

**AUSTRALIAN RURAL EDUCATION AWARD RECIPIENTS SPEECH
"THE STUDENTS AT RISK PROGRAM AT EAST KALGOORLIE
PUBLIC SCHOOL"**

**Judy Young
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*Judy Young receiving AREA Certificate from SPERA President, Sheila King
and Vice President, Murray Lake, Hobart, August 1996*

Ladies and gentlemen, it is with a great deal of pride and pleasure that I stand here tonight to accept this most prestigious award on behalf of the Student at Risk Management group from the Goldfields.

It is hard to imagine that a couple of days ago I was sitting in a little school perched on the edge of the biggest open cut gold mine in the country and tonight here I am in Tasmania picking up the Australian Rural Education Award.

It certainly was a shock to the system when we were told we had won this award, not because we didn't think we deserved it but because often in the bush recognition for education excellence and innovation is often in short supply. The sponsors of this award, the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia, must be congratulated for putting it in place because an award such as this recognises that in rural Australia we can and do provide quality education.

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge all those people that nominated for this award and from discussions I have had with people I understand that the nominations received were quite outstanding. This indicates the quality of education in rural Australia and makes us even more humble knowing that we were selected as the best of this outstanding group of nominees.

This award gives due recognition to all the teachers, all the parents, all the support workers and above all the kids who have been part of the program for in the Goldfields the past five years. It

tells them that while it hasn't been easy to get this program up and running, in the end it has all been worth it, and despite the frustrations and despite the difficult periods we have gone through we are achieving results.

I should start by telling you a bit about our program which we believe is probably one of the most rewarding initiatives of its type in the country. Firstly I must say that we do not claim to have all the answers to the problems that face the kids that we deal with on a daily basis but we are in there having a go and we are providing simple and practical solutions to issues that are often seen as being very complex.

This program began several years ago when we were confronted with a group of children aged between ten and fifteen who were struggling at school and in the wider community. They were typical of many "at risk" kids in that their literacy and numeracy levels were poor, many of them were involved in substance abuse and offending and generally speaking they were not doing very well at all. Initially we did what every school does and that was to provide extra support in the classroom but over a period of time we still could not see any improvement in these children. It is an age old problem in the bush especially amongst Aboriginal children who feature highly in the statistics as being "at risk" and we knew that we needed to do something different to try and address the problems facing these kids. Everybody kept telling us that the problems were very complex and probably could not be overcome in the short term but that didn't faze us as we set about to look more closely at some of the unique characteristics that made up these children.

We started to do some very basic research that involved talking with the children and their parents to find out a little about their lifestyle and what they saw as being the problems and more importantly the solutions. We soon found that in the majority of cases there were some clear indicators to why these children were not participating in or enjoying their school experience and once we had this information we set about making a difference.

In a very short space of time we were able to identify three key areas which accounted for many of the problems facing these kids. The most obvious ones were that,

- * most of the children had not participated in four and five year old education programs before,
- * the children's attendance at school was running at less than forty percent, and
- * the health status of these children was less than satisfactory.

Having narrowed down the issues to three we then looked at developing strategies to combat them. We knew we did not have a lot of money and we knew we had to generate cost effective, simple solutions if we were going to be able to convince rural communities that with a little bit of hard work and a lot of common sense, children whose education was "at risk" could be catered for.

We found for example, that many children could not physically get to school either because they didn't have a bike or their parents had no forms of transport. The solution to us was simple, we could go and pick them up and take them to school. With a bit of help from the Lotteries Commission we were able to purchase a little bus which we could use to get the kids to and from school. Overnight this simple strategy virtually wiped out absenteeism amongst primary school aged children in Kalgoorlie/Boulder. Our critics said that it was not our job to provide transport for these children but we knew that it was our job to provide them with a quality education and we could only do that if we could get them to school, so we did. Once we got them into our schools we found we were faced with more issues, the greatest of which was the appalling health and nutrition levels of these children. The best teacher in the world was always going to find it difficult to work with a child who could not hear, who had eyesight problems or whose skin was ravaged by scabies although the kids didn't mind and were very tolerant of their health condition mainly because they did not know any different and in essence did not know what it was like to feel well.

