

five minutes with...

Alan Brennan

Disadvantaged youth in the country lent a helping hand to homeless young people in the city this month with the donation of 500 pumpkins. Grown at Tilbuster Station, an agricultural program run by Pathfinders youth refuge in Armidale (NSW), the vegies were delivered to the Salvos' Oasis Youth Support Network in Sydney to be made into soup. Pathfinders CEO Alan Brennan talks about the work that went into Pathfinders 'pumpkin power' project.

How did the idea of giving away the pumpkins come about?

Pathfinders has been providing supported accommodation to children and young people for more than 30 years—but we recognise that providing accommodation only is simply not enough. As well as needing support and nurturing, they need to feel they belong and are participating in something worthwhile. Pathfinders' working farm for young people at Tilbuster Station provides an opportunity for young people to experience belonging and genuine participation—such as making this decision to take our pumpkins as a gift to young homeless people in Sydney.

Why was it important for the young people at Pathways to donate their produce to other young people?

The donation is an act of compassion and adds a synergy to the Pathfinders' program at Tilbuster Station, where they are able to help homeless youth in the city. It is also about the generosity of our young people who wanted to assist other young people doing it tough.

How did you deliver the pumpkins to Sydney?

Five staff and seven young people travelled to Sydney in our bus. The pumpkins were packed and transported there in one of our staff member's horse float.

Describe how the agriculture program at Tilbuster Station works.

The property is used as a venue to continue and expand upon the work Pathfinders does with at-risk youth and local families. We are working to turn this property into a multi-functional youth and family centre, including developing the property as a working farm for disadvantaged young people.

This year we produced a large range of vegetables, including corn, potatoes, squash, onions and pumpkins. Through this, our young people have learnt valuable agricultural and life skills in cultivating, harvesting and delivering our produce.

How does this program benefit the young people involved?

As well as teaching agriculture and farming, they learn essential life skills to develop their sense of independence and self-esteem. This has been an important factor in showing our young people what they are capable of and how they can give back to their community.

We want to demonstrate the resilience, generosity and compassion of young people and emphasise they aren't looking for handouts, but contributing to the wellbeing of others.

What do you do with the produce you grow?

We supply the vegetables grown at Tilbuster Station to our out-of-home-care residences and our youth refuge in Armidale. Pathfinders has also formed a community partnership with Meals on Wheels in Armidale to supply fresh vegetables to their community kitchen where all the meals for their clients are cooked and delivered fresh daily. We have also supplied pumpkins to nursing homes in Armidale and Glen Innes as well as The Salvation Army soup kitchen in Armidale.

How does this program educate disadvantaged youth about nutritious meals?

While planting, nurturing and harvesting the vegetables, our young people have learnt to prepare healthy meals with the assistance of nutrition students from the University of Newcastle. These students visited Tilbuster and taught them how to prepare and cook nutritious meals, as well as developing a healthy living plan and cook book.

What did the pumpkin soup cooked at Oasis in Sydney taste like?

It was absolutely delicious. Standing under cover at Oasis on a rainy day, many commented that it was the best soup they had tried in years.

Faye Michelson



PATHFINDERS CEO ALAN BRENNAN (LEFT) WITH MAJOR KEITH HAMPTON OF OASIS (RIGHT).