

THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE ON ASHLEY YOUTH JUSTICE AND DETENTION CENTRE IN TASMANIA MET IN THE RECEPTION ROOM, LAUNCESTON TOWN HALL, ON THURSDAY, 15 FEBRUARY 2007.

ROSSI STOREN-HARRIS, WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - My primary purpose in responding to the letter I got was to come along and offer you some interesting information about Molenda Lodge Incorporated, which is basically a children's rehab centre three kilometres out of Ulverstone, situated on a small historic farm. We have been working with kids who are considered to be at risk for the last seven or eight years, mainly with high school students. Some children were referred through family services and, more recently, through the Department of Youth Justice. We found that our program works with kids. After seven or eight years of seeing all the things that can clash in trying to run a kids rehab centre when you are working with school staff with different opinions, views and levels of training, and different views about behaviour modification and what that means, it occurred to me that we really needed a model to go by. We adopted the Glassier-Makos model. I think it was written in about 2004 or 2005 and it is a very good model. The good news is that with the kids that come up to Molenda we have had some really interesting turnarounds, and some of these kids are from pretty nasty backgrounds. More recently, the boys that we have been working with through Youth Justice have had some pretty hectic backgrounds, and one of the lads attending at the moment has been in and out of Ashley.

I would like to suggest the possibility of a day centre where a child is sentenced to attend and participate in a program that is addressed to meet his social needs and his social skills needs and self-esteem, and especially to build better relationships with family and other community members. We are staffed entirely by volunteers so that is probably why we have a very dedicated staff - because they are not getting paid. They are there because they want to be there and work with kids. They have had various levels of training and experience in working with kids, like a teaching background. We have one lady with us at the moment who has a background as a medical practitioner and linguist. I myself am trained as and was an acting psychologist and teacher, so I have a real interest in this area. I have also been involved in operating a ministry in conjunction with the City Mission. They have now got a presence on the coast, so we take a caravan into the park every Thursday from two to six and it gives us an opportunity to interact not only with the kids that we are trying to help but with their parents, neighbours and wider family.

Mr MARTIN - What age are the kids do you take?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - We take children from about grade 3 to grade 10. We have had a history of schools bringing children. That has broken down a bit because of transport and staffing costs; the schools say they cannot get money to provide the service up there. Two of the local Christian schools are going to be working with us this year and at the moment we are only going to be working with referrals through Child and Family Services and the Department of Youth Justice.

Mr MARTIN - How many kids do you take at a time and do they stay overnight?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - They don't stay overnight; it is a day centre, so they usually come during school hours - like the lad who is coming at the moment from Youth Justice. He comes at about 10 o'clock and stays there until about 3 p.m. or 3.30 p.m. I think that one is a ward of the State and hasn't been attending school a lot, but will be part-time this year. We have just finished with three.

Mr MARTIN - So it is very one-on-one.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - It is very one-on-one because we usually have one or two kids to each adult, so it is quite intense. We believe very strongly in increasing the child's self worth, not just correction, though we are very firm about what you can and can't do at Molenda and how to treat other people. We have clear guidelines about that. We believe strongly in having consistency and continuity for the kids because we found that, with the high schools, they would bring a kid up for a few weeks and then the kid would start to behave better at school, so they would take him out and put another naughtier kid in. The first kid would be resentful and his family would be resentful and they would just as likely confront me in the street saying that we had stopped their kid from coming just when he was starting to get somewhere. We feel that the children need to attend for at least one school term, say, one day a week, on a regular basis so that we can get somewhere with them and they can get somewhere with us and so that they haven't got half-finished projects they have been working on. There is nothing more frustrating to an already disturbed child than to be halfway through a project and have to be pulled out.

Mr MARTIN - I agree. What numbers can you take at one time?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - We could take up to 10 children on the property at any one time. We would not attempt to take more than that with our current staffing levels.

CHAIR - How are they referred to you? Are they from the north-west coast?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - The north-west coast mainly. We are willing to take them from as far away as people can get them there. We have had requests for children from Burnie but there have been problems even getting them there. Mainly the schools are stumped, or they say they are, by transport and accompanying the children.

