giving her feedback that "you may think you are saying this, but to other people it means something else". As Melissa has always been the sort of person who wants to do her best when she sets her mind to something, she also critiqued herself so she could adopt different strategies for interacting, as well as teaching people and keeping their interest and energy. She described this attitude change in this way:

"Last year I couldn't handle the lack of sleep, I snapped at people really easily. This year I told myself I was going to calm down. Sometimes if I am angry, I have the right to be angry but I don't have the right to be cruel. I can be nice with everyone and that actually worked out well".

This ability for self-reflection "develops...as I get older. When I was in Year 8, 9 or 10, I didn't really have that, but as I get older I just need to improve. I can't just let everyone else do it for me. It's about maturity". She believes this was greatly enhanced through the "YAP program - because of the environment and everything that we do, it's a lot different than my normal life".

Other people have witnessed these changes too. "My family probably noticed I'm a bit more determined to do things. I am more willing to give other things up like my free time or sitting around doing nothing. I give that up to help achieve my goals. I'm a lot more determined than I was before - it is a bit of a surprise that it has happened so quickly".

With maturity Melissa has shaped her desire to be a winner into considering **how** to make things possible - teaching her to prioritise. "Now that I have been with YAP and I am a senior I know how challenging everything is and how hard it is to fit everything in. I can't just say I am going to do this, and this and this. You've got to prioritise. I've missed out on a lot of things because I've had to prioritise....I try and fit everything in, not just cancel everything out - to compromise". Melissa thinks this capacity to set goals and prioritise may not have developed without the program. She has learnt that "you can't just cruise along. If you want something you have to try for it". Her studies have become increasingly important to her now and her motivation has grown. Neither would she have become "better at leadership and working with people under stress".

Part of Melissa's "yes, and..." approach is reflected in how she achieves her goals – more than the bare minimum is required. For example, when sitting awards, her approach is "you don't just want the examiners to be happy with it – you want to be happy with **yourself**. You can't just do resuscitation. You don't feel good if you just get through because you haven't really tried. You want to be satisfied with yourself...[and] **understand** everything". The ability and confidence to apply her learning in a real-life situation is Melissa's benchmark.

Funnily enough, the YAP **has** become a 'strings attached' experience, but strings of Melissa's own making. Why? "It's so incredibly fun, different". She is becoming more involved with SLS outside the program and has plans to go on with it, despite living over 45 minutes from the closest beach! She has started to reorganise her life to accommodate her desire to gain higher SLS awards and be involved in regular SLS activities. Her world has opened up with more directions emerging for her future, including an ongoing commitment to providing service to the community.

## Yes, and...

Although provided with strong models of community service from her mother who is very committed to the local school and "always says how good it is....I never really got what she meant. Now that I am doing all of this, helping everyone and they are helping me, it makes me realise what is the point....It was so good helping and having everyone appreciate what we do". The reciprocity is now evident to her: "You get what you put in. Here we are helping out the community but we get helped ourselves".

Over the past two years Melissa believes she has become a more "colourful and confident" person, and channelled her determination: "I am a lot more of a people person now - I've had to be. That's helped a lot and that's going to help with work, with everything... I have a lot of determination, that's in my nature. I just like to excel at everything, but I can't". Melissa has learnt that while she would love to "be the best at everything", that is not possible. She has, however, learnt to prioritise her time and energy to useful activities, like SLS, doing as many things as possible. Although she is very competitive, this has now become a competition with herself, "I have to do everything better than last time". Melissa is striving to be a winner who says "yes, and..." to life.



## Creating identity, finding belonging

Kim Pengelly, Adelaide, South Australia: Australian Air Force Cadets

*"It was OK to be who I was there. I was very proud of being a Cadet and loved it. It was almost a passion. Everything about me now as a person and who I am has...been a direct consequence of Cadets."*



Kim makes no bones about it, she believes she constructed her identity and found a community of belonging through the Australian Air Force Cadets.<sup>12</sup> Ten years ago she wanted to be just like 'Maverick,' the fighter pilot from the movie 'Top Gun.' Kim confesses to being so dedicated a fan. "I could recite the whole movie from beginning to end, some scenes backwards".

When an Air Force Cadet Instructor walked into her mother's workplace soon after, her parents found a way of turning what appeared to be an obsession into a real life pursuit. Joining Cadets was an experience that Kim believes has irrevocably shaped her life, building a strong sense of confidence and pride in self.

## Creating identity, finding belonging

When Kim attended an interest day she "fell in love. I said 'that's for me.' The cadets walking around with their uniforms on, and the camaraderie, you could see it! I'd moved over to a new state and I'd left all my friends behind...I didn't quite feel at home yet. So I was looking for somewhere to belong and where people had the same interests as me....I was looking for similarities and people who would accept me for who I was and not laugh at me because I was a bit different or quiet".

Kim was "tired of feeling alone," so when she witnessed how everyone was involved in Cadets, that "everyone was happy, no one was left out" she realised she had found a new community of belonging. As she spent more time in Cadets she found she could both blend in and "they still let you stand out. They encouraged you if you were good at something. If you weren't good at something, then they really helped you gain new skills. You weren't allowed to just mingle in and be average. They wanted to push you and instil confidence, for people to stand up and speak in front of other people whereas when you are at school it's only the "switched-on" confident people that get to shine. At Cadets, it was about helping the underachievers gain their confidence and have a sense of identity – you were **allowed** to be who you are and told, 'don't feel ashamed of that.'"

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<sup>12</sup> The aims of the Australian Air Force Cadets are to: give cadets a foundation of RAAF knowledge and discipline; develop the qualities of leadership, self-reliance and initiative; develop character and good citizenship in the widest sense; develop an interest in the Royal Australian Air Force and aviation; instil a knowledge of aviation history; and encourage cadets to continue an active interest in aviation into their adult life: <http://www.aafc.adfc.gov.au/aimsmission.asp>

Kim's hopes and aspirations changed during her early time in Cadets. "I knew that I wanted to learn to fly, get my pilot's licence no matter what and I wanted to meet new friends. What I have got now out of Cadets is different to what I wanted then". She wanted to do rifle shooting, learn to teach drill and, gradually, take on leadership positions. "I wanted to learn more about the practical and physical side of things. I wanted to do drill – I wasn't as interested in the academic side of cadets". She also gained other opportunities, such as participating in the International Air Cadet Exchange program and leading Adventure Training camps.

