

My Interaction with Kids Over the Years

This is not an ego trip and I am definitely no saint; perhaps more selfish as I have probably got the greatest kick out of helping kids develop confidence in themselves.

Back in 1950, when I was in hospital with polio with something like 360+ kids, I was one of the oldest at 15. I was old enough to understand what was happening to me and I felt for the younger ones who did not understand the enormous pain they were in. Now, when seeing a sick child, I have never lost that feeling of helplessness I felt as I listened to those kids screaming in pain 24/7.

It was during my early 20's that my newspaper employer at the time got me involved with the Miss NSW Quest and that had me frequently visiting the North Shore Crippled Children's Hospital (the beneficiary of money raised). As I walked down the hall among kids in wheelchairs, on crutches, or with callipers on their legs, again I felt helpless. This was where I first started using the phrase: "There but for the Grace of God go I." It had been a very slim line between me walking again after the polio and being stuck in a crippled children's hospital like those kids.

While working in New Guinea I had always insisted on taking at least one of our young teenage Papuan apprentices with us each weekend on our boat diving trips away. Because of this, when one of them got married, we were invited to his "official wedding" and then invited down for his tribal wedding. The tribal chief told us we were the first white people ever to be invited to one of their tribal ceremonies. What an honour! All because we wanted these kids to have a great time that they could not afford.

In my early 30's, I was asked by my LDS Church Leader, to take on visiting with Mormon kids in jail at least once a month. (We had several in there.) What I saw and learned led me to believe that jail was the wrong place for most of them – not just the Mormon kids.

The first thing I noticed when I went there was how well the place looked and how the kids seemed relaxed. To me it looked more like a high school, with a U-shaped building with a huge grassed area in the middle and surrounded by more grassed fields, etc. When I saw them during visiting time, the kids were wandering around in small groups or playing footy. I also saw bright classrooms for school work.

I was able to walk around with the kids I went to see and, because of the relaxed atmosphere, also interacted with other kids who were wandering around (or stayed with the ones I was visiting).

In talking with them all, what I found was that many of them were Wards of the State and, in general, it could be seen they could be easily led into trouble.

This led me to visiting the Home for State Wards (can't remember the correct title). This was a very depressive place that struck me as being much worse than the jail. No wonder they were easily led astray. Those running it were doing the best they could with what they had. However, people did not seem to want to foster kids between around 8 and 16 as, I think, they thought they had too much baggage. Consequently, after 16, they were out on their own without proper support.

I got permission to take the boys from the Home for a day's outing every so often and organized some of our Church members that had cars to help. There were usually about a dozen boys in the Home at any one time. We would take them up to Colo River picnic grounds (out of Sydney) where they could swim,

play football, cricket, whatever, and have a barbecue. Simply give them some time when they could burn off energy and forget their troubled lives and just have fun.

I will always remember one boy of about 9 who would suddenly call out to me and, as I turned, he would throw himself into my arms, often with me off-balance, sending me over backwards with him on top (after that I made sure I was always off-balance). He would laugh and hug me as I held him. That is all he, and most of them wanted...to be loved...to be wanted. All most needed was love and attention to turn them around.

Unfortunately, at the time, I had just been told I would be in a nursing home within two years so it would not have been fair to them or my wife, Margaret, to foster them...as much as I wanted too. It was heart-breaking to hand them back at the end of the day to what was a most depressive environment.

All this led me to believe that jailing these kids was the wrong way to go. All it did was embed the bitterness life had dealt them and turn them further against society and more towards the wrong type of leaders. No doubt there would always be some who could not be helped, but the majority just needed love and support to turn them around; to be taught to respect themselves, each other, and, in turn, society in general.

After we came to WA in 1974 I saw that this State was sending kids to "Boot Camps". When I looked into them, this pleased me, as these, run by the right people, were what I believe could be the best all-round solution for troubled kids as it gave them schooling, allowed them to burn off energy in the fields, learn work ethics, etc. Unfortunately, they were closed a couple of years later. Probably due to cost and people who did not care or see the future value in them – or, perhaps, the wrong people running them?

I believe that what is desperately needed are facilities (for want of a better term, call them Boot Camps) run by people who have a natural rapport with children. Places where these kids can enjoy the relaxing pleasure and camaraderie of working together in classrooms, on the playing fields...whatever absorbs their energy while learning to live sociable lives.

You will not save them all, but many will go on to become taxpayers and an asset to society, instead of a drain on taxes.

I saw many examples of what a properly run "Boot Camp" could do when, during National Service Training as an 18-year-old back in 1952, I saw the change in many young guys who, coming from poor, anti-social backgrounds, came in with a "chip on their shoulder" intending not to give into authority – "I'm not going to do that!"; "they can't make me do this!".

Initially they baulked and created problems and the rest of us felt like giving them a hiding, but as time went on they learned to enjoy the camaraderie of working as a team, both in the field and on the parade ground. The majority left the 3-month basic training camp with a much better attitude to life and society and, seeing some of them at NS camps over the following few years, noticed they were still enjoying their new way of life.

The thing about many of these boys (and girls) is they are ignored by parents who shouldn't be parents, are mentally lost, hence, easily led into rebelling against society and being easily led. Placing them in prison cells will only exacerbate this problem...especially where they are locked in cells for long periods of time.

Remember your own childhood...there is nothing more frustrating than not being able to get out and tear around with your mates.

