

# Forgotten victims of crime crying out for second chance



REBECCA BAKER

HE is the kind of young man and upstanding citizen most parents hope their boys grow into – only he's done so despite who his mum and dad are, rather than because of them.

The 20-year-old was just six months old when his mum was jailed while interstate for "doing bad stuff" – and she's been in and out of prison ever since. So too his late father, a drug and alcohol addict, whom he never really knew.

But Ryan Knowles is a suburban Adelaide council's newest Young Citizen of the Year, handed the kudos just months after receiving a Premier's Community Award in recognition of his service to the community.

The polite, softly-spoken award-winner who dreams of being a youth worker says he's been touched by the unexpected recognition.

"I don't do the things for accolades, I do it because I like helping people, especially those who are in the same situation I was once in," says the volunteer camp leader at Second Chances, a South Australian charity aimed at helping prisoners' children, or "PKs", as they are called.

It is estimated there are 4000 children of prisoners – dubbed "invisible victims" – across the state. For many, both mum and dad are on the lockup merry-go-round.

Life for the youngsters left at home can be downright bleak. They wear the stigma of their parents' crime whether they like it or not.

Many are bullied at school, many go hungry, and many live in households where drug and alcohol use is rife.

Many are encouraged to steal and lie and disrespect authority.

The proof is in the statistics: the children of prisoners are six times more likely to end up in jail than kids from law-abiding families.

It's a sad fact not lost on Ryan – adopted as a baby by his great-grandmother and brought back to South Australia – who first came in contact with Second Chances SA, as a nine-year-old.

The Adelaide organisation, founded four years ago as a break-away from Prison Fellowship Australia, makes contact with prisoner parents, seeking permission to buy birthday and Christmas presents, on the prisoner's behalf, to boost the children's perceptions of themselves



**BREAKING THE CYCLE:** Ryan Knowles and Montana Tucker with Attorney-General Vickie Chapman. **LEFT:** Children at the Second Chances camps (published with permission).



and make them feel more like their classmates.

It also runs nine adventure camps throughout the year, aimed at giving the children experiences they might not otherwise get, its efforts supported by a range of SA not-for-profits, government funding and money raised

through the charity's own furniture warehouse and op shop.

For Ryan, the chance to take part in a camp – and to meet the man who would become a life-long mentor – was life-changing.

"My Nanna was really, really good to me – she was very strict

when it came to discipline but extremely loving towards me at the same time ... she helped mould me," he says of the matriach who adopted him but sadly died when he was 11.

"The other major positive influence in my life has been Les (Dennis), who I met at the very first camp.

"I could have gone down a completely different road – and even ended up in prison – without having met him. Through him, I've seen the world. The community needs people like him, to mentor and help others and be good role models.

"He is a great, happy man who has taught me to believe in myself ... he had constant belief in me and saw my potential, and that I could do great things."

For an impressionable nine-year-old who had no one to cheer him on at sports day or do the regular family things kids do, the friendship of the 77-year-old volunteer stalwart meant everything.

"My mum would come in and out of prison and I didn't ever really get to meet my dad," he says. The few memories Ryan does have of family life are scattered with drugs and violence.

Today, his heart breaks for the young people he meets on camp.

"I can only imagine what some of these kids are going through in their life," he says.

HELPING OTHERS:  
Montana Tucker  
with Second  
Chances' chief  
Helen Glanville.  
Picture: NAOMI  
JELICOE

# Loneliness and hunger were part of growing up



ADELAIDE'S Montana Tucker didn't let an unimaginably tough and lonely childhood break her – instead it made her determined to make life for others a little brighter.

Her drug-addicted mum was in and out of jail from the time Montana was four, the little girl jeered and ridiculed when she wouldn't lie or steal.

"I would go to school as early as I could and leave as late as possible – it was my safety zone," she recalls. "I didn't talk, I didn't socialise, I did my schooling, got good grades and ignored everything else in my life."

When asked if she feels sad for that little girl, she tears up.

"I remember loneliness and hunger ... being independent at the age of seven but not being able to feed myself as there was no food and not liking the fact my family stole food," she says. "I had a friend when I was at kindy but that was it. We constantly moved about and I had no one."

That is, until she was invited to take part in a Second Chances camp aged about 15.

"It was honestly one of the best things that has ever happened to me ... I felt loved and valued and that is something that I didn't get elsewhere," Montana says.

"The first camp I went on I met one of the girls who has gone on to become one of my closest friends. She understands me and I understand her – we didn't go into details, we just both knew we'd had it hard and we were OK knowing that and helping each other."

Today, the warm and engaging 21-year-old is part-way through a teaching degree, specialising in high school physics, and volunteering as a camp leader with the charity that helped her.

She is also the proud recipient of a Premier's Award, given late last year in recognition of her community service.

Her message is a simple one: give little people love and "accept them unconditionally," she says. "Through my childhood, I had a lot of bad things happen but that has made me stronger and smarter ... I try to tell little kids it will get better just don't give up, keep trying – and allow people to help you."

“I felt loved and valued and that is something that I didn't get elsewhere

"I always think that as bad as I had it, a lot of these little kids have it much worse ... sometimes they'll tell you stuff about their lives that you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy."

"They are just innocent little kids ... and no one really ever thinks about them. So I try to be the type of person they can look up to. Young kids are really impressionable."

Ryan is just one of many of the shining lights Second Chances' chief executive Helen Glanville is so proud of, so too former SA Victims' Rights commissioner Michael O'Connell, who has just taken on the charity's newly-formed role of victims' advocate.

"I heard some of the stories of these young people and don't mind admitting to the fact it caused me to shed a tear or two," Mr O'Connell says. "To hear what these young people have lived through as children, to see how they have been able to rise above their personal circumstances to achieve and be successful, is both inspiring to others but hopefully, aspirational."

"Hopefully, it will encourage other young people to seize the op-

portunities offered by organisations such as Second Chances.

"(People such as Ryan) are prime examples of why we need to walk this journey with these young people ... by giving them the appropriate support, helping them seize opportunities, they can become fabulous citizens who play a role in ensuring the place we live is as rich and liveable as it is. Everyone deserves that."

Mrs Glanville says too often very young children are the "forgotten victims of crime" – something she's fighting to change through her organisation and army of 125 volunteers.

"The current legal, prison and educational systems neglect these kids," she says. Last Christmas, the organisation provided 632 presents and each month gives out 30 birthday presents.

"We want the children to know they belong, that they are accepted and that they are valued," she simply says. "Many of these children are liv-

ing with a stigma over their heads – they are teased and bullied at school and reminded 'your old man is in prison'."

A mother of two grown sons, Mrs Glanville's philosophy is simple – it's about restoring and, in many cases igniting, a spark of hope and sense of dignity. "These little people carry a lot on their little shoulders and minds but it is not their crime and it is not their fault – and we want them to know we are here for them," she says.

"Unfortunately, many are living in homes where they aren't taught the values and lessons many of us take for granted, such as honesty, respect and work ethic."

"Often mum isn't coping financially and the kids will turn up to school in tatty old clothes and shoes."

"Often they are told very negative things ... children aged under 10 who are told they are 'scum', they're told they'll 'just end up in prison like your old man'."

“They'll tell you stuff about their lives you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy