Rites of passage

Simple rituals aim to give Year 9s a positive pathway into adulthood

Bethany Hlat

The sun is low in the sky as a group of teenage boys and their parents trudge silently uphill through Lesmurdie Falls National Park. Classical music is playing over a loudspeaker as they reach the lookout with sweeping views over the city.

The boys, most of them 14 years old, are taking part in a ritual to symbolise childhood’s end and the start of their journey towards manhood.

They attend Mazenod College, one of 23 WA schools that have adopted the Rite Journey, a program which draws on the traditional concept of initiation to adulthood through a seven-stage rite of passage.

While the boys stand at the spectacular lookout, their faces tinged orange by the rays of the sun now sinking slowly towards the horizon, Year 9 co-ordinator Mike Pickford gently asks them by saying thank you to the people who have fed, taught and cared for them.

“The places, all the experiences, the films, the books, the games and the music, all that the human tradition gave you, that made your boyhood rich and good,” he says.

“Even the painful times — the hurts, the betrayals and the disappointments that made you who you are.”

As the boys stand in respectful silence, gazing outwards to the city lights sparkling below, Mr Pickford asks each parent to put a hand on their son’s shoulder and give them a gentle push to symbolise the start of their journey to manhood.

Many find the simple ritual unexpectedly overwhelming and a few boys bury their heads in their parents’ shoulders for a long moment before surreptitiously wiping away tears.

The program’s creator and director, South Australian physical education teacher and author Andrew Lines, says the Rite Journey reinvents the traditional process of a rite of passage to transform adolescents from dependency to responsibility.

Originally developed for boys but later adapted for girls, the year-long program uses a mixture of rituals, physical challenges, discussion and guidance to start the process of turning Year 9s into “responsible, respectful and resilient” adults.

Signposting the journey are seven ceremonial stages, starting with the calling ritual, where students say goodbye to childhood at a significant local landmark. “It’s intended to be a memorable moment for these kids, something that sits with them for ever as a point where they make the transition,” Mr Lines says.

The biggest challenge that students face during the year is the solo wilderness experience known as “the abyss”, where they spend 24 hours isolated in their own tent with some rations and writing materials but no access to technology.

“It’s an experience of what happens when you don’t have anything to take you away from yourself,” he says. “Kids these days don’t have that.”

Mr Lines believes Western society’s lack of rites of passage has led to many teens creating “bubble-wrapped and not really resilient” adults.

He was inspired to create the Rite Journey when he realised many teens lacked appropriate adult role models and needed help to deal with society’s intensive focus on body image and the impact of technology.

Many of his students were refusing to take responsibility for their own actions, laying blame to society’s lack of rites of passage.

“Young people are spending so much time in front of screens and little time in front of people. This lack of human connection is a real issue because it is really only by being in front of an adult that you can learn how to be an adult — and there is no software program that’s going to help a young person learn those skills,” he says.

During lessons, which are held during lessons, which are held

(Students) became more accountable, more resilient.

Mike Pickford

sitting on the floor instead of behind desks, boys discuss topics such as mateship, how to deal with anger and how to talk to girls. Girls examine issues such as body image and self worth, relationships and cyberbullying.

About 40 schools have adopted the program in the past five years, including schools in New Zealand, Britain and South Korea.

Mr Lines says the program has snowballed as word has spread, with 23 Australian schools signing up to deliver the Rite Journey for the first time this year — eight of those in Perth.

As well as Mazenod, they include John XXIII, Mercy, Swan Christian, Southern Hills Christian, Mundaring Christian, Mandurah Senior High School, Five WA schools have been using it for the past two years — Christian Brothers College Fremantle, Corpus Christi College, St Stephen’s School in Doncaster, Irene McCormack College and Ocean Forest Lutheran College.

Kalamunda, the only public school to offer the program in WA, will trial the program this year with one class of Year 9 boys before deciding whether to invest more money in training teachers to deliver it.

Principal Kathy Ritchie says if it is successful, based on feedback from the boys and their parents and an assessment of students’ attitude, behaviour and results, the school would consider rolling it out to all boys in the year group. “And, maybe in the longer term, looking at a similar thing for the girls.”

Emotions were running high...
Dreaming from Whadjuk to Wadjemup

Stepping out of the comfort zone pays off for brave students says Libby Elphick

Libby Elphick pays off for brave students.

Dreaming from Whadjuk to Wadjemup

Last month when parents and students from CBC Fremantle made their way up Monument Hill to witness the school's calling and departure ceremonies.

Deputy principal Domenic Burgio says the Rite Journey now underpins all pastoral care at CBC Fremantle Years 7 to 12.

"It's made a profound difference," he says. "In these classes some pretty powerful stuff happens. The whole way we approach pastoral care and learning comes back to 'are you behaving like a future leader, or is that little boy behaviour? Are you taking responsibility or are you deflecting it?'

"We're able to challenge the pastoral care model, 'are you going to be for your kid, or are you making the kid accountable?'

"We're trying to give boys a really positive pathway into adulthood and then empower them with the skills to make the right decisions at the right time."

For the boys painted in traditionally prepared wilgee (water) wearing a dilly bag (join cloth) taking to the stage to perform traditional Aboriginal dances is an act that is not familiar to them. An act that is very scary for them.

And, most importantly, an act that can be a significant first step in reconnection and reconnection with their identity and their rich culture.

The boys were dancing at an event organized and led by the Indigenous Community Education Awareness and Reconciliation project, WA Foundation, held to celebrate and wish well the first all-Aboriginal team of swimmers to compete in the annual Swim to Rottnest event.

For the eight-year-old Lockridge Senior High School Aboriginal boys who waited nervously for their call up to the stage at the North Cottesloe Surf Club.

These young boys, who mainly grew up in suburbs surrounding Lockridge, exist in a generation of young Aboriginal people who have had much of their culture bubble-wrapped.

They have expressed a desire to swim away from Rottnest to escape the prison."

Now with this swim from Whadjuk to Wadjemup we are swimming with our community for our future, past and present," he said.

"I think there's so much hustle and bustle in society today and in life," he says. "If we can provide an environment where they slow down a little bit and take in the surroundings, that could help them a lot in the long run. So they can learn to reflect and not jump to conclusions and take in every bit of information so they can make right judgments and calculated, educated decisions."

Steve Biddulph, an adjunct professor of psychology and the author of Raising Girls and Raising Boys, says rites of passage are essential to a well-lived life.

"I think it can achieve results as remarkable as reducing crime, preventing suicide, helping kids find good careers, prompting better respect for their partners and sex," he says. "Without them, we don't produce adults.

Until quite recently rituals to help children become adults were common in every culture as weddings and funerals.

"That is something that is necessary," Professor Biddulph says. "What's fascinating is that people with every culture create rites of passage themselves. Schools and universities, busker, nights, and the like, they tend to be actually quite toxic and clumsy, a kind of cry for something more meaningful to fill the gap."

"The backcloth is clear that this age group are not well formed yet, and so we are creating every culture. As the indigenous adult culture, not ejecting them into the big world. A rite of passage may be not in, not you're on your own."

Dennis Simmons shares his joy after the Rottnest swim, surrounded by his teammates.

Dream/Partnerships for Success Program Coordinator

"It is my honour to walk this journey with you."

Calling: CBC student Henry and father Anthony Moffitt in Fremantle.

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Swim to Rottnest event organised jointly by the Western Australian Surfing Club and the Indian Ocean Mandurah Indian Ocean Foundation.

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