We need to spend more time with our under-privileged kids, teaching them that life is not all a burden. When I was a young boy, country towns in NSW had what were called Police Boys Clubs. These would

be held in Town Halls, Church Halls, etc, and the kids had fun being trained in boxing, table tennis, gymnastics, etc, by Policemen who gave up their own time. I'm sure they enjoyed it as much as we kids did...and it kept a lot of under-privileged kids out of trouble.

After moving West I was asked by the Bishop of Doubleview Ward to help supervise the Cubs' weekend outings, keeping them safe, so again I had the fun of interacting with kids, even if it was simply in my capacity as a Priesthood holder.

Then we built Warwick Ward and I was asked by the Bishop to do the Scout Master's course and became an Assistant Scout Master (at the time, LDS Church halls were the meeting place for the local Scout Groups). Being a Scout Master again gave me the opportunity to help kids develop confidence in themselves and enjoy team work.

I loved sailing and yacht racing and spent many years teaching kids to sail; teaching them team work while building up confidence in themselves. Once they reached a certain level I would suddenly tell one he was skipper for the day. After the mouth dropped open in shock he would settle to the job and invariably do very well. I would just sit on the back rail ready to step in if something looked like going wrong. That only ever happened once.

An example of how this worked: One 13-year-old, made skipper for the day, was coming up to a "mark" where he would have to round into another direction. Suddenly a 60 ft yacht charged up the outside and looked like it would cut him off from being able to round the mark (my yacht was 21 ft). He looked at me and I simply said, "You know you have right of way, so call water on him". His small boy's voice yelled out "Water on the mark!" and the large yacht obeyed the rules and moved away to let him through. Once he rounded the mark and was on the next leg of the course, he looked back at me with wonder on his face and a huge smile. He never hesitated again.

That is why I say the greatest vision you will ever see is the look on a child's face when he/she achieves something they thought was unachievable.

One year the yacht club called me up and presented me with a special trophy they called the "Sardine Trophy" because they said "they could never tell how many kids were on my yacht". I treasure it and all the wonderful memories it invokes.

By the time kids are around 10-12, most kids have a dream of what they want to be. I always encouraged them to follow their dreams. For those who did not dream, I encouraged them to dream, as dreams are what advances the future. It is only dreams that has led men to walk on the moon, explore space, to develop medicines that save lives, to develop all that gives us such a comfortable life.

When health forced me to retire from yacht racing (and work) I went back to golf. I spent many Saturday's as the "senior" required in a foursome with junior golfers. A senior was a requirement for juniors to be able to play in open club matches. Most seniors didn't like doing this as they preferred to play with their mates (I played several days a week, so giving Saturday to the boys didn't bother me). I found it great to watch and help these kids develop their skills. Mostly they outshone me and did their best to make me look like a hack...having fun while boosting their confidence and skills. A couple of them went on to be come professionals. Being part of that gave me enormous pleasure.

I believe that kids only have a few short years of their lives when they can just be kids and enjoy life without any worries; from about age 8, when they start to realise who and what they are, to around 16 when they have to start looking to the future and take on the responsibilities of a world that is invariably in some sort of conflict.

I repeat what I said earlier...

The greatest vision you will ever see is the look on a child's face when he/she achieves something they thought was unachievable. Regardless of the costs, you cannot put a price on that!

The Other Side of the Coin with Kids

Working with kids is amongst the greatest pleasure I have had in life; but for all the good one can do, there can also be heartache.

A few years before I retired, we had a boy about 18-years-old transfer his apprenticeship to the place where I worked.

His father was a representative for a merchant that supplied some of our products; a larger-than-life character with a mass of white hair and a very charismatic personality. On the other hand, the boy was slight, very quiet and seemed quite withdrawn. I felt sorry for him and invited him to come sailing with us; so one Saturday he came racing on my yacht and seemed to thoroughly enjoy himself.

As I already had a number of boys and one adult as crew (always had one adult crewman for safety reasons), I could not take him on permanently. So I introduced him to some friends who had just bought a new yacht and needed an extra hand. When I saw how he fitted in I relaxed and stopped worrying so much about him as he appeared to be thoroughly enjoying it all.

After races we all congregated in the clubhouse for presentations. One afternoon I noticed him drinking what I thought was a glass of Coke, but found out it was rum and coke. I realised immediately that he had problems, as an 18-year-old should not be able to consume a number of rum and coke drinks and still be lucid enough to talk too unless he had been drinking for a number of years.

This worried me greatly, but he shrugged it off when I tried to talk to him about it so I didn't press the issue...just kept an eye on him.

However, he seemed OK; since taking to sailing he appeared to be happier at work and at the club, therefore I relaxed and concentrated on the boys sailing with me...teaching them to work as a team and develop confidence within themselves.

It was only a couple of years later that health forced me to retire. Then, only a couple of years after that, I received word that this boy's father came home to find his son hanging in the garage...he would have been about 21.

I know it could be said that it was not my responsibility, but I will always wonder that if I had taken him onto my yacht (regardless of the overcrowding it would have been) that I may have led him out of the depression that led to his suicide.

He had learned to hide his true feelings well, but there were still glimpses of those early signs of loneliness that led me to take him sailing in the first place.

I never learned if they found a specific reason for his suicide. However, he was a quiet, shy, introverted boy who managed to hide his feelings well.

Could I have helped him? Maybe. I will never forget and go to my grave wondering.

