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Kids Giving Back celebrates five years of student volunteering

By: Jennifer Crossman in In The Classroom November 8, 2017 0

Australia's leading not-for-profit student volunteering organisation, Kids Giving Back, recently celebrated its fifth year of operation in Australia. To mark this occasion, an industry event was held at Rough Edges, a homeless community partner in Darlinghurst, Sydney, bringing together educators, government representatives, charities, corporate sponsors and high school students from regional NSW school Kandos High.

Kids Giving Back announced a new grant from the office of the NSW minister for multiculturalism and disability services, while sharing key milestones achieved over five years, and its roadmap for continued growth.

Kids Giving Back was founded in 2012 by Carole Schlessinger and Ruth Töfler-Riesel, and delivers a 'triple impact' benefit on participants, charities and society. The organisation forges real connections between students and community, creating the 'next generation of generosity'. Over the years it has supported causes such as homelessness and poverty, intergenerational understanding, the plight of refugees and disadvantaged communities.

The organisation is proud to have exceeded its first five-year goals: it has over 10,000 volunteers and has made more than 36,000 meals for communities in need. Its ecosystem includes 84 charity partners, and they work with students from over 130 schools. The next five years will see not only a significant increase to these metrics, but a larger footprint throughout wider Sydney and NSW.

Just as powerful as these impressive statistics is the idea that through volunteering, young people develop empathy and resilience, and are guided towards leading a purposeful life. While the value of volunteering is a well-explored topic, more recently we have seen research focus on youth volunteering, which has found strong and perhaps unexpected benefits, and which appeal to me as an education veteran.

The report, Youth Volunteering in Australia: An Evidence Review, conducted by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, found that the key benefits of volunteering for young people are both personal and social, and include strengthening social relationships, developing skills, and even enhancing career prospects. So in a workforce that threatens to become increasingly automated, Kids Giving Back

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believes it is helping to future-proof students and youth ambassadors through the power of volunteering and the skills that are gained from these activities.

Engaging deeply and personally with the marginalised and with communities at risk also breaks down the stereotypes that are rife in our society. Speaking at the fifth anniversary, Penny Barletta, team leader at St John's Community Services and Rough Edges, focused on how Kids Giving Back helps to demystify homelessness: "It is exciting for us to be able to introduce high school students to the real people behind the stereotypes of those with mental health challenges, addictions and homelessness.

Over the years Kids Giving Back has given us that opportunity many times over and provided a valuable platform for our presenters to share their stories." Penny is convinced that it is this kind of encounter that challenges the often inaccurate and destructive ideas that our community has about the marginalised among us.

A key element of the industry event featured students from regional NSW school Kandos High, who cooked and delivered meals to homeless people at Rough Edges. Following the event, Kids Giving Back and Rough Edges took Kandos High students through Kings Cross to explore the issue of homelessness in a hands-on way, through a program called Urban Walk.

The sense of empowerment that the Kandos High students felt through this experience, as well as the connections they made with the homeless community, are perfect examples of the ideas espoused by Martin Seligman in the area of positive psychology and Richard Lerner's promotion of positive youth development. Both are deeply influential among educators today who are focused on student wellbeing. Lerner and Seligman advocate that in order to cultivate a flourishing community and thriving young people, we need to work with young people's strengths rather than coming from a deficit model of 'storm or stress' with a focus on what young people cannot do.

As a senior education adviser to Kids Giving Back, and drawing on my 40 years of experience as a teacher and deputy principal, I have seen the impact of volunteering on hundreds of students involved with refugees, residents in age care communities, and individuals and groups impacted by homelessness.

Students in our programs are made aware that relationships and social connections are two of the most significant aspects of life. Parents often comment that the experiences generate much discussion at home, which in turn influences them to include the whole family in volunteering and charitable activities. It highlights that having purpose and meaning are essential to each person, and that each of us has the capacity to enrich our community.

It encourages service to and with others and becomes part of a young person's DNA. Ultimately I believe that young people crave to be connected and to feel that their life is purposeful and important.

Recent evidence, in particular by Lerner and Zaff (2010), shows that across the high school years, service learning experiences tend to help young people become more informed and engaged citizens and is linked to positive youth development. Indeed, most schools in NSW have community service or service learning activities, and Kids Giving Back makes it easier than ever for schools to build great programs simply and efficiently.

At a time where our young people can be considered to be 'at risk', and where youth-related issues like bullying, depression and suicide are on the rise, the benefits of volunteering are crucial to the wellbeing of our young people, and ultimately to building healthy communities and society engagement for all grades.



Jennifer Crossman is a senior education adviser to Kids Giving Back.

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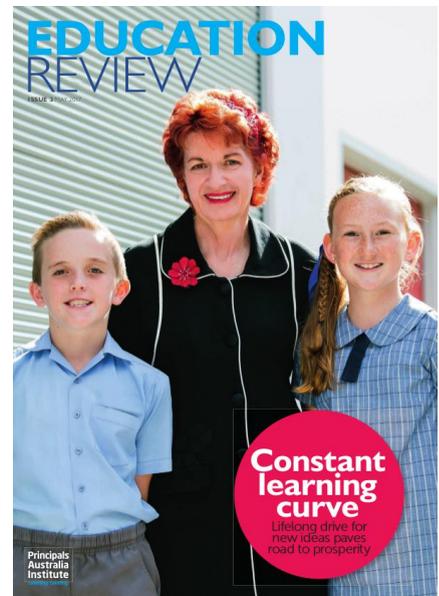
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