Achieving this was not easy. There were many struggles, including being one of very few females in a traditionally male environment, although that has changed markedly over the last few years. A good female role model and the positive support of other Instructors buoyed her through, so much so that she progressed to becoming the most senior Cadet in South Australia.

She believes most personal struggles were related to self-confidence. "I wasn't overly confident....When I first joined I was really shy and quiet and never wanted to actively take hold of a role and run with it....I could never stand up and speak in front of people. I would 'um' and 'ah' and wouldn't know what to say, but now I teach up to 40 cadets at once....I've been to national competitions and represented my state and done it with pride, stood out in front of all these people from all around Australia and felt good about who I was".

These experiences inspired her to become involved in public speaking through Toastmasters International. "I became a youth leadership coordinator because I felt the confidence that I could do that...but I would never have gone...if I had never gained the foundation of confidence through Cadets".

One of the most significant things to shape her life was finding "friends [who] were instant and life long. I'm still best-friends with people that I met when I was 13". She stopped worrying about being 'cool' and kids hassling her at school. She had her Cadet friends. "It was OK to be who I was. I was very proud of being a Cadet and loved it. It was almost a passion". Cadets became the centre of her social life.

Her employment history has also been affected. "I don't think I would have got the jobs I did if it wasn't for Cadets. I just didn't have the confidence, I would never had the guts to go out and actively look for better jobs". She rose from a junior position to temporarily managing three Wendys stores. "Cadets teaches you to teach other people, to become a leader, we really promote leadership. I trained all the new staff and my employers could see that I was able to teach and had a really good methodology hence I was promoted". Kim now works as an

administrative temp, which involves regularly meeting new people, fitting into an existing team and rapidly gaining a working knowledge of new contexts. She has switched her university course from Computer Science to Marketing: "working with people, being a people person is more who I am – again, a direct consequence of Cadets".

## Creating identity, finding belonging

Kim views youth development programs like Cadets as being "about community spirit and letting young people feel confident about who they are, giving them real support and a team environment where they can learn skills and do things that not everyone gets to do...[we] give them their instruction, a challenge, the resources to do it and then let them go. It's a very team oriented environment.... While Cadets still fosters leadership, you have to fit into a team and pull your weight".

Young people can continue with Cadets until age 20. However, Kim quickly returned as an Adult Instructor. "It was tragic when I left, I thought my whole world had been pulled apart. That was why I came back as an Instructor. I still wanted to be involved". Faced with retiring an identity that had become precious, she found an alternative pathway for her energy and commitment. Becoming the Adult Training Coordinator for South Australia keeps her directly involved with cadets, as well as supporting their instructors to ensure they adopt "real positive attitudes and supportive roles".

"I felt that I had so much to give back to those cadets who were coming through so I decided to stay...what better person to teach new cadets than those who have been in it for 8 years....I get such joy and its emotional for me to see what happens with these kids, and they get to learn from me as well.... Parents come up to me all the time and thank me for the difference I have made in their child. Their commitment to their schoolwork...their attitude has become much more positive". They have gained "self-discipline, self-care and self-respect, commitment to being a better person".

Although Kim did not retire her identity, she certainly had to change it as she navigated the transition from Senior Cadet to a junior within an adult environment, but once again she is "not flying solo. I have plenty of support but it was hard". She wants other young people to be able to experience, through programs like the Australian Air Force Cadets, "what I gained from Cadets...real pride, real confidence and self-discipline – it's very motivating".



## Beyond the local, beyond the self

Simon Gauci, Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Red Cross

*"I never really saw myself as being part of something bigger. But through doing all of this and getting a better understanding of the organisation as a whole and going to the National Youth Conference it shows that I am part of something so much bigger and so much better than what I had thought."*



In 1999 Simon participated in the Red Cross Community Challenge.<sup>13</sup> This kick-started major expansions in identity, relationships and experiences that he never would have anticipated. Prior to this, "I didn't have to move outside of my square, everything was pretty comfortable and I was fairly dependent".

In terms of the future "I had a vague idea – I wanted to go into politics. I wasn't sure how, I wasn't sure when but it was something I was thinking about doing. I liked the idea of being able to voice an opinion and... getting involved in making changes, doing things". The forum for taking action or the means by which to do it was not readily available to him. His ideas were mostly talk, shared with his close circle of friends and not tested in real world contexts.

Through the Red Cross Community Challenge (RCCC) he unsettled his "secure, comfortable existence". It "was a chance for young people to create their own project, organise it, run it, manage it and then make sure it finishes successfully or continues...the onus was on young people to control and run it. It allowed me to pick some area of society that I think needed some improvement and actually do something to try and change it". He hoped to gain organisational skills, as well as an opportunity to contribute to other people's lives in a positive way.

Simon was a key instigator at his school, developing joint and individual programs with fellow students. A key program was bringing computer technology and the Internet to people living in nursing homes. The aim was to increase their contact with the wider world, particularly as many residents had limited or no contact with friends and family. This occurred without the benefit of funding or strong support from provider organisations. They raised funds and sought donations in order to gather a range of old computer equipment.

The group grappled with the technological difficulties of old equipment, changes of management at participating nursing homes and being sidelined as a trivial part of the nursing home schedule. Participating residents changed and the unique needs or capacities of participants also presented challenges. Many residents had limited verbal and physical abilities. As Simon's group continued it became increasingly apparent there was some difference between Simon's visions and what could or needed to happen!