We are quite happy to work with adolescent children without them having a staff member there provided somebody accepts the responsibility for that minor being on the property. We are fully insured and covered for everything. All our volunteers are police-checked and I go through a program with them because I am very concerned that we get the right kind of personality and attitude with the kids, otherwise it undermines everybody.

Mrs JAMIESON - Do you have high turnover of volunteers?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - No, we don't; we seem to have stuck with the same ones but we get new ones from time to time. We have about four constant volunteers who attend two or three days a week, then we have a bevy of other volunteers who will come and go and do farm work or repair things and come if needed for some special event at the property.

Mrs JAMIESON - Would you like to outline the activities that you cover on the premises?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - Yes, we do farming activities and organic vegetable growing. We have animal husbandry: there are alpacas and pigs and sheep, a pony and donkey, a whole variety of farm animals. So they get to learn how to deal with them, how to feed them, what you have to watch out for et cetera.

We have a big woodworking shop which was funded mainly by the Tasmanian Community Development Fund. One of our volunteers is a very gifted craftsman with wood. We have a retired home economics teacher, so we are very well equipped to deal with cooking, sewing, craft and hospitality.

We like to have groups of the elderly out from the nursing homes and we get our kids to prepare morning or afternoon tea and serve it to them. They get praise and acknowledgment for that. That is a very therapeutic thing to do with these kids. They like to be acknowledged for their positive side.

We have also just about completed a little kiosk and toilet block. We would like to see the kids managing the kiosk. I have found, as a child guidance officer and working in rehab, overwhelmingly that the more responsibility and the higher the expectation you have of a disturbed or disenfranchised or disconnected person, the more likely they are to grow. Especially you acknowledge each step achieved and encourage them not to take the knocks too hard because they are hard on themselves.

Mrs JAMIESON - Do you follow a child through? Say you have a kid who has been doing really well with your program but they come from an unhealthy background at home, do you follow them into the family scene?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - We would dearly love to but because of protocol we are not allowed to have contact, so I know most of the children only by their first names. The purpose of going into the park on a Thursday was to find our own contact with the parents and we are increasingly getting in contact with the parents. Just this week I have been able to achieve a place for a young drug addicted boy in the Ted Noffs program. There is another boy we are hoping to place in Teen Challenge and another one in the Triple Care Farm out of Sydney.

Mrs JAMIESON - If you are a private organisation, who says you can't contact the family?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - For the kids who come to us at the moment, Youth Justice is not allowed to give us their parents' contact details because that is against the privacy of that kid. My only hope is to go into the park, catch the kids there and say, 'Tell mum to come and have a cup of coffee with me', or 'Go and ask mum if I can have her phone number'. That is the way we are dealing with that difficulty at the moment.

Some of the kids who came through Youth Justice and who were on work orders are now coming to the park to meet up. They are saying, 'Can I come to Molenda?', and I am saying, 'Yes, you can but you have to get there. I can't come and get you and I'd have to have mum or dad's written permission'.

Mrs JAMIESON - In that case, if you have, say, 10 referrals from Youth Justice and/or schools and then young Johnny pops up and says, 'I used to be here and I'd like to come back again', could you take him?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - As long as I had written permission from his family. I have to have proof that he is supposed to be there - for my insurance.

Mr DEAN - So you would have difficulty, I guess, in assessing the benefits of your home to a child in the long term?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - I would, but it doesn't overly concern me because the children mostly live in my community, so I get to hear how they are getting on. But I have no way of actually formally assessing the benefits. I think the most informative way to do that would be to interview the child. We have kids coming up and saying, 'Why can't I come back to Molenda, just cos I'm not on work orders?', so they are obviously getting something from that.

Mr DEAN - So the Education Department in - I think you said you are working with two Christian schools this year in particular -

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - Yes, I will be working with Leighland and North West Christian Schools.

