

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY- ‘LET’S TALK – YOUTH INITIATED COMMUNITY FORUMS’ – RESOLVING ISSUES ABOUT ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

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Welcome. We would like to share a very exciting project that we are working on in one part of Australia. So I will be presenting with my colleague, Vicky Wagstaff, in a dual presentation. We hope that you have all received a flyer about our project, if you have not then just see us afterwards. The flyer presents our ‘take home message’, which invites you to make contact with us, wherever you are in the world (email is wonderful), we also have a website, so that should you wish to link in with our project, you can, as this is part of what we are aiming to do.

Life education Australia is an organisation that moves primarily in schools – currently in primary schools and we are now moving also into secondary schools; currently we see 800,000 children and more a year. Another part of our organisation is research and a very exciting part of our life education programme is professional development of teachers in schools. So you can see the three facets, we are specialists in prevention drug education, linked in the context of health. We approach everything from the point of view of student well-being and a healthy life style. We work with schools in partnership with thousands of schools around Australia and we are now in over ten countries; we are now in the UK, New Zealand, Hong Kong, South Africa and others.

So life education is very pleased now to present part of the research arm of our organisation and a project that is based in Adelaide, in South Australia. Our project is known as *Youth Initiated Community Forums*, and we were asked why would we want to start a project like this? We wanted to bring young people, parent and community stakeholders together, to talk about issues in a local community area. We selected a normal area, a residential area of about 120,000 people, in the state of south Australia.

The city of Tea Tree Gully is located about 17 kilometres from the CBD of Adelaide and so, geographically, it is known as an area that is not low or high in socio-economic status. It has an average population of working people, school goers, community stakeholders and so on. There is a little bit of industry but mainly it is retail and white-collar work in that area. We are adjacent to other areas that are different social economic status. And of interest in the City of Tea Tree Galley, is a growing indigenous population. Our aboriginal population is growing and so are the ethnic areas as well. Therefore our project wants to bring together people in that community, to talk about issues such as alcohol and other drugs. We want to implement local solutions and most importantly we want to document those solutions, so that other communities can take what we have learnt from the people of this residential area.

What is most exciting is that youth are driving the project. Not that long ago (about two years ago) there was a series of drug summits held in the capital cities of Australia. In the south Australian drug summit, a very strong message came out, that young people wanted to talk with their parents and parents wanted to talk with their

young people about the issues, not having separate forums but bringing people together. The frustration of agency workers is often caused because they get different stories and different perception of what the problems are. And so this project is bringing together the all the stakeholders. About 71% of young people, in Australia, want to talk to their parents, and this often surprises parents, they think “my teenager does not want to talk to me about these issues.” So it is quite interesting that this project is addressing that.

There are three phases over the three years. In 2003 we completed the research phase. The research has been corroborated by local, national and international data, and we have external evaluators that are watching us very carefully, and advising us, so that the project will have thorough evaluation at the end. The action planning and implementation stage has started - and that reminded me very much of what we have just heard from Liverpool and what Mark Bellies told us this morning - that our issues in club work and what is happening in the clubs and nightlife, and in peoples lived generally, are very similar the world over. So we are finding that building partnerships is coming up very very strongly.

The third phase is promotion and disseminating the information to other parts of Australia and the world. Our key strategies and ‘take home messages’ in terms of what we are finding is working for this project. Young people are driving it; we are asking young people and really listening to what they are saying. The experienced people are mentoring them; the people in the field people with experience are listening to the young people. The community are informing the project and that is just not the young people, it is every one in the community, young people are then saying this is how we can deal with this issue. They are suggesting action plans and we are forming community partnerships because we want sustainable outcomes. After the three years, we want ‘*Let’s talk community initiated forums*’, to have some form of life after the project, and we believe that with community ownership, this will happen.

Vicky Wagstaff is now going to give you a step-by-step summary of what has worked so far: The project is being implemented for three reasons: to bring the community together. To design the solutions based around the issues from their perceptions. We held a launch as one of our first strategies to inform the community of Tea Tree Gully about the project; it was held in a local, regional shopping centre and it was quite successful.

I will have to tell our audience this morning that ‘lets talk’ is not a rigorous, academic, data collection. It actually asks the community “what do you believe the issues to be around alcohol and other drugs”, and they told us. Then we collated all of that information, or rather it was collated by an external organisation (*health outcomes international*) and we have now presented that information back to the community, so that they are now able to tell us what they believe the solutions to be. I suppose it is a bottom up approach, rather than a top down approach and we are finding within the Gully (this is what we call ourselves locally) that it is working really really well. Because the community are on side they are saying: “This is the data that we have given you, these are the issues that we have told you are occurring, and now we want to help you to help us, and to look at what will work with young people and families here.

