

PETER MARSHMAN - OAM, B.Ec

Chairman and Founder Youth Opportunities Association (SA) Inc



SPEECH – Presented at District Rotary Conference Oct 2007

Well, first of all I would like to thank you for having me back. Since I spoke to Rotarians in Swan Hill, we have had some great assistance from a number of rotary clubs in district 9520. Many of these clubs are the reason we are in various schools.

It is because of the assistance and support of organizations like rotary that Youth Opportunities has grown so rapidly and so much has changed. We are winning! There is now a strong supporter base within the Education Department to have the program rolled out to all schools. If this happens it will be a first in Australia, and I hope that as Rotarians you can feel some of the pride you deserve for making a difference.

I now believe there is the potential to change the way we educate young people to help them cope with the changes in our society. I believe this to such an extent that I recently sold my latest business, Burns for Blinds, to focus my full time efforts on rolling out Personal Leadership Training to more and more schools.

WHERE IT ALL STARTED

When I started Youth Opportunities (YO) in 1997, I had no idea of the impact it was to have on the students and my life direction. I started it to help a few kids because I was doing well and wanted to give a little back. I developed the program to increase the value motivation of my employees and adapted it for young people at schools who had become disengaged. Time and time again we found that these students had lost their way because of a lack of confidence, an inability to communicate, and poor understanding of the rules of how to become successful and happy. Often, through no one's fault, they were on a downward spiral of poor behaviour, poor attendance at school, leading to low marks, wrong crowds, unemployment, depression, despair and, in some cases, much worse.

OUR GROWTH

The program worked far better than I expected. We kept expanding and developing our resources. I wrote a text book called 'Choose Your Life' and invested over \$300,000 in producing animated DVD's. More and more schools wanted what we offered. The catch was that they couldn't afford it, because of the way schools are funded, so we had to find sponsors. The more sponsors we found, the more schools and students we could help. This is where the Rotary clubs have been so great, sponsoring programs in individual schools.

Three years ago we were in 9 schools, now we are working with 26 schools in SA. First term next year this number will exceed 30. These schools include regional schools in areas like Renmark, Victor Harbor, Pt Broughton, Moonta and Balaklava, as well as several special schools like Bowden Brompton for troubled students, Residential Care for wards of the state and Barkuma for the intellectually disadvantaged. This term we are also starting our first program for indigenous students. We have also begun to teach the program in higher socio-economic schools, such as Sacred Heart, on a fee for service basis.

This year we will Graduate around 1200 students. We have 14 full time trainers employed by YO and approximately 50 teachers trained to teach the program under a license system. That's right, we are now expanding by training teachers to teach the program under a license system, whereby we maintain strict performance standards. The effect of this on teachers and the culture of the whole school is simply amazing.

I would like to point out here that we've grown because of the need. It's not that we are teaching rocket science. We are teaching young people how to be successful and happy through good decision making and communication skills that help them overcome perceived barriers. This has been the catch for me and why I have become so obsessed with this.

If a young person was run over by a bus outside of this building everyone here would stop what we are doing if we could help. Metaphorically speaking, I am seeing thousands of kids being run over by the bus of their circumstances, and I have had to stop what I was doing because I can help. The program has such a profound effect on the attitudes of the graduates and I know that the more places it is taught the more young people are helped.

I feel compelled to do more. Not because of some burning calling, but simply because the program works and changes so many lives; and there are so many people who have been to our graduations and listened to the graduates that can attest to these changes.

We can help. We can help by teaching these young people that it doesn't have to be this way for them.

THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

I thought a few marginalized kids in our society had gone off the rails because of circumstances and bad choices.

But, our surveys tell us that 50% of all students are raised in what the law would define as abuse.

Sounds unreal! I still can't get over this figure. 50% of students in the majority of the schools in the state are being abused, and by abused I mean physically, sexually, emotionally and by neglect.

The figures are supported with announcements of 25,000 reported cases each year, and the headlines in the Advertiser on August 22nd that 10,000 students in this state are acting as carers.

