

HELPING VULNERABLE KIDS SHINE

Rotarian Dennis Van Someren volunteers for SHINE for Kids, an organisation assisting and mentoring young people who have parents serving time in prison.

THE prison population in Australia has doubled in the past 10 years, with approximately 40,000 people now serving their sentences across the country. The largest increases have been in remand, Indigenous and women prisoners.

- 33 per cent of the total prison population are on remand;
- 28 per cent of the prisoner population are Indigenous Australians;
- The total number of women in prison has increased by 77 per cent in 10 years.

Incarceration has impact far beyond the prisoners themselves, with around 60,000 children currently affected by a parent's sentence.

SHINE for Kids assists these children to manage the enormous upheaval in their lives that results. While dealing with turbulent emotions, they are often also thrust into financial hardship and disrupted care. Frequently, imprisonment results in a move to a new community and school, severing ties with existing social and support networks.

But, even more debilitating, is the seclusion resulting from guarding the secret of their parent's whereabouts.

Consequently, they suffer terrible loneliness and anxiety, which goes unnoticed and unassisted due to their fixated effort of concealing the reality of their situation. Without help, as many as 20 per cent of these children will end up in prison themselves.

SHINE for Kids is the only national charity in Australia that supports children of prisoners. SHINE operates child and family centres for children and families to relax before and after their visit. Children can spend time out of what is a daunting and confusing experience for anyone, interacting with other children in the same situation and having fun with crafts and play. This leads to positive associations with visiting their parent, rather than anxiety and fear.

Adults have somewhere to sit and talk with someone who listens to them without judgment. Those who are new to the prison system often have no idea what to expect or how the process works. During a drop-in, staff explain SHINE's programs and provide referrals to relevant community agencies.

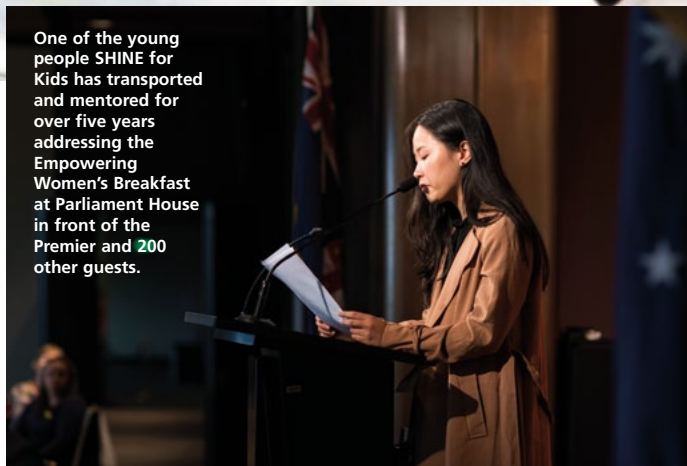
SHINE further runs child-parent activity days, set aside for prisoners to

spend extended time with their children and other family members. The parent can play ball, participate in arts and crafts, and take on everyday parenting tasks like feeding a bottle or making their child's lunch. NAIDOC week is celebrated with traditional food, dancing and painting activities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inmates and their families.

Additionally, extensive mentoring programs are provided for children and young people. Mentors, drawn from the community, are matched for at least a 12-month period to provide regular support.

Other programs assist with tutoring to ensure children's education stays on track. Bike Smart Kids helps children facing mobility issues due to not having a parent to drive them around. Participants are trained in road safety and bike maintenance, then provided with a restored secondhand bicycle and helmet of their own.

Dennis Van Someren, of the Rotary Club of Kenthurst, NSW, has volunteered for SHINE for Kids for



One of the young people SHINE for Kids has transported and mentored for over five years addressing the Empowering Women's Breakfast at Parliament House in front of the Premier and 200 other guests.

the past nine years. He primarily helps transport children and young people to visit their parents in prison, providing on-the-go mentoring over an extended period. Dennis has personal experience of what the children go through, having been affected during his formative years by his father's imprisonment for corporate fraud.

"I'm able to talk about my own experience instead of just being an old guy who drives the car for them," Dennis said. "For a young person, I

keep going. They can see that I've been through it and I'm living proof that they can achieve what I've achieved."

Dennis also travels and speaks extensively at Rotary clubs – over 70 so far – and other events to spread SHINE's message. Other Rotarians have since joined as volunteers and many have contributed financially. Some clubs have already committed to becoming partners of SHINE for Kids, but Dennis is keen for more Rotary clubs to come on board.

guess that's the way they could look at me. But when I tell them my story they open up and I can mentor them. I teach them about resilience in a simplistic way – my mantra is just

Dennis advocates for compassion and understanding for affected children's sometimes difficult and volatile behaviour.

"When you're young and you go through something like a parent going to jail, you can become very aggressive and very selfish and, in fact, you have to be that to survive... if you don't, you could go to an extremely dark side. Of course, youth suicide is predominant in the early teens, but it is also extremely predominant from 15 to 24.

"The most important thing is contact with the parents, because, when your parent goes to jail, you really become an outcast in society yourself. People feel rather uncomfortable with you and therefore you lose a lot of support. SHINE provides a family environment in all things they do, whether it be activity days, transport, mentoring – all very, very important."

Visit www.shineforkids.org.au for more information •