We appear on the radio twice monthly, which is also repeated twice monthly, and we talk to local identities. (Refers to screen) The person that you see me talking to there is actually Michael O'Connell who works for the attorney general department and he is the 'victims of crime co-ordinator'. We do not only use radio to communicate with our community, we actually use young people as well. There we have Stacey, one of our project team, and also Jess, who she is interviewing. Jess heads up a young video team at one of our local schools called *cyclone productions* and Jess has been videoing the *let's talk* project since the first of our community forums, which is where we got the information from about the issues and about the solutions.

We have actually found is that one of the ways that we are informing our community is through a peer education process. So Jess, who heads up *cyclone productions*, a young school based video team, her comments have been "I have learned so much about drugs since I have been involved in this project and so now I can help inform my young friends too, about what the issues are."

It was interesting this morning that a couple of solutions or strategies that we are suggesting, were about how friends help each other, and the way that we can help people in our communities to take ownership of the problems, providing we give them the right education, and the right information, and certainly this is one of the solutions we are talking about. (Referring to screen) These are some of the ways we have informed our community, and now the community is informing us.

We have held 23 focus groups, 3 large community forums and 231 surveys have been completed. We have actually spoken to about 500 people in total. The forums were thoroughly enjoyed by the children at the 37 schools in the district provided lots of useful information in an informative way, for example the drunken goggles exercise, which helped convey how people would feel when drunk. So we asked young people when we evaluated them, "If you are at a BBQ and people at the BBQ you knew had had more than one or two drinks, within that hour, are you going to get in a car and drive with them?" The answer was "no we would not going". So young people can actually help train the older generation.

The research told us the main drugs of choice, the age of initiation, the major factors leading to drug use, the 'hot spots' and the possible solutions. We design the strategies based on the research. The drugs of choice, within the city of Tea Tree Gully, according to the community's perception, were: tobacco, alcohol, cannabis and prescription medicines. There are interesting differences between the perception of young people and the perception of the older community, about those drugs of choice.

The age of initiation into drug use, supposedly twelve to thirteen, and young people are saying that they are starting to use drugs prior to age ten, but some of our agencies are not actually collecting that information, so by the time we do get this information the children are already hard-core users. Issues identified included, underage purchasing of alcohol and peer and family pressure, the data told us that the average age bracket of substance abuse is between 12-15 years of age, but anecdotally we know that it is far younger than that, so we need to concentrate our programs at an early intervention time, which is preschool and before. We have actually developed a very sustainable workplace-training project. Some of the other issues, included the

capacity to buy substances, even with pocket money, and boredom – young people are saying that they are bored and that is why they do it. I have to tell you that, from our perception, there is a lot to do in the Gully area, but not from a young person's perception and that is what we need to be dealing with.

Solutions suggested included education, information campaigns, targeting of hot spots, and interestingly - young people have suggested heavier penalties, raising the age to be able to buy alcohol, and they have also suggested that they want more police presence, more security and they want more ID checks and we did not falsify the data, this is actually what they have said. We are now into stage two: action planning. We have about 5 or 6 action plans being developed right now and so we are actually a work in progress. One action plan, which we are doing with the *golden grove* shopping centre, has been a way of harnessing the resources within the community, to work together in a partnership. This has proved to be very effective and very sustainable, because the community owns the project, for the simple reason that they actually own the data, they own the information.

The voice of youth, more than 50% of each action planning team has the voice of youth. (Referring to screen) So there are the action plans that we currently have under development. We have 18 suburbs within the city of Tea Tree Gully and I am aiming for 18 action plans. One that you are going to be interested in is the Medbury regional Centre action plan, which has brought together police, local government, *life education Australia*, a local hotel, the phase office, youth workers etc. And we are looking at the management of open space, within that area, and the issues that are around an alcoholic venue, within a park frequented by families. Our outcome is, so far, young people and parents working together. We are pretty thrilled with what we have been able to achieve. I suppose the other outcome is that, we have documented everything so carefully, that we are able to roll out the project, and test it in any other community. So if you would like to know more about this, please contact, Jo or Myself.

Thank you very much for listening to us this morning.