Mr DEAN - Right. They obviously are asking children who are not suited to a full-time classroom situation to spend some time with you.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - That's right, one full day a week per child.

Mr DEAN - Right. I was just wondering how that works with the -

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - We invited the two Christian schools in question - no, it was not us who invited them, it was MST, actually. The principals came up and had a look and discussed the sorts of things we would be doing, and they have children with behavioural problems and all sorts of problems. I think the North West Christian School is bringing four year 10 students for the year, and the other school I am not sure how many.

Mr DEAN - You would probably have some knowledge of a program called Student Works at Brooks High School which I think is for year 6 through to year 10 and higher, where they come out of the classroom for a day or two. Those that aren't suited to it spend time in ceramics and woodwork and craft work and all those things, and then go back into the classroom after that. So it's a similar thing.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - It is similar, but we go a little bit further in that we can offer a wider range of activities, especially in hospitality and the interaction with their community. They are interacting with volunteers in their community and getting acknowledgment for that.

Mr DEAN - I see that as a great thing for the kids.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - It goes that little bit further. I am all in favour of taking those sorts of kids out and getting them to do other activities, but it may not necessarily address the behaviours. We do address the behaviours that are separating them from the other kids, so if there's an altercation or there is clearly antisocial behaviour, we will take that child aside and say, 'What happened there was this, and what do you think that's done to the other kid? How do you think that kid is thinking about you now?' That kind of thing, and we go through that, always adding a positive element that, 'It was good that you did that, but this really separates you from the other kids and they're not going to like you for that'. We focus a lot on that.

Mr DEAN - Where do you get your funding from?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - We are self-funded. We grow organic fruit and vegetables; we run a community market once a month - that is fairly new; we have a trivia night once a month; we sell piglets; and we receive donations.

Mr DEAN - Well done.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - The whole idea of the model was to show that communities don't have to be dependent on government funding to look after their own.

Mr DEAN - So Youth Justice and the Education Department don't make a financial contribution.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - No, but we do charge \$3 a day for a two-course hot meal.

Mrs JAMIESON - Well done. Would you have the capacity to expand on one day a week? Do you look at little Johnny and think, 'If I could only have you two days a week.'?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - Oh, yes, we would. In fact, for some kids two days a week would be more useful. A lot of these kids are on part-time enrolment and I am allowed to say that because there is a lot of myth in the community - I think some schools pretend that it isn't happening. A lot of these kids are on part-time enrolment and annulment, and some of them are not but they just don't go to school. As you know, the truancy legislation has become a bit of a toothless tiger.

Mrs JAMIESON - Yes, it certainly has.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - They just don't go to school.

Mrs JAMIESON - So equipment repair, and things like that - if you've got the tractor or some other equipment -

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - Yes, we are funded for that, too. The Tasmanian Community Development Fund gave us some money to buy a little second-hand Kubota tractor so that we can teach agricultural stuff on a more meaningful level. We have all the equipment we could possibly need.

Mr DEAN - So you're out there ploughing your paddocks?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - I don't, but Kathy, the doctor, does. I reckon she comes as close to the cutting-up type of thing you were asking about.

Mrs JAMIESON - You got the dam fixed, did you?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - I keep off the tractor; I have absolutely refused to learn to drive it. I go better on the computer, actually.

CHAIR - Can I just ask you, Rossi, do you have any formal way of measuring your performance?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - No, we can't do that because we only have the children for a given period. Well, we can in that we could have a profile, if we had children there long enough. We have had a couple of children who actually came for two years from one of the high schools, but we haven't actually kept a formal list of tick-offs as to whether we think the child's moved through from point A to point B. We could develop such a profile, but we haven't had to prove to anybody yet why it is effective because we don't have any stats to fill out and we don't have any funding to justify.

