Tezza and his artwork

In honour of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Day, we turn over our front page to “Tezza” an Aboriginal young man who lives in residential care.

Tezza is a dedicated artist who learned his stencilling technique from school and who is influenced by characters drawn from the superhero genre.
Greetings!

It is a great privilege to be entrusted to the position of Guardian for Children and Young People, an independent statutory office dedicated to promoting the best interests, and safeguarding the voices and needs, of the young South Australians who live in out-of-home care.

I am under no illusions. This is a tough role—and a crucial one. As the mother of young adults, I’ve seen the good times and the challenges they’ve experienced as they’ve grown up in this new century. It is not an easy time to be young.

I want those children and young people for whom my office advocates to have the same things I wanted for my own children: to be cared for, kept safe, and have the opportunity to find their own unique strengths and talents. I want them to grow up to be secure in themselves and proud of who they are.

I originally trained and worked as a lawyer. Since then I have had a broad and varied career, including work on tribunals, university teaching, mediation and a term as a South Australian senator for four years. I have also campaigned for law reform and volunteered in community organisations and schools. My last (very enjoyable) volunteering gig, before starting this job, was a five week Introduction to Poetry course with years six and seven at my local primary school!

I have been drawn to work which promotes strong communities where no-one is left behind. These days we call this ‘social inclusion’. For me, this springs from my own personal conviction that every human being is inherently valuable and equal, no matter their circumstances.

I have also had a longstanding interest in criminal justice. Since my university days I have been fascinated by the purpose of prisons and punishment in our society and possibilities for ‘second chances’. Crime prevention through ‘justice reinvestment’—investing in communities rather than building more prisons—was a major focus of my Senate work. I am very pleased, then, that my additional responsibilities as ‘Training Centre Visitor’ will include overseeing the rights and welfare of young people detained in youth training centres.

So here I am. And I am fortunate to have joined a skilled, dedicated and compassionate staff team. From day one, they have been very clear about the work of our office: ‘It’s all about the kids’.

Every day we must remember that no child asks to end up in a situation where they need to live away from their birth family. As a society, we must only intervene in their lives to ensure their futures will be better than their pasts, so that they will be safe, respected and receive the support and care they need to be able to thrive.

In the best of worlds, a person’s background should not dictate their destiny. It is the hallmark of a fair and compassionate society to strive to ensure that every child has the chance to live a healthy life and achieve their full potential.

A fair and compassionate society is good for all of us.

Whatever role you play in the lives of children in care, I look forward to meeting you and working with you to get the best outcomes for those children.

Penny Wright
Guardian
What’s been done

June – August 2017

The Office’s Coordination and collaboration survey was posted in on 13 June. It attracted 384 respondents with a diverse range of interests and connections with the child protection system. The aggregate results have been published and we will continue to analyse the data about several key relationships over the next few weeks.

Amanda Shaw was interviewed on video by a Year 11 student in care about the importance of independent advocacy for children and young people in care. We will make the full transcript and a video available shortly.

Preliminary work continues on establishing the Training Centre Visitor program and the trial of the Community Visitor Scheme. Consultation on an education program for young people in residential care will conclude shortly and work will begin on the development of products.

Amanda Shaw participated in the Department for Child Protection’s Out of Home Care Strategy workshop and provided feedback to the Attorney General’s Department on the OPCAT Draft Inter-government Agreement.

The Department for Health and Ageing became the 83rd organisation to endorse the Charter of Rights bringing the number of Charter Champions to 423. Re-ordering of the Office’s rights materials is underway and includes stress balls, teen Charter booklets and comics. Quotes have been sourced for new products including drawstring backpacks and drink bottles in various colours featuring the rights in the Charter.

The Office welcomed Penny Wright as the new Guardian for Children and Young People on 10 July.

In 2016-17, the Office received total of 292 requests for intervention. Of those, 235 were within our legal mandate, representing 321 children and young people. This is a 62 per cent increase on the in-mandate requests for intervention from the previous financial year.

In the same period, 71 children and young people initiated contact with the Office and 75 per cent of those children and young people were in non-family based environments such as residential care, commercial care or Adelaide Youth Training Centre.

In the last two months, the advocacy team made a special effort to meet with as many of the young people in residential care for an informal catch-up.

The advocacy team welcomed Amy Allen and farewelled Jodie Evans who has been seconded to Commissioner for Children and Young People and Kate Cameron who moved to the Department for Child Protection.
Aboriginal children, community and culture

I am a Narangga and Arrente man. My mother hailed from the Narangga community. My father was a white man from Wolverhampton in England. I was brought up by my grandmother, however I was also guided by my grandfather, aunties, uncles and cousins, brothers and sisters. My grandfather, an Arrente man lived in Alice Springs with his mother who was a traditional Arrente woman, living in Tennant Creek.

