

Speech

Address By

His Excellency Major General Michael Jeffery AC CVO MC
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

On the occasion of

The Launch of the Gunnedah Mentoring Program

Gunnedah Public School, New South Wales
28 August 2006

- Councillor Gae Swain, Mayor, Gunnedah Shire Council
- The Honourable John Anderson, Federal Member for Gwydir
- The Honourable John Cobb, Minister for Community Services
- Ms Sarah Ferguson, Mentoring Co-ordinator, Gunnedah Shire
- Mrs Christine Gray, Chief Executive Officer, School Volunteer Program
- Mr Phil Rees, Principal, Gunnedah Public School
- Mentors
- Ladies and gentlemen
- Girls and boys

Thank you for your warm welcome to Gunnedah, and I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we're gathered this morning.

What a wonderful occasion to be here, and doubly so, thanks to the beautiful singing of the choir, the traditional welcome by Shannon Haines with the assistance of Jack Jordan, and the dance performed by Nick Smyth and Kameron Manks.

I am delighted to see the Minister for Community Services, John Cobb at this function. I last met John at Admiralty House Sydney in March when I launched the National Mentoring Program in the presence of representatives from the Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Australian Business in the Community Network, the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, The Smith Family, the Australian Institute of Family Studies and Federal and State Government Departments. Thus Gunnedah is in very good company. I said then, and I repeat today that no man, woman, child or family can live in isolation. Indeed that's the essence of the ancient African proverb which says, "*it takes a village to raise a child.*"

Ladies and gentlemen. There's a saying which goes something like this: "*You were born an original – don't leave this world as a copy.*" Although human beings will always admire and respect the qualities and skills that others possess, few of us would want to be their mere copies.

Having said that there are some pretty crucial steps in getting from Point A to Point B – from the early formative years to achieving one's potential. To do so requires the support and guidance of others – a brain to pick, an ear to listen, a shoulder to lean upon, a person to trust, and when needed, a guiding hand to point the right direction.

But where does this concept we call mentoring come from and what does it mean? The word itself can be traced back to the

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writings of the ancient Greek poet, Homer. He wrote about 'Mentor' the person to whom the mythical Odysseus entrusted the care of his son when he embarked on the Trojan Wars.

Mentoring has evolved from a legendary name into a support process that is recognised worldwide by communities, corporations, and public institutions.

I particularly admire the effectiveness of mentoring with young Australians. Who would not want to show young people they are valued, that they belong, that they have a future? Who would not prize programs that elevate academic skills, eliminate low self-esteem, reduce social isolation and open doors to choice, independence, to the maturing of interpersonal skills, to a better life?

We know that most young people will succeed wonderfully. But others will struggle – and some might miss out altogether. On the other hand, even gifted students need guidance from time to time.

Over the years, informal mentoring relationships have advanced careers and guided skill building through a professional or other organization. It seems to me that as societies become more complex and impersonal, the need for person-to-person mentoring has become even more important.

Youth in their formative years deserve the very best we have to offer. Investment in educational and social opportunities is the key to helping young people who are at risk of 'slipping through the cracks'.

This is the joy of mentoring – to unlock potential. Yet, if the power of mentoring is to be achieved, the good intentions of program staff and volunteers alone are not enough. Good intentions must be supported by solid structures and effective practices.

And that's what makes the Gunnedah Mentoring Program so impressive.

In essence, it is a mentor service crafted locally, working with young people in schools (primarily 6 to 12 year olds), in sporting clubs, and with teenage mothers in partnership with Gunnedah Family Support.

The Gunnedah Mentoring Program began mid-way through 2005 with 6 mentors working with referred students at two primary schools. The program now has 37 mentors in Gunnedah and Tambar Springs working with some 30 young people at any one time.

The Program has drawn from the work of the School Volunteer Program, a national program begun in Western Australia and now expanding into Queensland, New South Wales, the ACT, Victoria, Tasmania and the Northern Territory. It's a magnificent scheme and I congratulate Mrs Christine Gray, Chief Executive Officer of the national program, and her team for their visionary approach on behalf of young Australians.

And a word for the mentors. I see you all as magnificent examples in maintaining an Australian ethos of service above self; of assisting fellow citizens or youngster in need of a helping hand.

In this regard, I hope that throughout Australia, service organisations such as Rotary, Apex, CWA and educational institutions such as universities and TAFE Colleges, each with national networks, could link together to promote mentoring on a national scale by providing suitable mentors across Australia. These public spirited organisations have amongst their ranks thousands of people ideally suited for such roles.

I will continue to do all I can to continue raising public awareness of the extraordinary value of mentoring and to encourage many more Australians to become involved. I very much appreciate that the healthy functioning of our society depends in large part on the contribution of mentors.

Thus it is my great pleasure to declare the Gunnedah Mentoring Program officially launched.

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