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<sup>13</sup> The Red Cross Community Challenge is aimed at young people in Years 9-12 who identify a need in their community, then develop, conduct and evaluate a program to addresses that need. It is supported by a resource kit and access to Red Cross and school personnel. The intended benefits for young people are: gaining skills in project management while learning more about the needs of their own community, and applying the principles of an international humanitarian organisation to their own community work:

[http://www.redcross.org.au/ourservices\\_acrossaustralia\\_youtheducation\\_youthschoolprograms\\_communitychallenge.htm](http://www.redcross.org.au/ourservices_acrossaustralia_youtheducation_youthschoolprograms_communitychallenge.htm)

"I had a very unrealistic vision and thought it would work out beautifully...But, once you get involved it's quite confronting". Simon learned directly how great plans can fail and the importance of understanding people's context. "I had to...address the humanitarian issues and then you form attachments with people. It became quickly clear it wasn't going to turn out like my vision. But I don't think that was important in the end".

Things have changed and the program continues in a different form. "It is now no longer the computer teaching program. It is how can we support people when we are the only contact that they get....Change is not a bad thing. It was unrealistic to think we could get all of these people on the Internet...it was not necessarily something they saw as important....for them it was some contact, whether we did it on the computers or not was irrelevant....It teaches you a lot about human behaviour – you get very empathic with people and learn to understand where they are coming from".

Simon found that "you have to be [flexible], you are dealing with people. You have to be able to compromise, move and just change. I had this wonderful idea and now it is completely turned around. It's been confronted and changed a lot. You have to be ready for that, to accept that it has to change".

New concepts became part of Simon's direct experience, such as ownership, accountability, flexibility and evolution as he negotiated unexpected challenges. Why did he hang in there? "I was enjoying what I was doing. It helped me feel like I was helping somebody. It gave me something to own as such. This was my **own** little project. It was something that I could be in charge of, be responsible for. 16-17 year olds don't usually get to do that very often. I liked the challenge...dealing with the issues," otherwise it would have been boring.

But it was more than this. Simon moved beyond what he wanted and hoped to achieve, beyond the self, to recognising and valuing what he was being **offered**. People were giving back to him through providing learning opportunities about the "real world". "It connects with developing a massive sense of social justice.... you learn social skills, then there are issues of tolerance...open-mindedness... patience and empathy. To work with people you have to be able to put yourself in their shoes. It definitely changed my perception of the world. It makes you much more **grateful** for what you have and this is where you could end up [a nursing home]. That...has had the most impact. It just throws everything **completely** out of whack. It makes you see how quickly things can change".

Simon believes his experiences with the RCCC have changed him as a person. "I used to be fairly shy...but now **you** have to be the one to have the conversations, use the social skills – it forces you to be more social, more confident. I can meet people without having the same emotional heart attack that I used to have".

"If I hadn't done it I don't think my understanding of social justice would have the same depth or understanding. I would not be as organised or energetic....I wouldn't have had the evidence of my capacity – **now** I have proof".

"Others have noticed I am a lot more independent... [they] see that my sense of social justice has been blown away....I am not so idealistic now...become more grounded. You have to have experience to get the realism. I set better goals now. You have an understanding of what is likely to happen. You don't set yourself up to fail."

His own ideas and stereotypes were confronted, as he worked with people with whom he previously didn't get along. He was amazed at how they found a way forward and achieved goals, whether it was on the IT program, letter writing programs from Year 7s to nursing home residents, an annual Xmas party for the residents at his school, raising funds for a youth provider, or recording residents' stories and creating a book to sell so as to raise further funds.

Simon's projects have moved beyond his local environment. He is now an active member of the Red Cross, recently representing Victoria at their National Youth Conference to increase youth participation and develop "outcome statements, recommendations and strategies for how [Red Cross] can be more young people friendly. They were not patronising us". The message was "you do have something to contribute...you are important, what can you tell us." The fact that it was what can YOU tell us – that was **really** good to know".

Simon's vision of his future has also been reshaped. "I now have a completely different set of ideals now, I have had to re-evaluate what was once important. It affects a lot of things you do...It's opened up a career pathway – I might want to work in these areas...because I enjoy what I am doing". Although this has fuelled his desire to get into politics, it has expanded his concept of **how** to act politically. "It would still be good, something that I would like to eventually do, but its not the be all and end all, its not the only way" to make change.

Finally, to Simon's take-home message - he is keen to challenge the perception that young people are just into themselves and can't make a contribution. "Young people are like that if you don't give them the chance not to be. Young people have a lot of enthusiasm, we do have new ideas, we do have new angles on stuff – they are unrealistic at times and very idealistic, but is it only through doing stuff that you are able to see" what it is possible to achieve. People seldom realise that "young people have a hell of a lot to offer. But it is an issue of who will let them, and give them a chance...to change that. To an extent it is a give and take thing. You have to have enough faith in us – **that** will change things".

Beyond the local  
beyond the self



## Recovering the green path

Chris Stewart, Perth, Western Australia: CALM Bush Rangers

*"In Year 10 I started wondering if I could  
do environmental work."*



Environmental work had interested Chris for some time, but when he looked into it seriously in Year 10, achieving a university degree in it seemed out of reach, "I did some research and found out there was no way I could get into it...with my grades". So he switched to the electrical area, setting up work experience during Year 11. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, he discovered he "absolutely detested it!"

## Recovering the green path

Rather than remaining hamstrung by this, Chris spoke to a career guidance teacher who offered an alternative option: first doing a "Certificate 4 at TAFE in Environmental Management and then going to university through the Certificate". It was at this point that he realised how doing the CALM Bush Rangers<sup>14</sup> program at school since Year 8 had been a smart move. Over time, the green pathway that originally appeared beyond reach started to become increasingly visible and available – he **would** be able to recover his goal.

Through another work experience placement with a National Park, Chris realised how important this decision was: "I did so many jobs and never wiped the smile off my face....I decided it was **really** something I wanted to do".

When Chris chose the youth development program in Year 8 as an elective, he "thought it would be interesting...going on camps, learning about the environment. They [the school] showed us a documentary on Cadets about what to expect, so we thought why not. You get to meet other people". This "why not" decision opened up a greater range of activities than he and his friends had originally imagined.

