

Heather McAllan brings hope to the homeless **Manager, Spiritus Beenleigh Youth Accommodation and Support Service**

Christmas and birthdays come and go and are usually happy occasions for most of us, spent with friends and family in a convivial atmosphere.

If you're young and homeless though, that's not likely to be your experience. It's more likely to be full of confusion, loneliness and unrealised wishes. That's why Heather McAllan, Manager of Spiritus' Youth Accommodation and Support Service at Beenleigh (BYASS) tries to make life as comfortable and informal as possible for the young people who come under her care.

"Normality is important at these times so at Christmas we'll have a tree with traditional decorations and gifts for everyone" she said.

It's the same during school holidays. Going to the movies or a theme park is not an option for these teenagers, many of whom are still at school. If they're over sixteen they receive a payment from Centrelink but out of this they must purchase text books, stationery, school bags and the like and this money doesn't stretch very far.

The work of BYASS is geared to reduce homelessness in young people and to work toward family reunification wherever possible. It provides fully supported short term accommodation for sixteen to eighteen year olds, family mediation to prevent youth homelessness, training in life skills to assist independence and programs and counselling and workshops for both parents and teenagers alike.

This training assist in such practical things as cooking, cleaning and laundry and workshops help in areas such as self-esteem and anger management.

"These workshops help kids to gain an understanding of their anger how to handle it constructively. At twelve to fourteen, they're not cognitively developed and they don't know what to do with it" she said. "Adolescence is a time of change. Kids are figuring where they are in the world and what they believe. They're testing the waters. They don't always follow the rules or make the choices we might, but if they're respected and listened to, you're half-way to reaching a positive outcome."

Heather admits that people needing the help of BYASS are getting younger.

"I see more and more young girls in the last couple of years. Modern society has taken so much away from childhood. They have to make such huge decisions when they are very young."

The work and time that Heather and her staff put in seems to do the trick. There's a high success rate and most teenagers return home or go out into the wider world wiser and better prepared for the complexity of life's challenges.

Passionate about her work and the young people in her care, Heather adds

"The kids are just great but adolescence can be scary. While they're with us, we try to make things as homely as possible – including one's own pillow!"

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