

Session II: Health and Communities

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Julianne Schultz: This session is on health and communities. Our speakers are Bernie Shakeshaft, who is the founder of BackTrack Youth Works in Armidale; Sally Redman, who's the CEO of the Sax Institute; Elizabeth Elliott, who's a distinguished professor of paediatrics at the University of Sydney; and Maree Teesson, who's professor and director of the Matilda Centre for Mental Health, also at the University of Sydney.

Bernie Shakeshaft: Look, I bet I'm the only one here today who had to Google what a lounge suit is. I was pretty disappointed to see that I couldn't find cowboy hat, work boots and jeans. But, anyway, here I am wearing my tie with the paw prints. I'm Bernie Shakeshaft, and come from a loving family, big Catholic family. School was probably the toughest patch of my life. It didn't work out. If I went to school today with what I know about the education system, they would say you got that ADHD thing. Can't sit still, dyslexic, oppositional behavioural defiance disorder for sure and Tourette's probably. Wouldn't make a lot of sense to my mum. I think my final year at school, I spent that much bloody time in the principal's office. I was starting to think I might be the principal, had my own desk there. I go, if I couldn't make it through that system, then the kids that we work with now — we've heard that word disadvantage a bit today — how the hell are they going to get through it?

Probably going to be a little bit controversial, some of the things, my opinions. But this is just my lived experience. I look at technology 150 years ago and I look at where it's up to today and I go, worlds apart. If I look at transport 150 years ago, where it's up today, worlds apart. If I look at education 150 years ago and where it is today, sorry, I'm not a scholar, but I don't see a whole lot of difference: 20, 30 kids sit in a classroom. Sure, there might be a computer screen and do things different ways, but everyone's going to learn the same way. If it's not working, Einstein's definition of insanity, keep doing the same thing, expecting a different result.

I find that pretty disappointing. I think regardless of where you grew up, your level of education, your chosen career path, you might agree that as big people, one of the most important jobs that we have is to raise happy, healthy little people. I reckon that children are the most honest barometer of how we're going as a society. Mental health: 1 in 3 kids in Australia have a diagnosed mental health condition; 1 in 3, meaning 40,000, homeless kids tonight. I was going to say a million people living in poverty, but then I heard Her Excellency say it's actually 3.3 million. I'll stand corrected there. How about suicide being the leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds in Australia? In 2014, the Dusseldorp Forum put out a report, in 2014. The federal law says you must be at school until you're 17, or you have to be in a job.

¹ This is an edited version of a transcript of the presentation.

In 2014, they estimated 1 in 5 kids under the age of 17 didn't go to school, were not involved in training and certainly didn't have a bloody job. When we started in 2006, we were dealing with 16- and 17-year-olds in and out of jail, certainly not going to school. All our referrals now are coming at 10, 11, and 12. We are seeing kids not make the transition from primary school to high school. Where does that end up? We value education, but we have to do it a different way. Have we got a different way? Hell, yes. Going to have a look at that in a minute. How about locking people up? 2013 to 2018, the UN data, looked at every country around the world and measured growth in incarceration rates. Columbia coming first, Turkey hot on their heels coming second. Guess who's coming third? The lucky country, Australia? Righto.

On average, 956 kids are locked up each night nationally in Australia. There are another 5,000 on community service, supervision orders. Do you know how much it costs to keep one kid in incarceration in Australia? \$700,000 a year. That's the average. Bit more in some states, little bit higher in the Territory. When we start to do the numbers on that, pretty straightforward: 2 grand a day, 956 kids, 2 million bucks a day we're spending because that's the best damn solution we can come up for finding a 10-year-old. That's what age we lock kids up in Australia. 10 years of age, we start locking kids up and we're prepared to pay 2000 bucks a day to create a problem that you know is going to come again. There's the stats on it: 80% of kids reoffend within 12 months.