They have been on "camps, abseiling, white water rafting, rehabilitating dunes, adventure training and canoeing. Last year we saved up funds and went to Exmouth for 10 days. That was absolutely fantastic – beautiful sights, beautiful places. I'm never going to forget that trip. It was the best!" However, this was not simply about being a tourist. There was a range of practical tasks involved. On their walks they did "surveys of the beaches, collected rubbish and analysed where it came from" and were involved in clearing pathways. For those who wished, they could use their experiences to gain Duke of Edinburgh awards.

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<sup>14</sup> The Conservation and Land Management CALM Bush Ranger Program, part of Cadets WA, aims to encourage young Western Australians to take an active role in the conservation of the natural environment and to understand the needs surrounding its management. Activities promote personal development, positive attitudes and leadership qualities, enhance self esteem, and teach problem solving, conflict resolution and group dynamics: <http://www.cadetswa.wa.gov.au/cadets/bush.html>

Several of Chris' school teachers were involved in the program, and they brought these practical experiences into the classroom. Chris decided to continue with CALM Bush Rangers despite it no longer being a school elective in Year 11. Doing this extra-curricular work, although presenting challenges to managing his study load and organising his life, was a valuable part of heading down the "green track".

When Chris started with CALM Bush Rangers he "never expected to do half the things I can do now. I never expected to be able to lead a group of thirty kids or do such things as abseiling, mountain bike riding and stuff like that. It's gone past my expectations".

He has moved from being a cadet to becoming a Section Leader in charge of ten younger cadets and supported by one or two senior CALM Bush Rangers. He has revelled in the responsibility and a different Chris has emerged. "When I first joined Bush Rangers, many people said I was very quiet, small, never said anything. I didn't like joining in. Now it's totally the opposite. I like joining in. I like doing things - I have to! I'm loud. So from my point of view I have changed. I can take responsibility now more than I could before. I'm not shy of people when it comes to" meeting them or getting them to do tasks. This is "definitely from Bush Rangers".

His social life took on a new shape as he met more people. He spent more time "going out more after school with friends and on weekends," as well as going away on weekend trips and camps with CALM Bush Rangers. Coupled with these shifts, Chris' confidence in his ability to take on new skills has strengthened. "I've got heaps of new skills and two First Aid certificates. I've done practical work, been able to rehabilitate a creek. [You get] lots of environmental skills from that. [Also] communication skills with people, management skills and organising people".

On occasions, Chris' father has accompanied his section on a camp. Chris thinks his family "must have seen a couple of changes, especially with me...[being] really excited about camps and doing the training - they must have seen a difference in me. They didn't see that [excitement] before. The main change is that I am a more responsible person due to the leadership role I've taken".

Chris has taken the idea of responsibility very seriously, consciously seeking out opportunities. "Well, I decided I wanted to go up in the levels. The year that I decided I wanted to be promoted I looked at the criteria for them. I did heaps of work. I showed that I had stuff that they needed....Responsibility also goes out of the school". You do Bush Rangers "during school, but at home you organise what you are going to do," like organising plans for next lessons, developing fund raising strategies and planning weekend trips and camps for the section.

Skills in organisation have been a great bonus for Chris. "It gets you ready for Year 12 – learning how to do preparation....All of us have our work up to date. The teachers trust us to do this. We know that if we don't do that....we can't go on camps! The teachers [in Bush Rangers] have taught us how to be organised".

## Recovering the green path

All of these developments are highly relevant to Chris' new trail to his preferred direction in life. His course is a "mixed degree with some management. I can become a Park Ranger, then later on through CALM I can do different courses, like management... and work my way up through the ranks of CALM". Being in a management or a "front line" position was not previously in Chris' vision of himself. "I wouldn't stand up in front of the class before. I will do it now quite happily. I can take charge of people when I need to, can get jobs done and I couldn't do that before".

Not only has Chris recovered his green pathway, which is "absolutely cool," he is laying a solid foundation for it's future. He knows that his course will "take account of the work that you have done with CALM. I have already done over 500 hrs...over 3 years". His portfolio of certificates of completion, participation and awards is "growing really big, I've got heaps of stuff". Further, "the experience with management is going to help me get a job. I have had a lot more contacts as result of Bush Rangers, [gaining] work experience in different places" and doing a wide range of activities: from working with injured animals and documentation of animal trapping and bird watching to help with research, to tree-planting and rehabilitating sand dunes and creeks.

The program, with its introduction to voluntary work, has also meant an engagement with and commitment to community work, including fund-raising for environmental issues. "If I wasn't doing Bush Rangers, I wouldn't be so involved with doing regular environmental work....I have done a lot of work with council". This also enables good networking, not just for friends, but for contacts in the environmental field.

Chris may be on his own green path, but he knows he is part of a big picture.



## Promoting challenge, providing support

Victoria Bell, Adelaide, South Australia: St John Ambulance Australia

*"They are always encouraging you to keep striving, to improve yourself, to deal with problems and to keep trying to better yourself."*



Victoria's family emigrated from Northern Ireland when she was 10. Although they had lived in Australia for the first 3 years of her life, most of their family connections were in the UK. Just before turning 13, Victoria was invited by a friend to attend a St John meeting.<sup>15</sup> Thus began an unexpected journey into a new community of service, challenge, encouragement and support; a new family that enriched her biological one.

At the time of joining "I really had no idea of what I was getting into. I'd heard there was First Aid and you bandaged people up. I didn't know about St John in the public....I had no expectations of what it was going to be like at all". Victoria had not been involved in any community groups or activities, although she did a year on the student representative council of her large suburban high school in Year 8. "I was a bit of an academic. I'd always been a fairly good student. Just studying, reading...listening to music".

## Promoting challenge, providing support

In terms of her future, "I didn't know what I wanted to do after school. It was always the story that you wanted to be a teacher, then a doctor, then a vet. I'd always known I wanted to go to university...it was a goal because my parents hadn't been to university....They knew I was a fairly good student and had a good chance of getting into a good course. They have always been encouraging me".

Being encouraged to rise to challenges has become a key theme in Victoria's life. Not only does she have a personal tendency to try to improve her skills and family support and encouragement, but with St John she entered a community that promoted setting goals and self-improvement within a context of mutual support. This spurred her on to do things she never imagined she would.

