

## **Wild4 (2019) in Licola**

### A year of change for Wild4

In 2019, Wild4 turned five years old. 2019 was also a year of significant change for Licola and Wild4. Longtime CEO of Licola, Adam Wake, decided it was time to try a new challenge with his family and moved on to the CEO role at Cottage By The Sea over in Queenscliff - a long way from the mountains here at Licola! Wild4 was a pet project of Adam's; a product of many years of thoughts, ideas, conversations, trials, tribulations and, ultimately, four successful programs in its infant years. For myself coming in as the newly-minted Wild4 Co-ordinator for 2019, it definitely felt like picking up Adam's baby. Thankfully I was lucky enough to receive his support, encouragement and mentorship in moving the program forward and tried as best I could to keep to the successful program outline that Adam had run in 2018 on which I had been one of the volunteer instructors.

In order to ensure that I had the support I needed to run a successful program, I looked towards two other highly-skilled Bush Adventure Therapy practitioners, one here in Gippsland and the other in Queensland, to be on the phone or email to bounce ideas off when it was needed. Their advice and mentorship helped Wild4 2019 do the best it could do to help the young fellas who came on the program, and lay out the questions we continually ask ourselves to help Wild4 grow in all the little ways it needs to be a successful program going forward.

Another change to Wild4 in 2019 was borne out of environmental necessity as large bushfires in the mountains to the west of Licola in March 2019 had burnt the Wellington High Plains area - where our hiking expedition had traversed through, and the walking tracks were yet to reopen. With a good study of the maps, chats to local landholders and a few days out stretching my legs, we were able to create a new route from high up in the Alpine National Park to our north that would have the young fellas travelling right back into Licola under their own steam (all going to plan). For those reading that may know the area, both groups started up near Mt Reynard, and travelled back via Kelly's Hut, Shaw's Creek, The Crinoline area, McMillan's Walking Track to the Wirwirndook'yeerun (Macalister) River near Glencairn and back downstream to Licola.

### Getting it right

A critical key in running a successful program such as Wild4 is our staff. We were incredibly lucky to get a "dream team" together: two incredibly experienced outdoor professionals who had instructed on Wild4 in past years, and two younger, though experienced, outdoor instructors who had both volunteered on Wild4 in 2018. This

meant that we had a good mix of skills and Wild4-specific knowledge in each group, and we were able to further support them with the addition of two volunteers. These volunteers were two men who both work outdoors with school-aged children and young people through the year, but wanted to gain experience working on a program like Wild4. As a testament to the commitment of both these volunteers, they travelled down from the Sydney-area to Licola, journeying with two of the Wild4 instructors who are based on the NSW South Coast.

A program like Wild4 also relies critically on relationships with our sponsors, referral agencies and schools. In the absence of Adam, this took a bit of work to reforge those links. I am incredibly thankful for all of those that I engaged with. For, as we neared later-spring and the December start-date of Wild4, referrals came in from many organisations and many Lions Clubs, including Clubs new to Wild4, stood up to the challenge of financially sponsoring a Wild4 young fella (Y/F). It was truly a humbling experience. Throughout the referral period, I spoke with 36 different schools or referral agencies and we narrowed down to 32 referrals of Y/F's. In forays out of Licola, I drove as far as Colac, Geelong and Rosebud, and locally in Gippsland to Yarram, Churchill, Sale and Maffra to meet up with these Y/F's and their parents or guardians. We tried to make as many spots available as we possibly could on-program, and were willing to take 22 Y/F's split between the two groups. It was a dynamic process right up to the 11th hour, with one Y/F from Geelong pulling out the night before program due to getting a job and two more on the waiting list getting the call-up straight afterwards. On day one, 21 of the 22 participants showed up, which was fantastic, though we couldn't help but feel disappointment for the one that failed to come. But at the end of the day it has to be up to him to make that decision to hop on the train and get to Traralgon on Day 1. No one can drag him on to Wild4, he has to want to do it himself.

As in previous years, we also had one returnee in each group who we call the "Young Fella Mentor". These are Y/F's who have come on a previous Wild4 who we think would benefit from going again and stepping up into a role that involves helping the rest of the group get through it and mentoring. They get invited back because they were standouts in their groups the previous year. Both of these Young Fella Mentors rose into their role and showed great maturity and growth from where they were in December 2018. One is absolutely exceptional and his ability to empathetically help and lead peers not that much younger than him is both astounding and admirable.

