

**Assembly 10 December 2007**

### **Great Programmes in Boys' Schools: Social Justice**

For the past four years, Shore School in North Sydney, Australia, has been running a unique social justice programme for its boys. Shore is a boarding school for boys aged 13 to 18 years. The school wanted the boys to do something active and worthwhile for their local community and decided to approach their local Church for ideas. The school was very interested to hear that St. John's Church had been running a street café since 2004, in Darlinghurst, an inner-city suburb on the edge of Sydney's commercial heart.

The street café, called Rough Edges, is a drop-in centre for people who are living on the streets or have problems coping with everyday life. The café is open Wednesday to Sunday evenings, and provides a place where these people can feel safe and be listened to. The people who drop-in to the café are dealing with problems that are all too common in today's society: mental illness, drug abuse, homelessness, gambling, family breakdown and long-term unemployment.

The boys at Shore immediately decided that they wanted to help in some way at Rough Edges. It was decided that every fortnight, different teams of boys would volunteer to give up an evening to work at the cafe. On their particular shift, the boys run the café, serve meals, prepare hot drinks and play board games with those local people who drop-in. The boys are playing their part by helping the local community.

Rough Edges provides meals, snacks and drinks at minimal cost. Nobody is turned away, however, and if a person does not have the money, they are asked to wipe down the tables or tidy up, in return for food and drink.

Shore School is one of Australia's most expensive private boys' schools and is located on a magnificent piece of land overlooking Sydney harbour and the bridge. The boys who go to the school come from families with high incomes. It would be fair to say that the boys live a very comfortable life. This is in stark contrast to the people who call-in at the café. In designing this programme, however, the school wanted to avoid the 'soup kitchen' model where the boys would simply serve meals to the less fortunate and do so from a basis of power and privilege.

What is different about this programme is that the boys talk and engage with the patrons and not just serve meals. This is especially the case on Wednesday evenings when the boys run a games night. Games, such as chess, Scrabble and cards are a real way of breaking down barriers of rich and poor, privilege and disadvantage. The result is that people are really brought together. Everybody says that Wednesday's is the best time at Rough Edges, and that the atmosphere in the café is calmer than on other evenings.

Off course, the boys needed training before they signed-up for this programme and set out for Rough Edges. In the first term of every school year, volunteer training is run with St John's Church for boarders in Form 1 and for any new boys in older years. The

training consists of practical sessions, and often includes hearing from the café patrons themselves about the problems they face in life. The boys are taught how to listen to others. They also receive relevant information on homelessness, substance abuse and mental illness.

The training also includes an Urban Walk. It is at this time that the boys' eyes are really opened as they see a side of Sydney of which they have no experience. Darlinghurst is a densely populated area on the fringe of the Central Business District, where extremes of wealth and poverty are evident - including expensive housing and run-down apartments, clubs, restaurants, luxury car dealerships and homeless persons, many of whom are much the same age as the Shore boys themselves.

If you take a look at Shore School's website, you will find that the fourth aim of the school is "To equip boys to participate in the wider community through a broad and well-rounded education of the highest standard, with knowledge of themselves and how they should live and relate to others." I imagine you will find a similar aim on most school websites, including our own.

What the boys at Shore wanted, however, was to develop a programme where they were involved with the community beyond their normal contexts. The Rough Edges café programme has been a great success. Rough Edges allows boys not only to work and support each other, but also to engage in a long-term meaningful activity.

The fact that the boys can relate to such a wide range of people and deal with confronting issues has also been of help back at the School's boarding houses. The boys return after their evening in Darlinghurst to a place where they know they are cared for and feel safe. A win-win outcome for everybody.

J.R. Kennard

\* The above text is based on an article written by Shore School for the International Boy's Schools Coalition series *Great Programs for Boys*.