CHAIR - So what is your basic message to us here today?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - The message to you, particularly in the last few months when I have been working with really disturbed kids or kids who have been through Ashley and what-have-you, is that there needs to be, in my humble view, a step between children who fail to meet the requirements of the courts through their work orders or whatever and who may bring disfavour upon themselves through that system. There needs to be some intermediary step between that and admittance to Ashley. From my understanding of what is happening at Ashley - and I only have hearsay evidence and the comments from the boys themselves - it is a fairly severe step to go for some kids, at least, and I guess it is because there is no other step in between -

CHAIR - Yes.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - to go from that to Ashley, where they are incarcerated and for our coastal kids who are away from their families and contacts. They are subjected to all manner of bullying and I have some comments - and I cannot give you her name - from a previous youth worker there that some of the staff have become a little bit hard-headed perhaps and turn the other way when a kid is being bullied. They use things like biro to stab kids and they will snap the end off a toothbrush and sharpen the stem of it and use that as a bullying tool. It disturbs me that you would have children as young as 10 or 11 confronted with those kinds of situations and subjected to older boys and being bullied.

CHAIR - So perhaps in your view if there was another Molenda in the north and in the south of the State, if you had it on a regional basis then that might assist.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - Yes, that would be great, because the kids do respond. We don't namby-pamby them. We have strict guidelines as what they can and can't do. They are never allowed to roam around the property unattended, inviting them to get involved in mischief or, you know, run a bit wild; they know that from the start. We interview them

at the start and tell them how it's going to be and I find that the response is good; I haven't had a kid yet rebel to me, not yet, anyway, and that is in seven years.

I have seen kids rebel to teachers and tell them to 'eff off' and then nick off over the creek and go up the hill and I can't comment on that because I don't really know what has happened to cause that, but with our approach and the way our volunteers are asked to deal with the kids we don't get that kind of response, and yet we are still very firm. I mean, I am from the old school - can't you tell? So we don't believe in letting them run amok but I do believe in explaining to a kid just what there is about his or her behaviour that is causing the flak that they are getting - and that is the key; most of them are very hungry to find that out.

Mr DEAN - Under the Youth Justice placements, have any of those been directly from Ashley?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - Yes.

Mr DEAN - Have you seen any differences in those youths and the others? Is there anything you could pick up from that?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - Yes, I have. The boy we have at the moment I consider to be quite, in many ways, cowed. He was first put in Ashley at 11, and I didn't know until yesterday any of his Ashley background, but I noticed that he was different.

Mr MARTIN - How old is he now?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - He is 14. He seems to be very controlled in his emotions, especially his facial expressions and his reactions to things, be they good or not so good. He is overly concerned with being reprimanded. For instance, he was digging a post out - he loves doing manual things and we give him a few choices of things that need to be done on the farm; we try to give them choices so that we can tap into their particular interest - and it was fairly warm yesterday and he was working on the post hole and he came up to the house quite distressed. He had got permission from his supervisor who was a youth worker to come to the house - and she is really lovely with the kids, this particular worker - and he said he needed to see me so they came and got me from the office where I was stuck on the computer and I said, 'What's up?' and he said, 'I'm very hot and I don't feel well' - and this kid is a real hard worker.

But he was extremely anxious and I said, 'Sit down for a minute, mate, and talk to me about that', and he just said, 'I feel sick, I feel all sick in the stomach. I'm too hot', and I said, 'Well, that's fine, you sit there and drink your water. Does your supervisor know where you are?' 'Yes'. I said, 'Well, when you feel better, we'll go down and see them but perhaps it's too hot to continue with that job at the moment', and he just looked shocked to me and I thought, 'Crumbs!'. I don't draw any conclusions from that but it is interesting, because we haven't had that that kind of thing before.

There were a couple of other boys who were as wild as mallee bulls and you couldn't take your eye off them for a minute or they would be gone; in fact they did one day, around the corner of the house to have a smoke, which of course they are not allowed to do and they are not allowed to have. That was quite interesting; I am learning a lot up there.

But they weren't cowed, they weren't like this kid, and the other one who had been in Ashley was the same as this boy to some extent but not as much as this boy. With this kid there is something radically holding him back.