Again the solution was simple, we went out and got some money to employ a full time nurse who put into place a nutrition program and began treating the most common of ailments. In a very short space of time general health standards began to improve and correspondingly came indications of much improved performances in the classroom. We had in effect empowered the children to take responsibility for their own well being and now that they felt fit and well they never wanted to go back to the way they felt before. Given that our research indicated that early intervention was a key strategy that needed to be implemented especially in relation to Aboriginal children we set about to guarantee every child aged four or five years old a place in an education program. Under normal circumstances, this happens as a matter of course but we were surprised at the number of children we found who were not accessing early childhood education at all. We used local knowledge and parental support to make an offer of placement to every family. We had access to a school that through a decline in enrolments was in danger of closing and we used this school as the base school to take on children who would otherwise not have a place in a five year old program.

We used multi age grouping strategies which coupled with health and transportation support has seen these children rapidly acclimatise to the education system. In a relatively short period of time we have seen their "at risk" status reduced dramatically and many of them could slot into any mainstream school program with only minimal additional support.

Investing in very young children reduces the costs to the community later on because there is a reduction in the number of children who appear as "at risk"

Our program covers all children of all ages who are seen to be "at risk" and while our philosophy is that early intervention is the way to go we do work extensively with young teenagers who present their own peculiar problems as they sometimes struggle to come to grips with life in the bush. Many of them feel alienated from the school system but every time they fall down or feel like giving up we pick them up with some not very fancy you beaut strategy but just with a lot of common sense and attention. We never give up and in the end neither do the kids and it is most gratifying to see a young teenager who feels the weight of the whole world on his shoulders finally realise that there are others who do care and who are prepared to help.

While we are only part way through this project and are nowhere near finding the ultimate solution we do believe that we are on the right track. We will have a go at anything and we are risk takers in that we know what doesn't work and are prepared to try anything to find solutions to problems.

We have as our brief to look for simple solutions because simplicity gives us the best chance and will maximise our results.

Because our program is dynamic it is forever changing and if something does not work we will try something else because that's the way we do things in the bush. Who knows where these kids will lead us but one thing is for certain, we are in it for the long haul. We have already begun developing and modifying a data base so that a very user friendly student management package can be put together. This package will in an instant be able to deliver to a teacher an accurate profile of a child and will contain information such as work samples, health records and outcome statements recording student achievement. We hope to link this to a centralised data base that will hold information on every child in a remote location in the Goldfields Education District which incidentally is the biggest education district in the world and much larger than the whole of Tasmania. By doing this, schools in the district will be able to download a detailed profile on a student shortly after they have enrolled in their school. This has huge ramifications for remote schools where the population is very mobile and where difficulties are encountered keeping track of students.

Enough of our data base plans because this is our secret weapon for next years award.

I could go on for hours but in finishing I must say that we could not have done this thing on our own though and on behalf of the group I need to acknowledge the Lotteries Commission for supporting us, Healthway for providing us with a research grant that is used to collect and examine the mountain of data we have now collected and the Education Department who have let us take some risks.

I must also express our thanks to the many people who have worked on this program. At times they have become frustrated and downhearted because they cannot see immediate results and because they work in this program everyday dealing with children who nobody else wants. They are legends because they do the job and they do it well, there are people like Brother Reg who rode his bike from the monastery to school every day to read stories to the kids and to play a bit of music. He did not do it for money but he did it because he knew every little bit helped and that he was making a difference and that's why our program works because we believe in what we are doing.

The biggest accolades must go to the kids who at times suffer poverty and deprivation but through it all show enormous courage and the will to go on. They are the ones with the big beaming smiles who make it all worthwhile and on behalf of them I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this award.



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