Things started off fairly predictably. Victoria completed her basic First Aid certificate, learnt about St John's role in community events and after 6 months, began 'duties.' On duty "you go to different places...wear your uniform and take you First Aid kit. You have to go with an adult member and they look after you. If anyone gets hurt they do the main treating but get the cadets to help them whenever they can". St John does community duties ranging from local sporting events, such as the pony club, BMX and Motorcross, to high profile events such as outside concerts and international competitions. Victoria's first duty was at the last Adelaide Grand Prix!

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<sup>15</sup> St John Ambulance Australia is a self-funding charitable organisation dedicated to helping people in sickness, distress, suffering or danger. In St John Cadets, young people aged 11-18 years learn practical first aid while developing organisational and leadership skills, citizenship, computer and clerical skills. Cadets can choose to experience the challenge and excitement of first aid competitions and national cadet camps, as well as other sporting activities. Trained older cadets accompany Operations Branch members in performing volunteer first aid duties at public events: <http://www.stjohn.org.au/community/index.html>

A year later, Victoria began competing in the St John's state and national First Aid competitions. Initially she was in a team of 3 competing with other Cadets. Upon becoming a Cadet Leader she competed as an individual. She gained opportunities to build confidence and "put things into a national perspective. You get to meet people from all these different states and make friends that are really lasting – it's really good". Victoria continues to win state competitions and compete at nationals. Her goal of coming first still eludes her, although she has twice been in second place.

The competition events simulate real world situations for teams or individuals to address. This taught her to "think outside the square, a bit of lateral thinking.... You never know...what the situation is going to be. You have to think on your feet". She developed skills in problem-solving and strategic thinking. "You go in and you have to think on the spot, work out priorities like which treatment to do first," learning how to be creative and resourceful.

Adjudicators and other spectators observe them. This is not unlike treating an injured person at a sporting event where many community spectators are present. Valuing collective rather than just individual efforts is the philosophy promoted. "I think it's very focussed on working together, especially in the team event. In the individual event I have to rely on myself but definitely with the team it's about helping each other out, building on each other's strengths and realising that you...and other people have weaknesses but...you can complement each other and end up being a really good team".

Victoria has experienced many changes from her involvement, even though some only became apparent when others pointed them out. "Since I've started I've been friends with the person who used to run it and they told me I used to be really, really shy when I was younger. I probably was, I wasn't very outgoing. Now I don't have problems introducing myself to people....I have a lot more self-confidence".

Although "I did used to be quite shy, it was not so hard to make friends but I was very **careful** about who I made friends with. I sort of waited to see what would happen before I gave too much of myself too quickly....I am still cautious...but I am more willing to give things a shot and...see where it takes you. Because I know I can look after myself and I have the confidence if anything happens I know how to sort out my problems.... I know how to teach people. I know how to be a leader and I also know how to be part of a team and to take...and give positive criticism".

Victoria now lives 60 km away from her St John division, having moved to attend university to study law/arts, yet her attachments to that community, that family, remain strong. She is now a Cadet Leader, having first becoming a corporal in her 2<sup>nd</sup> year, then later a sergeant. The courses required to gain these ranks teach members how to work with younger Cadets, teach them new skills, use games to maintain their interest, explain new material and develop teaching plans. She travels each fortnight to lead Cadets, although she is less available for community duties.

"I would feel weird leaving them because I started lecturing the kids. I have grown attached to them...I feel a responsibility toward them". This sense of obligation "hadn't really developed until I got a bit older. I didn't really appreciate it for a while". It was more about "just being with my friends" and helping them out "if they have any problems".

Victoria sees the skills and qualities gained through St John, such as thinking outside the square, strategic thinking, understanding another's perspective, confidence and teamwork, as "not just First Aid...[but] life skills....I think learning how to teach people is very rewarding. I've been using the same skills that I was taught back then. I am still using them now in St John and an after school hours care program I started working in a few months ago where I have to take kids for games. So I have applied what I learned...to that side of my life as well, which is really useful". She considers these skills are a foundation that has assisted her in her chosen profession of law: "the whole thinking outside the square helps in law...as you have to work out the problem - how can I look at that from another perspective".

Knowing how and when to gain support is also encouraged. "They want you to try and work out things for yourself....They want you to use your own initiative and be an individual, but also know that when you are really having problems and you can't work it out...that's when you get help from other people. They encourage independent learning, but understand that group learning and group help is very important" too. They make sure that "if you have problems you know who you can talk to".

For Victoria, youth development programs such as St John need community support as they provide "people to help with public duties," and then there is "the development and confidence it gives the children" as it expands their knowledge, skills and sense of what they can do. They gain "the reward of being able to help out other people...another good side of it".

## Promoting challenge, providing support

To Victoria St John is "a big family". What would her life have been like without it? "I probably wouldn't have had so many community activities or as much awareness of the community....I think my confidence would have grown but not quite as quickly or with as much support. I'd still be academic but not participating in community activity as much, very focussed on my study, maybe not getting out as much. St John introduced me to new people and experiences". Now that it is in her life "I couldn't imagine not having it".



# CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THEORY AND EXPERIENCE IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

The stories gathered through the interviews present an opportunity to identify and understand the connections between theory and experience - to evaluate the match between rhetoric and reality and, therefore, the value of investing in youth development.

The fifteen themes that emerged across the interviews are described below, and are directly represented by young people's words. The illustrative quotes are intended to be indicative of the theme, not a comprehensive listing of all related quotes.<sup>16</sup> In the participants' stories there is considerable evidence of connections between the desired outcomes of youth development work and young people's realities. These connections are outlined and highlighted.

