



One child at a time

PCYC manager Justin Abrahams knows only too well the challenges facing youngsters growing up in a disadvantaged community. After 23 years delivering compassion and support to those on Struggle Street, he probably helped some of their parents, too

WORDS TRACY RENKIN
PHOTOGRAPHY CHRIS KIDD

It's lunchtime on a blue-sky, sunny school day, and two young, cap-clad kids are scooting through the Bridgewater Woolworths carpark towards the PCYC building at the top of the hill.

The youngest is in Grade 6 and his mate is a young teenager. They're having a laugh as they kick up their deck and come to a stop by PCYC manager, Justin Abrahams, who is standing out the front. Everyone calls this Nike-sneaker wearing, grey-haired man "Abes".

The youngest boy speaks first: "Hey, is Ben here?" Abes shakes his head. "No mate. Ben's not here."

Ben Kamaric is one of 20 youth workers this award-winning PCYC has embedded in 10 surrounding schools over the past two years to provide support for behaviourally challenged children. They rotate around the primary and high schools to help manage difficult situations in the hope the kids aren't just simply sent home.

They are the ones who chase after these kids when they run away from the classroom, or who calm them down when they explode in toddler-like tantrums. They are in the firing line of flying chairs and pelted drink bottles and little arms and legs lashing out in anger and frustration.

The kids they are watching often come from a life of trauma, and sometimes pure neglect, Abes says. The youth workers literally drag kids off each other in school-yard bust-ups in the playgrounds and calm them down during — in some cases — frequent school lockdowns.

They cop the kind of foul-mouthed language you'd expect in our maximum security prisons out of the gritted teeth of — sometimes — five-year-old preppies. Abes says preppies can be the "bumpiest and most unruly and difficult to manage".

For about 50 primary school aged children a day, they are the only reason these kids get to go to school at all, because they are the ones who personally drive and pick them up from home.

Despite those physical and verbal attacks, the children they are there to help form close bonds with these young men and women very quickly. They trust them. And often open up to sometimes only them about the "shit" that's going down in their life.

Sometimes the stories are so horrific the staff need professional de-briefing afterwards. Sometimes they come back to the Greenpoint Road facility and cry. Abes says that in many instances his youth workers are the most significant adults in these young people's lives.

"These children tend to cling onto our staff when they form that relationship," Abes says. "And that latching on can happen in a really short amount of time."

Ben Kamaric is currently at a primary school swimming carnival helping to keep about 20 "unstable kids" on track so their peers can enjoy the special day without incident.

Every week day morning this 22-year-old is the one who sits down with the youngest scooter-rider for just one hour to help him with maths and English. If he behaves and tries his best, this lad is rewarded with some kind of sport before he has to leave the school and go back to his house.

This 12-year-old only gets five hours of primary school-based education a week. His violent outbursts are so "out-of-control" that without the PCYC he'd be completely out of the school system.

He and his older, scooter-riding companion chat with Kamaric's boss, Abes, for a few minutes more and then turn their wheels around and roll down the hill. "They'll be back later," Abes tells *TasWeekend*. "Probably to shoot some hoops or play some pool."



Main: Youth worker Ben Kamaric, assistant manager Samantha Andrews and manager Justin Abrahams at the Bridgewater PCYC. Above: Layla Watt-Jones, 8, Meia Watt-Jones, 11, and Jorja Sutcliffe, 9, are among the youngsters who are benefiting from the PCYC program.

Abes knows both boys well. He knows their complex challenges and history and where they live. He's spent the better part of his 23-year policing career in Bridgewater, and it only seems like yesterday that he was helping the parents of current school-aged locals back in the 90s when they were kids.

He says young people today are more willing to try something new to address the challenges in their life. Decades working in the area means Abes is a man who really gets the diversity of complex issues that fester in a disadvantaged community like this — illiteracy, generational and long-term unemployment, homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency, domestic violence, poverty, teenage pregnancy, poor nutrition, and lax parenting. He's seen it all.