10-15% are sexually abused. That's right, an average of 2 out of 18 of the students who do our program have been sexually abused in some way.

Mr Howard rushed off to help Aborigines but I must ask, what about low socio-economic Australia?

Can you imagine the effect that this is having on the students, and indirectly on our society?

If you were living in a state of abuse, would school be relevant to you? Would you resent the system that did nothing to help you?

How would you feel if -

- o you had to look after your siblings because your mum is an alcoholic and dad – who knows where he is?
- o your parents are drug addicts or have mental problems that are causing them to be dysfunctional?
- o your parents don't want you – your mum and dad divorced and your mum doesn't want you around with her new partner?

It is easy to blame parents, but what is the point if they are living in dysfunctional circumstance.

It is easy to blame teachers, but they are under-resourced and not trained to handle this problem.

It is easy to blame the Government, but surely the Government is the will of the people. So what are we doing about it?

In the meantime, the kids suffer.

A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

We help them by getting them to help themselves, by changing their beliefs about the level of control they have over their circumstances.

Personal Leadership Training teaches these young people that in a country such as Australia they are lucky enough to have choices. Yeah, their circumstances are tough, but they are 15 and we challenge them to become Personal Leaders who can create successful lives for themselves by using the steps of the formula in the program.

I might add at this point that as we move into some of the higher socio-economic schools, we have been amazed at the effect there.

So many young people in these schools are suffering from low self esteem and depression because they are struggling to fit in, keep up, or to make the right choices. And when they learn about personal leadership and how to gain success and happiness for themselves, the effect can be even more profound. These are the graduations where the tears flow as they are more articulate at expressing their joy at overcoming the inner fears and pains that they had been suffering in silence.

Too often the story goes like this:

At primary school the school report says Kelly is a bright young student, then some debilitating circumstance commences. Next report says Kelly is inattentive in class. Next report, Kelly is a trouble maker and is not attending all her classes. Next there isn't one, unless it is a social service report or law report.

This could all be avoided with training that shows Kelly how to overcome the circumstances and make a successful and happy life for herself.

It appears Personal Leadership Training fills the gap in the education of our youth. A gap that has been created by the breakdown of families, and the diminishing influence of religious education and even sporting clubs. At the same time, a 10 fold increase in the number of choices available to young people.

And schools are not filling the gap because curriculum like math and science is irrelevant to the young person who is bringing far more than their lunch box to school. These kids need to learn what it means to be a human, how to be and how to relate successfully to others before they learn Pythagoras's Theorem.

THE RESULTS

The results of 10 days of Personal Leadership Training and some follow up:

- 98% of graduates are engaged two years after completing program---either at school, in work or at TAFE
- 77% of graduates go on to year 12 compared to a state average of 64%
- 95 % of parents and teachers surveyed report significant improvement in one or more of the following
 - Confidence
 - Relationships
 - Communication
 - Application to school

SO WHAT IS MY DREAM FOR A BETTER FUTURE?

My dream is that Personal Leadership Training sits alongside all schools and that we can teach young people to believe in themselves, and their future, in a great country such as Australia.

We all know that success is about values, attitudes and communication skills. How many times have I heard managers say just give me a kid with the right attitude and we can teach him how to do the job, yet they are not being taught how to develop this right attitude.

I want to help change this!

The challenge is

- to make more people aware of the extent of the problem, so there are more and more advocates for change.
- to find the finances to keep growing.

My dream is that our generation recognizes the problem and that we are all responsible to help push for these changes. You must get more and more people of influence to push for the change because we will all be affected one day.

I believe in the quote, "Evil flourishes when good men and women do nothing".

I believe it is evil what happens to these kids

If we don't act, I believe the legacy of our generation will be a societal problem as the 50% of our youth become adults and create more and more dysfunctional families.

We have an answer, but unless the figures are recognized and we can make it part of the new culture of schools, it will be just another program that was good while it lasted.

Many thanks for listening.