What are we doing, Australia? The lucky country? I don't know. Look, if this stuff was working, I'd say, well and good, but if

it isn't, then what are we doing? For me, I go: first world country that I live in, I think, feels like a national shame in many parts of it. We're tipping so much money into things, but it's not working. So easy to define the problems. It's probably the easiest part to do. We can go on about that all day, but what's the damn solution? In 2006, I made a decision in my life, I go, "Either stop complaining about what this problem is or go and do something about it." I chose to go and do something about it. We started BackTrack Youth Works,² with no business plan, no funding, just a busted shed and some busted kids.

How did we get that busted shed? The community, council Reshaping Australia Communities in Action. Day one is where it started. Our council gave us a shed (at a peppercorn rent) and we started grinding away with the kids most risk in our society. I didn't know all that fancy stuff was there. It's good to have good people in it. Who are the kids? Almost 100% of the kids are already removed from the education system. They start at 10 years of age. They're often kicked out of home. They have substantial contact with the legal system. Some already been locked up. Mental health, drug and alcohol addiction, poverty, multi-generational unemployment. 75% of the kids are indigenous, all come with severe psychological distress. These are the kids society has let down. They've fallen through the cracks; they're being kicked out of everywhere.

What is BackTrack? There are three components to it. The first one is where we work with the young kids. It takes us about 12 months usually just to sort out legal issues. We've got our own school teacher. We provide a different level of education. We start

² <https://backtrack.org.au>

doing practical hands-on training. Stuff that we know will make these kids employable down the track. How do I know that? Tell you what our data says. 87% of the kids that we start with — these are the kids that no one else in society will work with — 87% of them end up in jobs or back in full-time education and training.

The very first kid that was referred to us, an indigenous kid. He's the eighth kid in his family, so the youngest: all brothers above him, single mum. School principal gives me a ring, would I come and have a chat with this kid. "We're about to kick him out of school." Expel him out of school. Once you're expelled from school, things get really tough. I said, "Yes, happy to come and have a talk with him. But what are you expelling him for?" She said, "Well, he was trying to throw a chair out the window of the third storey building." I went, "It seems pretty savage. You're going to expel a kid for trying to throw a chair at a window?" She said, "Well, Bernie, the teacher was still in the chair."

"Let me go and have a yarn with this lad. I know the family." I go in there and I go, "Champ, what's your dream?" I watched him squirm for two or three minutes and he went, "You know what? I want to be the first kid in my family to finish year 10 and not have been locked up." Can we help with that dream? The quicker they kick him out of school and he comes and walks alongside us and the quicker we'll do something about that. That kid went on to finish year 10. He then went on to finish year 12. He's the first BackTrack kid to ever go to university. Lasted about three and a half minutes, but he got there.

He's now in employment. None of his brothers have ever had a job. He works for

us. He's one of our supervisors and he gets what we're doing on the ground. That's the first bit. BackTrack just keeps filling holes in the thing. We get these kids into jobs. A lot of them get sacked after a month or two months. They're back with us. We're on this revolving door. Hey, what are we going to do about that? There's plenty of employment agencies, I think 10 of them in town. These kids don't go there and they're not helping those kids out to get a job. I tell you what we'll do, we'll start a for-profit business, but we're only going to employ unemployable kids. How's that for a business model? Lunatics only. Since then, we've had 56 kids employed and they stay with us for as long as it takes, till we move them on into full-time employment that they can hang on to.

Of the 35 young people we have employed at the moment, I think 90% of them are indigenous. You want to talk about closing the gap? Come down, visit us in Armidale, but you can't find a gap. 35 kids, 26 of them are on trainee ships and we have an 88% completion rate. Do you know what the state average is? Low forties. Is it easy? Hell, no, but we're hanging in for the long haul and it works. The last bit: is this stuff replicable? Can you scale it or is it just because it works in Armidale for some crazy reason? Well, when we start involving communities, I can tell you in Dubbo, Lake Cargelligo, Broken Hill, Moree, Hawkesbury, Macks-ville, Tenterfield, and now Toowoomba are the towns that we are working in. And guess what? All get the same results in a really short period of time.