## Confidence

Without exception, all participants identified how their confidence had grown substantially, enabling enhanced self-esteem and a stronger sense of identity and self-efficacy. Many claimed that their involvement assisted them in overcoming shyness and supported them in believing they could take their place within a group more assertively, face challenges and step into leadership roles. For example:

*"I used to be fairly shy...but [became] more confident. I can meet people without having the same emotional heart attack that I used to have." (Simon Gauci)*

*"Confidence has really come out in the last couple of years...before that there was all that shy business." (Leigh Spriggs)*

*"I became a youth leadership coordinator because I felt the confidence that I could do that...but I would never have gone...if I had never gained the foundation of confidence through Cadets." (Kim Pengelly)*

## Social and communication skills

Participants saw youth development programs as providing opportunities to learn about and enhance their social and communication skills. The improvement they and others noted in these skills was a key way in which they measured their growth in confidence. They moved self-belief into action as they built assertiveness in expressing their own thoughts and ideas, speaking in front of groups and stepping into leadership roles. They learnt to talk through and deal with different views and ways of doing things, once again increasing their sense of self-efficacy. For example:

*"It teaches you a lot about human behaviour - you get very empathic with people and learn to understand where they are coming from....You learn social skills, then there are issues of tolerance...open-mindedness...patience and empathy." (Simon Gauci)*

*"I'm listening to my Mum a lot and understanding about her....You start having understanding of parents, family and friends. You don't think everything revolves around you." (Diana Juskov)*

*"I wouldn't stand up in front of the class before. I will do it now quite happily. I can take charge of people when I need to, can get jobs done and I couldn't do that before." (Chris Stewart)*

<sup>16</sup> Some quotes are drawn from participants' statements made during the interviews that do not appear in the stories as presented here which summarise the interview content.



## Leadership skills

Confidence together with good social and communication skills are part of the recipe for developing leadership. Whether it happened within their youth development program, school and local community or on a much wider scale – such as representing their area, state or Australia – all participants reported they experienced substantial development in their leadership skills. At times this was surprising to them, as they never set out to be leaders.

Taking on leadership meant stepping into responsibility and dealing effectively with choices – their own and other people’s choices. For most, becoming a leader was linked with their commitments to voluntary action and giving service to the community in terms of both the provider organisation and the wider community. For example:

*“I had no inkling that I was going to be a major leadership identity in Scouting.” (Aaron Wardle)*

*“I mightn’t have had as much leadership [if not in the program]... leadership...my teamwork has built up now....I already had [some of] these skills but I have refined them.” (Leigh Spriggs)*

*You “definitely [learn about] leadership....Because we did it last year we have all the experience and can take a whole group of students ourselves and train them. That is **incredible** leadership”. I have become “better at leadership and working with people under stress.” (Melissa Jewel)*

## Teamwork skills

Although leadership was clearly present in participants’ stories, this was balanced by their accounts of developing teamwork skills. Making positive contributions to your group and, collectively, getting the most out of each other as a group was seen as very rewarding as well as a critical life skill. Working in teams provided a forum through which young people both strengthened and practised their developing social and communication skills. They came face to face with difference and opportunities to manage conflict – key skills in developing active empowered citizenship. For example:

*You “work towards goals of an individual nature and team goals. You can’t go on a hike on your own so you choose things that you are all interested in doing and can go out and achieve as a team. Keeping each other going [is important - you] couldn’t do that without the teamwork which is very characteristic of Scouting.” (Aaron Wardle)*

*“I got confronted with a lot of stuff that just completely reshaped [my stereotypes]. I was forced to work with people who I didn’t particularly get along with, but I had to give them credit...it was amazing! I hadn’t thought they were the type of person to do [community work] at all.” (Simon Gauci)*

*“I think it’s very focussed on working together... with the team it’s about helping each other out, building on each other’s strengths and realising that you...and other people have weaknesses but...you can complement each other and end up being a really good team.” (Victoria Bell)*



## Developing self-efficacy and independence

In addition to talking about how they strengthened their confidence, participants were frequently specific about acquiring a sense of self-efficacy. This was often related to feeling more independent, being able to take risks by participating in different and challenging activities (that may not have been readily available to them), having greater comfort with self-responsibility and gaining evidence of their personal capacities. For example:

*"I always find myself as a risky person, I love taking risks [now]." (Rachel High)*

*"You learn about responsibility [in the ESCC], how to take charge of yourself." (Diana Juskov)*

*"They want you to try and work out things for yourself.... They want you to use your own initiative and be an individual...They encourage independent learning, but understand that group learning and group help is very important" too. They make sure that "if you have problems you know who you can talk to." (Victoria Bell)*

## Opportunities for self-reflection

An unexpected outcome for many participants was the opportunity they gained for self-reflection. They put themselves in perspective and learned self-acceptance, thereby developing and/or shaping a unique identity. This re-appreciation of self led to a boost in self-esteem and confidence. Through coming to understand and appreciate their place in the world several participants also had their previous perceptions and meanings challenged and transformed. For example:

*"I had to learn to love the way I am...the Duke of Edinburgh things helped." (Rachel High)*

*"It connects with developing a massive sense of social justice.... It definitely changed my perception of the world.... It just throws everything **completely** out of whack. It makes you see how quickly things can change....I now have a completely different set of ideals now, I have had to re-evaluate what was once important. It affects a lot of things you do." (Simon Gauci)*

*"It was OK to be who I was. I was **very** proud of being a Cadet and loved it. It was almost a passion." (Kim Pengelly)*



## Setting and achieving goals

Participants reported that opportunities to set and pursue goals were abundant. However, a critical component of this was that goals could be of any size and were based on personal relevance and interests. Many participants had opportunities to set both individual and team goals, and then plan and follow through on the steps needed to achieve them. As they experimented with setting and achieving goals, they felt able to tackle more challenging things with greater confidence.

Efforts were rewarded along the way by both formal and informal means in order to foster motivation. They learnt about setting goals more effectively, setting themselves up for success and accepting the outcomes of their personal efforts. They also began appreciating the responsibilities of choice in considering what they needed to do, or not do, in order to focus on and achieve a goal. For example:

*Having a goal to reach "motivated me to be more committed to work at it...even if it was hard".*  
(Rachel High)

*"I am more willing to give other things up like my free time or sitting around doing nothing. I give that up to help achieve my goals. I'm a lot more determined than I was before - it is a bit of a surprise that it has happened so quickly."* (Melissa Jewel)

*"Well, I decided I wanted to go up in the levels. The year that I decided I wanted to be promoted I looked at the criteria for them. I did heaps of work. I showed that I had stuff that they needed."* (Chris Stewart)

## Opportunities for new and challenging experiences

The stories provided ample examples of how young people had new and challenging experiences, often things that would otherwise not be possible or easily available to them through their school, family or community networks and/or resources. As Diana put it, *"It's nothing you have experienced before. It's nothing you expected it to be, because it's better."* These opportunities involve exposure to different locations, types of experiences/activities, range of people met and roles that young people can perform. Aaron noted that, *"opportunities like that have kept me moving along with it."*

Many described the sense of pride they had found through their efforts and accomplishments. At times there was some astonishment at what they had achieved or been prepared to try when they reflected on the impact of their youth development experiences on their lives.