### 10 Days at Licola

One of the things we just cannot predict is what will happen when we put 11 Y/F's from different homes, suburbs and towns across Victoria together into one group for

an intense experience in the middle of the High Country. This can certainly lead to a few moments as the groups work on the fundamentals of respect - for others, for the land they're walking through and, hopefully, for themselves. Through Wild4 2019, six participants left at various points. As Adam has said in previous years, this is not a failure. One of these Y/F's I bumped into down the street in Gippsland the other week and he reminisced that he had needed to go on the day that he left, that if he was there another day he "would have exploded." I affirmed to him that making it to Day 8, which includes all the expedition and the solo night, was an amazing feat and that it was a mature decision to have made. That sometimes choosing to walk away is a wise choice. For another, four days away from home was his limit. That was one extra day than he managed on school camp earlier that year and for him and his background, that was a win. When I last spoke to him in April, he wants to have another go again, to see if he can manage all 10 days next time.

Again, each group completed a half day service project with Parks Victoria, cleaning up campgrounds of rubbish, excess firepits and ash, and giving the drop-dunnies a clean out with the firehose on the back of the Parks' vehicle. We feel this "giving-back" is integral to the program and we're thankful that Parks' comes on board to facilitate our raggedy groups of Wild4 hikers to build a sense of purpose and achievement in a task.

Warm and dry weather dominated this Wild4, and as the groups hit the Valley country closer to Licola, the days were hot. As such, the River kept dropping, eventually getting to the point where the groups couldn't raft back to Licola as planned. With the temperature in the high 30.C's on their final journey day back to Licola, we decided to use the vehicles for a pinch of their big journey, dropping each group at the Target Creek confluence above Licola. With a lifejacket strapped over their shirts the Y/F's and their instructors floated downriver and so were able to finish the big long journey both in the River as planned, and wet and cool as the day demanded. Both groups unpacked and settled in for a big bbq dinner and long wrap-up chats on the riverbank as the stars came out. Most of one of the groups chose to drag their bunk mattresses outside that night and slept bunched up on the cooler grass. For many of these Y/F's who spend so much of their time indoors, this final night of Wild4 had them happily bunking down on a patch of grass and whispering to their mates under a starry sky - it doesn't get much better than that.

### Post-Program

Our planned follow-up post-program was interrupted, first by January's bushfires and then by the COVID-19 situation. Four of our Wild4 Y/F's were due to come back to help on a January Lions Sponsored Camp, leading the 8-11 year old kids and assisting the adult volunteer leaders, but this was not to be. Our water skiing

follow-up for all the Y/F's was cancelled. In the end, myself and one of the instructors called each of the Y/F's individually through April and May and talked about their goals they set during Wild4, how that had been going for them through the COVID-19 lockdown, what goals they had set themselves for the rest of the year and what things they may be able to do to get themselves there. We also offered a chance for any parent or guardian to call us if they wanted to.

We found these chats immensely rewarding. One of the Y/F's expressed how a big shift for him after Wild4 was realising that he could make friends easily, as he'd been able to do it on program, and had expanded his friends group at school and felt he now had some close friends that he could rely on. Another had enjoyed the outdoors so much, that he was in the process of joining the local Scout troop after one of his grandparents had sourced some funding to help kit him out and pay his fees (though the lockdown has interrupted this). One Y/F reflected how though on the tough climbs up the hill, he'd hated it at the time, he had really enjoyed the feeling of getting to the top and was applying that thought process to his schoolwork!

Talking to one referral partner, they passed on that:

*"(YP1) really turned a corner after Wild4 and is taking active leadership roles in their program. He's doing really well. He's come a long way since almost being asked to leave the program"*

We are only with the Y/F's for a brief time, a mere 10 days though in the rich environment for learning of the mountains, and it is the parents, guardians, teachers and social workers that are with these Y/F's every day back in their towns and suburbs. We only hope we can assist these people in their struggles to support these Y/F's make better life choices and go after the goals they set for themselves. Without the financial contributions of the following, the Wild4 2019 would not be a reality:

**Paul Family Foundation, Vermont Lions Club (LC), Sandringham LC, Geelong Corio Bay LC, Drouin LC, Rye LC, Maffra LC, Heathmont LC, Loch Sport LC, Ashwood-Mt Waverly LC, Nunawading LC, Blackburn LC, Glenroy LC, Churchill LC, Sale LC, Lilydale LC, Boronia LC, Endeavour Hills LC, Macalister Valley LC, Maffra Lioness Club, Lachlan Moore & Family.**

Dan Abikhair,  
2019 Wild4 Coordinator, Licola Wilderness Village



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