Only two local government areas in New South Wales with long-term juvenile crime stats going down. Six of the universities that are in this room did this research. This is not me making stuff up. You can read it.

It's all published. I think it's Tweed Heads, Toowoomba — not Toowoomba, up on the border somewhere — is down 2.2%. Armidale down almost 50% long term. Ten years before we started, they looked at, everyone went, "Ah, it's because we've got extra cops and extra cameras in the mall." The beauty of research is they checked that with 20 other towns and went, "You know what? They've all got extra cops and extra mall cameras. How come these guys' crime rates are down?" We know how to do it. We take them out of town Friday and Saturday nights, times of high risk.

Same stats right around the countryside. 80% of the damage will be done by 20% of the kids. Concentrate on that 20% of the kids. And, hey presto, guess what happens? We don't need Einstein to work this one out. Lucky enough, in 2014, that kid that didn't finish school, the university actually just recently gave me an honorary doctorate. When they rang me, they said, "It's an honorary doctorate." Don't clap. Just throwing money. Gave me an honorary doctorate in lettuce and I went in lettuce. This is good timing because those iceberg things are 12 bucks each. Not lettuce, you idiot. Letters, whatever that means.

In 2014, I was lucky enough to get a Churchill Scholarship, travelled right around the world, wanted to look at organisations punching above their weight and what are the similarities. Seven simple things:

- *First*, long term. We're not doing a 26-week program. Must be long term. And you've got to do whatever it takes, for as long as it takes.
- *Second*, holistic in nature. Don't just concentrate on mental health. Don't just concentrate on education. You've got to

look at the whole big picture of what's going on in these young people's lives.

- *Third*, multiple funding sources. What's our budget this year? Just short of \$7 million, Less than 5% government funding. 7 million bucks a year. If one of those funders leaves us, we don't sink.
- *Fourth*, must fill a gap in the system. Don't replicate what somebody else is doing: come up with some fresh ideas.
- *Fifth*, interesting one, didn't matter how much the self-generated income was, but they all had self-generated income.
- *Sixth*, embedded in the community. Takes a village to raise a child. Want to travel fast, travel alone; want to travel far, travel together, all embedded in the community.
- *Seventh*, an effective evaluation.

I skipped through this because we're running out of time, but have a quick squizz, first year at BackTrack. All legal stuff, mental health's all over the place. General stability. Are they interested in education? Are they interested in employment in the first year? Not one little bit. But have a look in the third year and now we're not going to court anymore, the mental health stuff's good stability. Are they're interested in education? So long as we bring a different style of education to the table. And then employment, they want a job. This is the 5% of kids society's given up on that cost us — what do they call them? — the million-dollar kids. We turn it around with about 150 grand a year. What does the research say?

Good engagement strategies. We call it circle work. It must be real. It must be meaningful. We talk about the hard stuff out there in the paddocks. If I ask most of the people in this room, they'll get pretty squirmy. If you listen to the conversations

we have, what happens when you die? What's your dream? Do you know how to fix this piece of shit in your life? And then we start making real traction. Case management: I'm not a big fan of it. Our kids go, you go over to that office, that's where they sort the hard shit out you. Yes. We call that the sorting-the-shit-out office. Diversionary activities, Friday, Saturday nights. Get those kids out of town. We use dogs. Doesn't matter what you do, but get them out of town. It must be a personal development. The Hunter Medical Research Institute says the return on investment over is over \$2 for every \$1 invested, all published journals.

I'm going to leave you quickly with one simple notion that we've used and we've taken that from Canada. It's called the Circle of Courage.³ They say, whether it's your personal life, whether it's your organisation, whether it's your whole town, you get these four simple things in balance and everything will be going well. First one — I've heard it here many times this morning — *belonging*. You must feel connected to something. The second one — *independence*. You have to have a say in your life. The kids at the shed go, "We call that owning your own shit." Pretty good concept. The third one — *mastery*. Doesn't matter what you're learning, so long as you are learning something. The last one — *generosity* — you must give something back. That's what our kids do so beautifully.

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