I learnt from my childhood that connection to culture is important and empowering. As a child, I spent most of my life with my grandmother who taught me the value of respect among our people. Uncles and aunties played a big role in my up-bringing and that reinforced this respect. Connecting with my grandmother’s country meant undertaking activities such as spear fishing over on Wardang Island. I also spent a lot of time with my grandfather in Tennant Creek, where I was immersed in my culture and connected to country.

People providing a service to Aboriginal children and young people need to have a willingness and desire to understand kinship. They need to have some idea about the complex nature of family and individual family roles like nan (grandmother) and puppa (grandfather), uncles, aunties, cousins, sisters and brothers. They need to know something about skin names, totems and connections with certain communities. Nunga children hold connection to culture and values in high regard and like to be close with family particularly grandparents and listening to their stories.

I see my role within the Guardian’s Office is to promote the importance of connection to culture and strongly advocate for all Aboriginal children and young people in care to be able to connect to their culture and their communities.

I’d like non-Aboriginal Australians to understand what we as Aboriginal people have faced and continue to face. We still carry the burden of historical injustices, the stolen generation and forced assimilation into white society with the loss of our culture. Daily, we still experience racism and are stigmatized and distrusted. Our people live with the trauma of lost culture and the premature death of so many of our Elders and young people.

Aboriginal young people are strongly affected by relationships and need people in their lives to be consistent, honest and trustworthy. We at the Guardian’s Office need to let children and young people know about our role. To do this we need to build a connection by ongoing engagement with the community and the children and young people. My recent visits to some Aboriginal children and young people in their residential care homes helped them and the people who look after them to become aware of our office and to create a connection.

When working with Aboriginal children and young people, we need to consult and engage with the Aboriginal community and to recognise and work with the Elders. To do this we must be open, honest and genuine. We need to be respectful of the culture, traditions and the Elders of the communities and to respect their ownership of issues affecting their young people. We need to acknowledge and make use of the uniquely valuable and relevant knowledge that communities have about their children. We should offer our knowledge and insights with humility. Where we can, we should make use of the language of the land on which we meet and try to use stories and images to connect in a human and credible way.

Finally, this cannot be done quickly. We need to be patient and consistent and allow all of the time necessary to develop trust and understanding.
4 August – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Day

Of the approximately 3,600 children in state care in South Australia on 30 June, 2017, one third were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.

Connection to family, culture and place is important for all children and young people but especially so for those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. The forced separation of the Stolen Generations has left a deep scar on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and perpetual shame on Australia.

When the Guardian spoke to a gathering of Elders and other concerned people about the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the Murraylands in 2015, some very clear messages emerged.

There was a pervading sense of loss. Elders were saddened today by the ongoing loss in new generations, the loss of cultural knowledge, loss of language, loss of connection to family and to land.

Cultural connection included connection to other Aboriginal people (with whom they felt most comfortable), to birth families, to extended families, to local clan groups and to languages and culture. Some spoke about finding connection or themselves and their young people through music, dance and art.

The strength of the bonds in extended families, Elders told us, needed to be acknowledged and valued but also we needed to recognise that extended families sometimes didn’t have the material resources to look after even more children without some practical assistance.

Schools were identified as playing major part in the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. ‘Just one good teacher’ could make a great difference. But these opportunities were often wasted being only fragmented involvement of the school community in occasional one-off cultural events like NAIDOC Week instead of incorporation of Aboriginal history, language and culture into the core of mainstream education.

Many social workers, the Guardian was told, failed to do even basic cultural work with the Aboriginal children in their care. Perhaps many lacked the knowledge and comfort with Aboriginal matters? Perhaps they lacked the time, training and support from their organisations to develop the skills and the relationships needed.

Aboriginal children, the Guardian was told, frequently related better to Aboriginal workers, teachers and carers. Aboriginal adults, the Guardian was told, need be present in the environment where Aboriginal children are cared for and taught. Knowledge of Aboriginal language, culture, arts and history among non-Aboriginal workers, teachers and carers was thought to be very limited.

What success there had been for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children had been had been as the result of local solutions rather than broad policy settings. These solutions were generated in response to identified needs and were collaborative efforts by interested parties with appropriate skills and experience. They were actively supported by local Aboriginal leaders and had strong cultural themes in present in programs and activities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people themselves often speak to the Office’s advocates with regret about their separation from language, country and culture and about the barriers to reconnecting. Perhaps the final word should go to the five young Aboriginal people in the short video made as a prelude to the meeting, Aboriginal Young People Speak.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Day is coordinated by SNAICC – National Voice for our Children who own the graphic device used on this page.