*"When I first joined I was really shy and quiet and never wanted to actively take hold of a role and run with it...but now I teach up to 40 cadets at once. I've been to national competitions and represented my state and done it with pride, stood out in front of all these people from all around Australia and felt good about who I was."* (Kim Pengelly)



## Sustained experiential learning

Many participants talked about how in the second and subsequent years of programs they started to appreciate what and how much they had learned, and their ability to share this back with others who were younger or less experienced. They emphasised the importance of learning being hands-on and based in real world contexts. For some, these interviews were the first time they had stopped to consider the significance of their learning and how their youth development experiences had and were continuing to shape their lives – a theme that will be further explored below.

Their stories demonstrated the potential for learning to have exponential value when learning experiences with direct relevance to a range of life skills are sustained over a longer period of time. For example:

*"I felt that I had so much to give back to those cadets who were coming through so I decided to stay...what better person to teach new cadets than those who have been in it for 8 years....I get such joy and its emotional for me to see what happens with these kids.."*  
(Kim Pengelly)

*"I was helping out as a Cub Instructor with the local group with areas of Scouting where they needed someone with experience to teach them various skills. Becoming a Full Assistant Scout Leader [and] being able to teach people skills that you have learnt and help them achieve their goals has been the most direct influence from my earlier experience with Scouts."*  
(Aaron Wardle)

*Its "not just swimming...[it is] entirely [about] working with people, leading people, setting goals. Of course it's applicable...I've got different ways I can go now. Not only just straight into my job....Now that I have got everything under my belt, I have these different experiences I can go in different directions....I am a lot more of a people person now - I've had to be. That's helped a lot and that's going to help with work, with everything."* (Melissa Jewel)

## Structured progress

As young people described their journeys through the youth development program, most commented upon how each program was structured to have an entry point, then a series of steps through which participants could progress as they gained and built on new skills. However, the number of awards they pursued and the pace at which they progressed was a personal choice, dependent upon their time, personal or competing interests and motivation. They experienced encouragement to move forward and through program options, but not pressure. All steps and contributions they made along the way were recognised, therefore they always experienced a sense of achievement regardless of the level that they decided to reach. For example:

*"You look to the greater goal of completing each component of the award scheme, being recognised for having completed your objective despite the hard work and involvement necessary. You gain a great sense of self-satisfaction in achieving [each] task, and that was one of my major attractions."* (Aaron Wardle)

Cadets is *"about community spirit and letting young people feel confident about who they are, giving them real support and a team environment where they can learn skills and do things that not everyone gets to do"...As an Adult Instructor, I see how "we give them the support and the ability to do these things [they choose to do] - it could be anything. Its all about...inspiring these kids to be the best at whatever they want to do, to try their hardest."* (Kim Pengelly)

In describing their personal experiences, the participants depicted the intention of the overarching principle of conscious enterprise; a developmental sequence of deliberately planned and structured activities intended to realise positive outcomes for young people.



## Transferable skills and knowledge for negotiating life

Managing the realities of life and growing into citizenship calls for a range of personal qualities, skills and knowledge. Young people need the ability and confidence to make plans, deal with unexpected challenges and then modify their ideas about what they will achieve or how. They need to display vision, tenacity, flexibility and creativity, as well as make good use of available resources through networking and learning how to prioritise.

Participants identified experiences that fostered these personal qualities and built transferable skills and knowledge. They believed these would assist them in negotiating their life and entering new territories, whether they were operating as an individual or part of a group. For example:

*"You have to be [flexible], you are dealing with people. You have to be able to compromise, move and just change. I had this wonderful idea and now it is completely turned around. It's been confronted and changed a lot. You have to be ready for that, to accept that it has to change." (Simon Gauci)*

You learn to "think outside the square, a bit of lateral thinking....You have to think on your feet." These things are "not just First Aid skills [but] life skills.... I think learning how to teach people is very rewarding....the same skills that I was taught back then, I am still using them now....I have applied what I learned". (Victoria Bell)

*"It opens your eyes, you see different things. You come back and use them later in life." (Leigh Spriggs)*

## Young people's participation

Several stories highlighted the importance of young people's participation in program design and provider organisations' processes, and having official positions within provider organisations' structures. This participation ranged from making decisions about the activity focus of a local youth development program, to becoming a leader where there was increased responsibility for program design and management, or representing their group/region at the state or national level with a provider organisation. Such participation extended their opportunities to build teamwork and leadership skills, strengthened their self-belief and inspired them to make further contributions to their communities.

Participants identified that when this occurred, young people were more clearly acknowledged for having a legitimate voice that could constructively inform organisations about their performance and future goals. Young people became stakeholders in more than name only and their knowledge and abilities were valued alongside those of staff, community members and other involved adults. For example:

After representing Scouts internationally the "National Youth Council in Scouts [became]...a natural thing to apply for. I have been elected deputy-chair. It's great to have these friendships.... To be able to work together at such a high level and have an impact on the future of Scouts is a wonderful achievement that leadership skills have taught me". (Aaron Wardle)

*"Young people have a lot of enthusiasm, we do have new ideas, we do have new angles on stuff -they are unrealistic at times and very idealistic, but is it only through doing stuff that you are able to see" what it is possible to achieve. Red Cross "were not patronising us." The message was "you do have something to contribute...you are important, what can you tell us.' The fact that it was what can **YOU** tell us - that was really good to know." (Simon Gauci)*

