

WILD4 “Adventure” in Licola – December 2015

Setting up a program such as this from scratch was a fairly big undertaking - bigger than expected. With relatively few participants on this inaugural camp ("Wild4 Adventure") of 20 boys (identified as at an increased risk of disengagement) aged between 12-14 years old and sourced from across the state to ensure as much as possible that they did not previously know each other. A great many organisations were contacted and meetings held in order to gain trust first, and then the necessary referrals of potential participants. Not all of these led to successful referrals and when children decided for one reason not to come, at any stage in the process, we identified another and eventually had a waiting list for any vacant places that came up – one of these was utilized the very night before camp started.

In order to gain their 'buy in' each family unit was visited by a senior member of staff (from as far north as Wodonga and south as Forrest near Colac). Every aspect of the 10 day program was explained to them in detail including all the scary bits and many opportunities to ask questions and explore their trust in us. By then filling in the application form and further, actually turning up at pick up on Day 1 they had already taken a big step and this could be seen on their faces at Traralgon Train Station on the 12th December. I cannot stress enough the importance of continuing to maintain contact with each family unit from sign up to Day 1, including phone calls to each and every one the day before program started, but even then only 17 boys showed up. Apparently 85% turn up rate is extremely high and well above industry standard, so we'll aim for 90-95% in 2016. Of the boys that were identified their backgrounds ranged greatly from the problematic to truly horrific and they had been through things in their lives that no-one should ever have to bear witness to let alone it being their lives. One common theme though between the boys was that they were all identified as at an *early* stage of disconnecting and not too far down the line to run the risk of “cross-contaminating” for lack of a better phrase. Those that came to us were all essentially good boys who were starting to make bad choices, some a little more than others.

Two of the 17 starters did not make it to the end of the 10 days. For one it was too big a step for him at this time in his life and as the youngest participant at 12 years old he has been offered a place in the 2016 program which has been accepted. Another presented in a way that was more extreme than anyone expected and it became unsafe for us to keep him on the program; this is still an ongoing issue for this lad and one we have not dropped completely. A number of conversations and communications have been had which are set to continue in the hope that he can get what he needs in the future.

"Wild4" itself does not "re-invent the wheel" and is similar to many journey based programs that we all know work well, particularly with careful facilitation covering areas that include goal setting, leadership, ELC (the experiential learning cycle), communication, conflict resolution, navigation, comfort zones, hygiene, respect, teamwork, determination, choices, trust, fun, group support and values. We had presentations from a number of parties but I was greatly surprised by how well received the Ranger in Charge of the ParksVic region of Wonnangatta was when he spoke about the National Park – where the boys were about to head on their expedition and solo night out experience. One of the instructors joked post course that as their group descended down Gillios Track to the remarkable Tali Karng the boys were unhappy in their chosen predicament to the point that they exploded and they thus dubbed it “Tourette’s Hill”. Instructors truly earn their dollar in this program. One of my most experienced of all facilitators who was a Psych Nurse for 7 years before the last 15 years in outdoor education said that this, behaviorally, was in the top 5 most challenging he had run.

Notes of participant successes were taken throughout the Program and will be used in the subsequent home visits post camp which has yet to commence. Each participant will be re-visited in their home bases over the following 12 months at least 3 times with the aim to revisit these successes including commitments participants made to themselves. As I have been away throughout January I have yet to receive a great deal of feedback but I have heard some very positive comments which I will explore further and report back to anyone who would like to listen. Early indications of some short term wins are;

- Auntie: “all I wanted was to be able to get a tiny window of opportunity to talk to X to give me a chance to bring up a healthy happy boy. Since returning from Wild4 he has been easier to talk to... but that might be just because he wants lots of Christmas presents.”
- Mum: “he has been playing with his younger sisters way more than he ever has before”

- Grandma: “He was quiet at first and I didn’t ask too many questions, I think he was knackered but I have found out from a number of places as well as him that he really enjoyed the Camp and will be meeting with some of the other boys he met again to go away in April. After being rude to me recently after a while he came back to the kitchen and said ‘Granny, I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that’. Wow. I told him that we were going to have a great relationship”
- Melbourne based Police Officer: “I’ve heard nothing but positive feedback from (participant A) and (participant B). Parents of both boys have mentioned the boys are displaying a level of maturity, respect and responsibility they didn’t possess prior to WILD4. Even playing a small role in the process as a referral contact I felt a sense of achievement and proud of you all. I can only hope the success was overwhelming for all involved”

Of course this is very short term stuff; time may tell if there have been any longer term benefits and I will continue to use the same 20 questions to assess this with each of the boys over the next 9 months. It is likely though that we will never really know how much positive impact the program has directly contributed to any of the individuals concerned but I am confident that we have been a seed, a stepping stone, some assistance to provide more options and for some, for some it might make the difference when they are presented with a decision... one that could lead down the bad path and one that ultimately could lead to the good. We have to trust that this is what we do, our role, and I do.

At the end of the program each participant was called on after the graduation/ celebration dinner and given the hoodies that were made up with the Wild4 logo – they loved these. They were also offered the silver pendant with the inscription “aut viam inveniam aut faciam” (a Latin phrase that they had to look up themselves on their return home). They were told that the pendant was theirs to choose if they had done enough, if they felt that they had done enough in the past 10 days then they should take one but if they felt that they still needed to do something, something more, before they could feel that they deserved one then they could choose not to take one. That this was a personal assessment and that we would not judge. Two of the boys refused these and offered no explanation as to why. I hope that they are working on some internal goal and when they are ready for their pendant they call me.

I have learnt during this whole process and will make some changes both with the referral process and in the program itself for future camps. The Program will run again in December 2016.

Adam Wake
Licola Wilderness Village