

Illusion-free zone

The first conference of the Australian Association of Young People in Care

Readers will be aware of the establishment of the Australian Association of Young People in Care (AAYPIC) mentioned in both Jan Owen's earlier report for Children Australia (vol. 19, no. 2) and Meredith Kiraly's report in this issue. The first conference was held in Sydney in September of this year, offering young people and workers a chance to air their ideas and experiences of life in care situations. Many also had the opportunity to contribute to the Social Worker's Conference which was also happening in Sydney on the same weekend.

Following are some perspectives from a few who were involved.

THE AAYPIC CONFERENCE: From Shane and Danni – the legends

We got involved in AAYPIC approximately two months before the IFZ Conference in Sydney. WE weren't all that sure if what it was all about, but going away for the weekend to Sydney seemed like a fun idea. The weekly meetings beforehand geared us up for what was to take place.

The trip

Getting up at 3.30am to meet the bus by 5am was not our idea of fun but we packed the night before and were ready just in case we slept in a little. When we arrived at the meeting place, there was an air of excitement amongst those who were awake mentally. The convoy consisted on one minibus, two vans and a car. The trip to Sydney was pretty boring we must admit, since we were not in the buses. But we had fun anyway, trying to keep up with Rev. Head Jim. In Sydney the traffic was ridiculous and Jim somehow liking amber lights, thought it fun to watch the following cars running red lights to keep up.

The conference

When we finally arrived at the conference site, after ten or so long hours, we were pretty glad to find rooms and unpack and chill out for a while before the welcoming meeting. It was pretty scary kind of sharing rooms with people you didn't know, but that was okay because it's a good way to get to know them. At first, all the states were hanging around each other a bit, but the games during the meetings helped break those barriers down.

The conference was informative, fun, knowledgable, innovative. We had lots of freedom of speech to say what we think of welfare etc., planning future things.

By the second night, most people, the kids, felt that the conference was a safe place to speak out, because we had gathered that all of the kids and some/most of the workers were in the same situation – either in it themselves, used to be in it, or wanted to help us, the kids, somehow.

We had a mini night club Saturday at the Conference centre, which was quite an interesting scenario – a lot of people met under totally different circumstances. It was a fun, relaxed atmosphere.

On Sunday, a lot of them left, and there were only about 30 kids approximately left at the centre. That evening, we prepared the presentation for the Social Workers conference the following day.

Monday morning, we all packed up the camp site and left for Bondi – the Swiss Grand Hotel where we did our presentation – and it went exceptionally well. The hotel provided sweets the snack on – which was dangerous since everyone got involved in a cool-mint fight – but it was fun. After that we were treated to a meal in the hotel, where I think most of us spun out because I'm sure few of us had ever eaten at such a grand place.

They were even nice enough to arrange a surprise birthday cake for Shane – since it was his birthday, and we all, social workers included, sang Happy Birthday to him.

After that, most people departed. It was hard saying goodbye after we had gotten to know each other so well in the three days we were all together.

And Sydney sucks chronically – they have one-way streets to Hell!

Interview of Elizabeth Smith, by Meredith Kiraly

Meredith: I haven't really planned what questions I'm going to ask you about the conference Liz, but, let me see, let's start with two or three general questions like, what are your thoughts about going to the AAYPIC conference?

Liz: I was a bit nervous in a way. I was sort of happy to go because, excited in a way, because, well, expressing your feelings and your thoughts about being in care. And trying to make it better living, like, I don't know...

Meredith: Trying to make it better living for...?

Liz: For people living in care, that are going into care now. Make it a better system, like, social workers understanding kids and rights for kids in care, they have a right.

Meredith: Okay, and when you got there, what was it like?

Liz: I felt it was like a really posh hotel that we were going to and I thought ohhwaaa!

I thought, it was good how we went into the meeting room before the conference all started and it was good, a good practice, for the conference room.

Meredith: Okay, now I'm thinking you have been talking about going to Bondi Beach, to the big Social Work Conference up there?

Liz: Yes.

Meredith: Do you want to go back and talk a little bit about the weekend at Narmaroo [the AAYPIC Conference]?

Liz: Yes.

Meredith: What was your impression about that?

Liz: When I first got there I was a bit shy because I didn't hardly know anyone. I was a bit embarrassed because I knew some people from Victoria but some of them, like three or four people, I didn't actually really know because they didn't come to the meetings when we were in Melbourne, before we went to Sydney.

Meredith: So that was when you arrived. And how did you find the weekend?

Liz: I liked it because we played games and got into eight groups and sort of decided like what things we should be saying at the [Social Work] conference, and what [are our] rights in care, our group and what can we write down and how can we present it - to the social workers, and the workers at the conference. I learned a lot from it as well.

Meredith: Can you remember one or two things that you might have learned?

Liz: I learned that there are some things I didn't know, like some social workers write things that are not true about you, like some workers go through your stuff, and I thought that living in care was really nice and I

liked [it], like an easy life, but when I came to the meetings in Melbourne, in the city, when we had that meeting, I heard a lot of really sad stories, and I thought I was the only one that had really terrible problems with my Mum with alcohol, but...

Meredith: Yes, so that was really important, to find out there were others that had experiences like you.

Liz: Yes.

Meredith: Was there anything that you didn't like about the weekend [AAYPIC] conference?

Liz: Not at all, I liked it a lot, because it was, like, really good. I didn't like it when we had the disco, because the D.J. played good music, but, I thought that he didn't play for a really good long time, and whoever paid for it didn't get their money's worth.

Meredith: Right. They wound up quite early didn't they?

Liz: Yes.

Meredith: Anything you think should be different next time?

Liz: They should get to split the groups up and let each state people get to know each other a bit more.

Meredith: Right.

Liz: Because when we first went up there, it was like, Victorians hang around with their group, the people they knew, and like, NSW and Western Australia like that kind of group, they stick together, and after, when we got there that night, after we played the game, it was just like the ice just shattered, and everyone was like mixing and mingling with everyone else.

Meredith: What game was that?

Liz: You sit in a circle and a guy goes, who's got shoes and...

Meredith: Yes.

Liz: Yes, like musical chairs it was.

Meredith: I remember.

Liz: Do you know the name of it?

Meredith: No, I don't know the name of that game; there probably is a name. But I know the game you mean, because we play it in Melbourne too. That was fun?

Liz: Yeah.

Meredith: Any other comments you'd like to make about it?

Liz: Are you going to write all this up?

Meredith: Yeah, and I'll show it to you.

Liz: Can I have the end results from it as well?

Meredith: Yes you can.