*"We have a youth council for 18-25, State and Australian Youth Council and they think up ideas on how to get young people involved. They give feedback on issues for young people in the organisation [and are] a link between the hierarchy of St John and the young people on the ground." (Victoria Bell)*



## Appreciating the rewards and value of service to the community

Every participant gained exposure to doing volunteer work in the community through his or her youth development program. Some young people had never intended to do this, while others had some interest in making changes or contributing to community issues but were not sure how to pursue it. Several young people found that their sense of social justice grew substantially and that community work involved personal rewards that were previously poorly appreciated. Many gained a strong sense of personal satisfaction and self-efficacy, valuing the opportunity to take on roles viewed as important and responsible while enhancing their skill development. For example:

*"It was so good helping and having everyone appreciate what we do....You get what you put in. Here we are helping out the community but we get helped ourselves." (Melissa Jewel)*

Youth development programs provide "people to help with public duties," Participants gain "the reward of being able to help out other people... another good side of it". (Victoria Bell)

*"If I wasn't doing Bush Rangers, I wouldn't be so involved with doing regular environmental work such as tree planting, or cleaning up the creek ....I have done a lot of [volunteer] work with council." (Chris Stewart)*

## Building community through expanded friendships

For many participants, involvement in youth development programs led to an expansion of individual networks and trusted relationships beyond family and close friends. They created strong connections with adults as well as peers. Through this exposure they built a sense of community and belonging that extended across a broad range of geographical locations, experiences and personal backgrounds – they were part of a bigger picture.

This sense of community supported them in trying new experiences and often translated into young people volunteering their time and energy in community areas. They also reassessed their relationships with other people, challenging assumptions or stereotypes and gaining a more complex understanding of who others were as people. For example:

The program has "changed my life – having friends around me, learning how to meet people and make new friends." (Rachel High)

*"I was really enjoying these challenges, opening up and meeting people from around the world. It was a big achievement going away to different places for long periods of time and leaving your family behind." (Aaron Wardle)*

*"I ended up having conversations about things I never thought I would...with people that I thought I would never talk to....Teachers too – I got to know them so well...its good to share that experience with them." (Melissa Jewel)*



## Shaping the directions of young people's lives and futures

Ideas about the future varied between participants at the time they commenced youth development programs. Some had a clear sense of future direction; others were undecided or had given it little attention. Several years later they all believed that their youth development experiences had undeniably and positively shaped their current directions.

For some it provided them with a sense of direction while for others it meant that their dreams became realities. For those who had an initial future vision, this did not mean they discarded their original aspirations but rather, they expanded and enriched their intentions – more options became available and they had the opportunity to network with people in their area of interest. Several enriched their intentions by deciding to make ongoing voluntary commitments to service in the community, while others thought their career choice would taken on a community service flavour. For example:

*"I'm still studying and I like it. I know I can get somewhere when I get older. I don't think I would have direction if I hadn't got involved in Cadets."*

(Diana Juskov)

*I am "going to go back farming...eventually....I see more of the bigger picture now...it's wider...not a tunnel. I can go there, there, there and there...it's a big delta."*

(Leigh Spriggs)

*"The experience with management is going to help me get a job. I have had a lot more contacts as result of Bush Rangers, [gaining] work experience in different places."* (Chris Stewart)

*"It's opened up a career pathway – I might want to work in these areas...because I enjoy what I am doing."*

(Simon Gauci)

The participants' stories are rich with examples of how enactment of good practice principles is critical in achieving the intended outcomes of youth development for young people. In the experience of these young people, their youth development programs were clear about program purpose, made resources available to young people, provided role models, offered mentoring and valued young people's active involvement— in some situations this extended from the program itself to participation at organisational levels. The message received was that they, as young people, were worth investing in and valued.



## THE VALUE IN INVESTING IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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All stakeholders in youth development programs and activities – young people, program staff, provider organisations and the community - are participants, supporters and beneficiaries. The stories presented here highlight ways in which young people can and do make conscious contributions to different areas of their communities through youth development programs and activities – how they step into active and empowered citizenship. As programs are voluntary, young people engage in the level of service to the community they find manageable. Yet, as they realise the personal value and satisfaction they gain, this level often exceeds what young people initially imagined they might contribute.

On occasions this reaches the point where the focus of, or opportunities available within, the program do or may become the focus of a young person's future career, such as was the case for Rachel, Aaron, Chris and Simon. Although others may direct their careers in areas that are not directly related to provider organisations, they become so inspired by their experiences that they plan long-term commitments to organisations and service to the community.

Victoria stated that, *"St John introduced me to new people and experiences."* Now that it is in her life *"I couldn't imagine not having it."* Diana commented, *"I hope I don't stop doing community work. I never thought of it because I thought it was really boring, but when you actually do it its really rewarding".* Kim said, *"I loved it so much I made it my social life and it was my #1 commitment...[when I stopped being a cadet] I came back as an Instructor. I still wanted to be involved".*

The satisfaction that young people gain is highly influenced by the feedback and acknowledgment they receive from program staff, provider organisations and community members. Frequently the potential value of service to the community and youth development work is not meaningful to them until they experience it directly; for example, Melissa commented that *"Now that I am...helping everyone and they are helping me, it makes me realise what is the point... It was so good helping and having everyone appreciate what we do".*

When communities, government and business invest in youth development, simultaneously they invest in positive outcomes for both young people and their communities. Investment needs to be long-term to ensure that programs are sustainable; outcomes are not always immediate as real benefits emerge more strongly over time. Expectations need to be tempered with awareness that outcomes are multiple and varied amongst young people. Not all young people may achieve or benefit in the same way or to the same degree as the young people featured in this publication.

Youth development programs and activities have the capacity to provide a self-reinforcing cycle of mutual benefit. Evidence of this cycle is clear in the stories documented here. From this perspective, maximum benefits are likely to be obtained if experiences and opportunities exist for **all** young people to access and participate in youth development. This can only occur when attention is paid to increasing the diversity and number of opportunities for young people within and across programs. In this way, many more young people will have the chance to discover that youth development programs and activities can be *"better than fantastic"*.



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