Before they extended their \$5 a day, after-school care program for primary school aged children to five days a week, and improved the high-school drop-in centre program and built up their holiday care program, youth gangs were a huge problem in Bridgewater.

These young kids were hanging out and loitering around the takeaway shops, throwing rubbish bins, shoplifting and getting into fights. It all got so bad that the health centre across the road had to employ an outside security guard.

But now many of these same kids congregate at the PCYC and enjoy a myriad of diverse sports and a hearty afternoon tea in a supervised, computer-free environment. They appreciate it so much that many of them come back every afternoon.

We've just walked out through the front, double-grilled security doors and past the "You are Safe Here" sticker plastered to the entrance after a couple of hours chatting in Abes' office. I sat down with him and his assistant manager Samantha Andrews who prefers to be called "Sammi".

They both tried to put into words the joy the PCYC "family" felt in September, when it won the Social Change Maker Telstra Small Business of the Year Award. It lifted them up, they say.

Abes admits he had a massive lump in his throat when he walked up to receive the award and almost teared up. He was so proud of his team, he says.

Sammi says it was only because of the changes Abes has made that they won. But, she admits, the change wasn't in any way easy.

"We've tried really hard these last two and a half years," she says. "We just kept pushing, and pushing and pushing."

The internal transformation has been such a whopper it has been simply exhausting. Abes is going to give his office wall a fresh coat of paint before he hangs the big award. He says the external recognition was really appreciated, but it's the real people that benefit from the changes they've made that matter the most.

"It's not about the glitz," he says. "It's about the outcomes, and the outcomes we've achieved affect real people. We might not be the biggest or flashiest PCYC in Australia but we certainly are the best."

Before he stepped in as Gagebrook PCYC general manager the program reached about 500 kids a week, but it was running at a fairly substantial loss.

Now it is personally connecting with about 3250 kids and is sustainable. Apart from the Bridgewater facility, they also have pop-ups in New Norfolk and Brighton and Claremont.

Dozens of children are driven back to their homes each day when the after-school programs end. Before he started they were only in one school. Now they are in 10.

Abes has been sipping on a lemon and lime electrolyte sports drink while we've been chatting. An unopened, cereal box of Kellogg's Frosties sits on his desk alongside a string of untouched Easter eggs. He's depleted, he says: "wrecked".

Before winning the award he endured a two-month long tension headache. The last two years have been the most stressful in his career, and the headache is only now starting to lift. He still picks up a stress ball that he constantly squeezes as he happily shows off the PCYC headquarters.

Sammi, who grew up in Gagebrook, was in Year 10 when she first walked through these PCYC doors hoping to bulk up after a bad bout of bullying. She's the kind of tough nut who is scared of taking a sick day because she doesn't want to let anyone down.

She gets a bit teary as she talks about some of the challenges the pair has overcome in tipping this PCYC on its head and filling in the gaping holes.

It's taken long and emotionally draining days to make it more financially stable, to foster a diverse partnering system and make the services they offer more dynamic so that they can embrace more kids.

Sammi says she's proud of how the kids have learnt to follow the rules and do the right thing. She's proud that the majority of the children are going to school more often and staying at school for longer and becoming the most engaged learners they have ever been.

The PCYC program is changing their attitude towards learning, she says, one child at a time. In some instances, these troubled kids look up at the PCYC staff like parents because the staff give these children more affection and attention than they're used to.

"I feel like that for a lot of these kids, their parents give up on them and then their teachers give up on them and then there's us," Sammi says. "And we are the ones who try and pick up the pieces and see what we can do to fix it."

Their "fix it" for the 12-year-old scooter rider is to take him to the local high school one morning a week and stay with him while he learns new skills in the woodwork room. It's a transition everyone in the PCYC family hopes will be the start of this boy's high school education.

He's doing so well with his jewellery box that the woodwork teacher told Ben Kamaric that this 12-year-old's workmanship is better than the 15-year-olds who have been woodworking for three years.

"He's actually unbelievable with his hands," Kamaric says. "He was fully excluded from school and he wasn't going to come back. Now he can wake up on a Tuesday and he's got something to look forward to."