Mr MARTIN - I have had a fair bit of experience with a group of kids from the other end of the State and I have views on what I am going to ask you, but with your experience, do you think there is a common trait amongst most of them as to why they have got into a position where they are at risk?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - A reason for their aggression?

Mr MARTIN - Yes.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - Yes, I do. If I had to put my finger on one main contributing factor I would say it is the inability to express appropriately how they are feeling. They express it but not in the way that you and I would recognise as expressing a feeling. They are more likely to go ape. The young lad I am working with who I met in the park is a past Molenda boy, he used to come with the schools. He is now 16 and has quite a drug problem and has become very violent so we are going to send him to the Ted Noffs program where he will do three months' intensive work on all those issues. He himself was saying to me the other day when his mum was sitting there that he gets so uptight and there is so much going on in his head and he is so angry that he doesn't even know how to say it, and even if he did know how to say it, he is not sure people would understand. I thought that spoke volumes and that is a 16-year-old boy, so you can imagine an 11-year-old boy in a home where there is a whole lot of radical stuff going on who is feeling it very much but not able to express it. He wouldn't even be able to get in touch perhaps with why he is feeling like he is.

Mr MARTIN - I find from talking to a lot of them down my way that most of them have been shown very little respect and love in their lives. They have never really experienced love.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - That is right. The Glassier-Makos model we follow stresses very much the importance of respect for these children. If you are going to label them and say, 'You're here for punishment' and we just have to punish them, that is fine and it might make them feel a bit better perhaps about what they have done but it goes nowhere really, in my view, or very little of it goes anywhere towards learning where they are going wrong and being able to take on board the skills to change their behaviour. So I am not saying that they should not be corrected or that there should not be consequential learning because I do believe in that, but I think the way in which you go about expressing that to the disturbed child - and I am going to call them that because they are disturbed - is very important and crucial towards learning and change.

Mr MARTIN - Do you think that happens properly in Ashley?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - I can't comment on that because I have never even been inside Ashley, but if I were to hazard a guess - there is a bit of a joke in our community about that 9-second fence -

Mrs JAMIESON - Oh, it's nine now?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - I am wondering, just from the distance and not having very much information and all that being hearsay, why a boy would go to the trouble of going over a fence that has sharp stuff on it to get out of Ashley two days prior to when he was going to be released and then attract another sentence of perhaps a month or more. Why would that be so, I wonder? The general community is going to be asking why is that so, or the more sensitive ones will; the ones who are just out for punishment won't; they'll say, 'Stick the little brat back in there and lock him up a bit longer or with less light or less food or something'.

Mr MARTIN - Maybe the alternative accommodation they've got back home might not be very good.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - Well, something is going wrong in there, isn't it, to make them that desperate. I find that if you keep the kids well occupied and take a little bit of interest in what their interests are they will respond positively. Surely there is the capacity for that in an institution like Ashley, where you could do vocational preferences or personality profiles. There are all sorts of simple things you can do to find out where a kid's strengths lie and then create some programs that meet those needs accordingly, because if you are going to have them in there and are expecting them to change, you have to do something constructive about getting it.

CHAIR - Rossi, thank you very much for your evidence. Is there any thing you would like to say just in conclusion?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - No, just that I don't have any of the answers and I wish you all the very best.

CHAIR - Thank you very much for coming in. It has been very interesting and we wish you all the best with your endeavours at Molenda. I think Mr Wilkinson has one question.

Mr WILKINSON - I am going to ask a couple of questions if I might, Rossi. Molenda Lodge, as we know, is in the north-west of the State. Are there any similar schools running in the north?

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - We're actually a day centre. Not to my knowledge. We would like to warmly invite you to come and have a look and I think it would be very constructive if you were to interview or have a chat to some of the kids who have been through Molenda and find out from them why it works for them.

Mr MARTIN - Absolutely.

CHAIR - We will take that on notice, thank you.

Mr WILKINSON - It's a day centre; you don't have them overnight, they just come in the daytime.

Ms STOREN-HARRIS - No, they just come in the day.

Mr WILKINSON - Thank you.

CHAIR - Thank you very much and all the best.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.