

YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

An innovative program

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Youth workers have appreciated the positive results that can be gained by youth engaging in work projects within the general community. Until recently, however, there has been little exploration in Australia of the use of community involvement projects for youth who are placed in the category of being delinquent. Using the concept of Youth Involvement Programmes as set up by the Recreation Department within the Commonwealth, we set out to apply this to boys who are resident at the Westbrook Training Centre in Queensland. The initial Programme was developed by Don Smith, Department of Children's Services, with two male third year

social work students as group leaders and the author as consultant.

The idea of involvement in community projects was put to the boys at the Westbrook Centre (the State run security and training centre for delinquent youth aged between fifteen and seventeen years). From among the volunteers twenty were selected on the basis of judged likely commitment to the idea. The youth were then divided into two groups. One group was to work as a team in Toowoomba city, the others were joined by another ten community youths to form a team working in Brisbane. The 'outside' youth were volunteers from a number of Brisbane youth organisations.

Social Work students

Each group was led by the social work students and began by attending a number of training sessions and camps. At these the leaders spent time on leading discussions on communities and their problems, the interests of the boys in various community issues and the way their own group was functioning as a unit. Each group divided up into small work groups determined by individual interests and then selected an area where they were going to develop their project. The projects selected varied greatly — mostly the boys identified handicapped children, old people and one-parent families as being the areas of concern. The group leaders then worked with the project teams to develop their ideas and any social and practical skills needed for the project. The youth were then to make contact with the organisations concerned and offer to carry out their ideas or invite the organisation to suggest needed work or activity.

Introductions

Apart from giving a letter of introduction, the leaders refrained from direct intervention in the liaison between the youth and the community. Some projects were carried out in large institutions, e.g. play and activity work with mentally retarded children or providing facilities in an institution for

physically handicapped persons; some in smaller institutions, e.g. building a playground in an Opportunity School; while others were in a less structured setting, e.g. compiling a list of recreation needs and facilities for youth in an inner suburb. The boys were permitted freedom of movement during the project work, some stayed in their own family homes while on the project, while the Toowoomba group returned to the Training Centre overnight. The project time extended over several weeks — some projects were conducted at weekends only, others operated during the week. The programme terminated with a day spent on reports and evaluation.

No formal measures

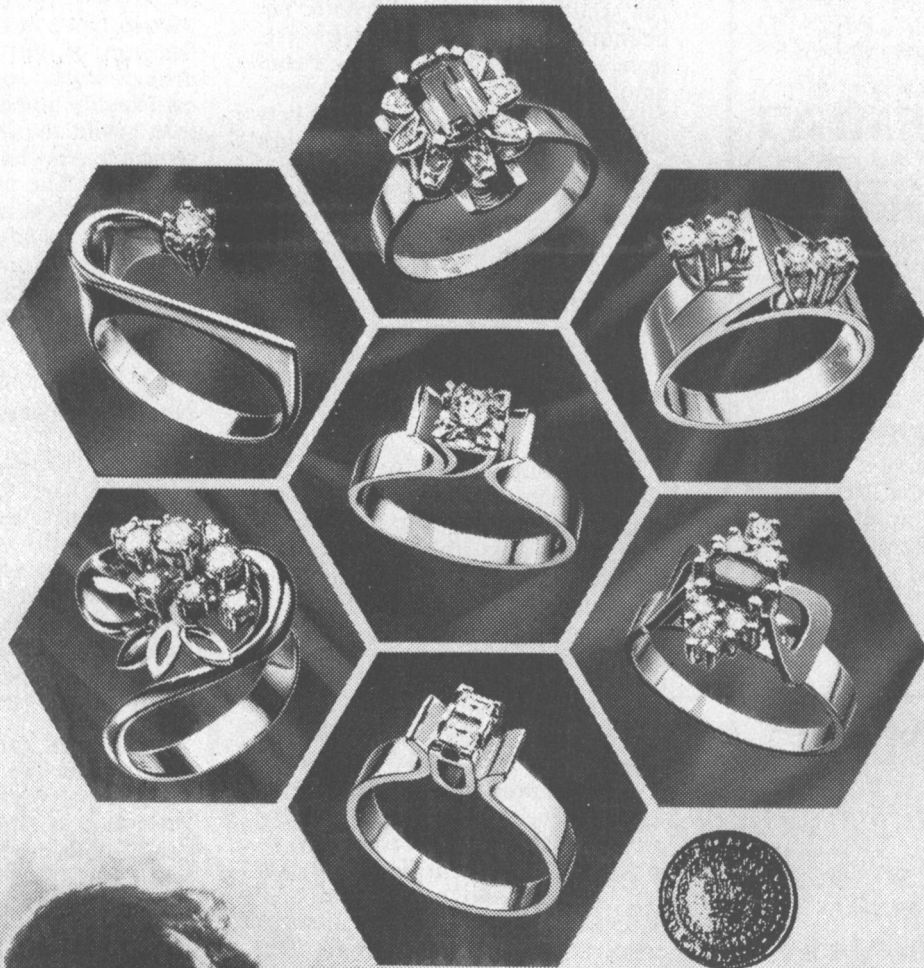
While there were no formal measures used to assess the results, there were several areas in which positive results were seen by all close observers. In almost all cases the boys and the projects were well received and in some instances relationships were established between the boys and people in the various organisations which are ongoing.

Both parties gained favourable insights about the other. Many of the delinquent youth developed an appreciation of themselves as having useful skills needed by others. There was clearly a development in social skills that would have been most difficult had they been taught in a less meaningful way. The "mixed" group probably facilitated more of this social skill learning. The interaction between outsiders and the Training Centre boys on most occasions produced very positive results for both.

Encouraging results

The Youth Involvement Programme has shown many encouraging results for future work. Already some modifications to the original programme are being tested to try to expand its usefulness. At this stage there is little doubt that such a concept could be regularly used for a number of youths being placed in such Training Centres.

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