

# Mentoring young people leaving care

Clare Griffin

*'Whitelion' is a non profit organisation that supports disadvantaged young people and helps make our community a more inclusive and safer place. Each year thousands of youths are disconnected from their families and our community due to abuse, neglect, drug addiction and poverty. These young people have often had horrific life experiences with few positive role models and are caught in a 'cycle of discouragement'. Many of them end up in out-of-home care or the juvenile justice system. Whitelion gives them the best chance to 'break the cycle' through positive role modelling, mentoring and employment, and the opportunity to build positive lives for themselves.*

*Clare Griffin is the Mentoring Team Leader at Whitelion. She has worked with young people involved with the out-of-home care system in a variety of roles over the past eight years.*

In June 2004, Whitelion, in partnership with MacKillop Family Services and the Salvation Army Crossroads, received funding from the Department of Human Services in Victoria to commence the Leaving Care Mentoring Initiative. This program was funded to address issues which young people leaving care face, including lack of community supports and isolation. The program has been successful and recently expanded to Gippsland in partnership with Quantum Support Services, the Gippsland Mentoring Alliance and Berry Street Victoria.

The objectives of the Mentoring Program are to foster the young person's sense of self; support them to establish independent living skills; assist them to access employment, education and training opportunities; support them to maintain engagement and achieve positive outcomes while addressing issues of isolation, loneliness and alienation.

Raman, Inder and Forbes (2005) found that community involvement for young people leaving care was highly associated with building resilience. The Whitelion model works with young people from 16 years of age and aims to match the young person with a mentor from the community before they leave care. The match is actively supported by Whitelion until the relationship becomes independent. The relationship with a volunteer mentor provides young people with a support person outside of the care system and a link to a range of different opportunities including recreation activities, employment opportunities and positive new life experiences.

Mentors are screened and provided with ongoing training. Mentors are required to make a commitment of at least 12 months to their match and to spend at least three hours a fortnight with their mentee (young person).

Matches are made through group activities or direct matches. Group activities provide young people with the opportunity to choose their own mentor. Not all young people feel comfortable

participating in a group activity and so they can be matched directly with a mentor depending on the individual needs of the young person.

Matches are given a trial period to ensure it is appropriate for the young person. This means that by the time the match is official, the young person and the mentor feel comfortable and excited about making a commitment to each other. If it does not work out, it means it is not a failed relationship for the young person but an empowering process for them to make a connection with the right person.

A small number of young people elect to cease contact with their mentors for a period of time. This may occur for a number of different reasons including testing the relationship and experiencing difficulty in their life that they may not want to expose to their mentor. Often, however, the young people have reconnected with their mentor and the program after about six months. The continuity and ongoing commitment of mentors has been extremely important for the young people – especially after leaving care and losing contact with many of the other significant adults in their life. The induction training for mentors highlights the importance of this ongoing commitment to young people.

Young people are initially nominated to the program by their worker, but ultimately it is the young person's decision whether or not they become involved. Many of the young people are able to keep their relationship with their mentor separate from those with their workers and care experience. The benefits of being involved in the program, as noted by the young people, include having someone to have fun with, help finding employment, and a reduction in self-harming due to feeling connected to someone.

An evaluation framework developed by Whitelion in partnership with Social Ventures Australia is currently being trialled to formally capture significant changes of the young people in the program.

Most importantly, the young people participating in the program have felt mentoring has had a positive impact on their lives and transition to independence.

*My mentor is my best mate, he has helped me immensely with my self esteem and believing in myself for the first time in my life. He has given me unlimited support in pursuing my dreams.*  
Mark (17 years old).

□

## REFERENCE

Raman, S., Inder, B. & Forbes, C. (2005) *Investing for success: The economics of supporting young people leaving care*, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Melbourne.