

STORM Co programs change lives

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From theory to the real thing

For years I've been a supporter of STORM Co—from the beginning, in fact. In my former life as a church editor I published many reports and believe the concept of encouraging young people to serve in selfless ways is brilliant. The glamour of going to out-of-the-way towns and communities simply adds to the appeal.

My support, though, has been based on theory, until now. For the first time, this July, I saw STORM Co in action, in northern NSW—at Moree, Gwabegar and Coonabarabran.

I returned more impressed with the actuality than the theory. Almost 100 left the Avondale College campus and church for six areas ranging from the aboriginal community at Goodooga, the other side of Lightning Ridge, to the Sydney suburb of Macquarie Fields. Most were Avondale College students, with a mix of others from the church and surrounding community. The Coonabarabran trip was organised by the College Church.

STORM Co began in 1993 and its founder, Jerry Unser, is still involved. He has seen it grow into a national and in several places a worldwide movement. A record 22 teams will be involved in northern NSW this year.

'This year my big push is to tell teams to under-program and over-engage,' he says. He wants the teams to do all the preparation before they leave, 'and then engage with as many aspects of the community as they can. I think the key is to build bridges through relationships. A by-product is the team dynamics that develop when individuals have a purpose and are doing some practical Christianity.'

So, this is STORM Co

A typical STORM Co involves a Kids Club in the mornings and community service activities in the afternoon. The Kids Club is aimed mainly at primary school aged children, but I noticed that some older children also attended, often with younger brothers or sisters.

The service activities vary with the location and, depending on input from the local community and council, can change year by year. Usually it will involve cleaning up public parks, helping elderly people with their yards, or services the councils direct them in—last year in Bourke that included

painting a mural.

The Kids Clubs involve games and crafts. There's usually face painting and group activities. A 'learning time' tends to be about character development, often with puppets. And there's singing; that's the strongest Christian element of the program.

No attempt is made to hide the Christian underpinnings of STORM Co, but it's muted and presented in such a way that there have been no complaints from communities, at least none that I hear about. I'm told that, at first, any community is suspicious about what it's all about, but in the end, the overall service emphasis for kids and the community wins out. Timing STORM Co programs to coincide with school holidays also proves helpful to parents.

The children really enjoy the Kids Clubs. Excitement fills the halls where they meet and there's lots of noise during activities. But it quiets down for instructions, the next activity or for a presentation—with a little help from some of the STORM Co team, of course.

Bonds that grow between the team members (usually aged about 17 to 25 years) and the children become very evident. In one place I discovered a girl with the name of her favourite team member face-painted on her forehead. She wanted to be her friend. At Coonabarabran one team member was described as always having 'twenty kids hanging off her.'

What I see is evidence of admiration and even respect from the children for these older but still young people. It may only be a few days but there's a sense that the impact is going to last long after the STORM Co program is finished. Some of the kids want to be a part of STORM Co 'when they grow up.'

As for the team members, I find them in a state of semi-exhaustion after a few days. The basic accommodation—that's usually mattresses strewn on a church hall floor, doesn't help. However, there's a sense of excitement. The conversation readily turns to the children they're working with—the problems they face, the joys they've discovered and the frustrations. There's talk about a problem child, an incident, or the sense of satisfaction in helping out an elderly couple. There's a focus on what is happening.

Being together in something that's bigger than them is a bonding influence. There are open signs of team members supporting each other. And there's

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Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

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always something different happening. Trying to find a television set for the State of Origin game that week, was on the minds of several. I sensed that teams were gaining more from the experience than they were giving. Actually several told me they were hooked on STORM Co programs for that reason.

What's impressive is that STORM Co leadership from the college and church is made up from among the team members. There is no experienced senior person telling them what to do. There is training before they leave home base, but that tends to be in things like clowning, puppetry, craft and developing practical skills for the tasks they may be involved in. Even the bus drivers were found among the groups I visited. For those leaving from the Avondale campus there's usually a couple asked to upgrade their driver's license so they can drive the bus for their group.

Some impacts of STORM Co

I spent most of my time with the teams, but I did talk to a few people from the communities I visited. They were positive about what was happening. I met Kevin at Gwabegar (pronounced with a silent 'G'). The town itself is small with maybe 150 residents. Kevin is probably in his 60s and he's an open STORM Co enthusiast. In fact, he's extended his house, installed bedding for the teams that visit and helps provide food. The Gwabegar STORM Co team has the most comfortable accommodation and perhaps the strongest local support of any of the teams. A couple of years ago Kevin received an Australia Day honour for community services. I'm told he was so impressed with what the first STORM Co teams did that he felt he could do something in his community as well. He reckons that the annual STORM Co visit is the best thing that happens in Gwabegar. This is the eighth year STORM Co has come to town and the day after my visit a community barbecue was held.

'The only time the community gets together as a

whole is when STORM Co visits,' says Kevin. 'This is such a good thing for our town.'

Loreena Butcher is a veteran STORM Co participant. I met her on the job at Coonabarabran. This is her sixth STORM Co. She's also been on short-term mission trips to India and Thailand. Her passion, though, is for STORM Co.

'When you go to those overseas kinds of places, it's big, grand, and awesome with huge returns and rewards,' she says. 'It's easy to fly overseas and it's unreal. On the other hand, when you go to a small town in Australia, it's almost as if there is less reward. But it's greater, because it's at home. It can be harder at home, though.'

She describes the satisfaction in these terms: 'You come back from a week of STORM Co absolutely trashed, tired and grumpy, but you've developed such a close relationship with those you worked with. You've seen them do things they've never done before. It's cool to see them step up when things have to be done.'

Then there's the association with the children. That's a reward in itself.

'In fact, we get a greater reward than our impact on them. You see school kids who you think are complete morons. Then you see them step up. It's great!'

'There's also the spiritual aspect, where we go into a community and help the kids to understand a little about Jesus. And we end up having them sing songs about Jesus to us. In the way they catch on to this, they teach us a whole lot about God.'

To those who are thinking of trying STORM Co she has this message: 'Do it! Do it now!'

'So many people I know say, 'It isn't my thing.' But they won't know until they've tried it. Everyone I know who has done it has enjoyed it.'

In case you missed the message, she says it again, 'Do it! Do it now!'

Be warned, though. Loreena's story shows that STORM Co can be addictive. **TEACH**