



Years 7-11 Awards Assembly 2019

Over the last two weeks, 13 Year 11 Students, along with Mr Martino, Mrs Pastorelli, Mr Williams and myself, went on our Philippines Immersion. We were also joined by two students and a teacher from St. Joseph's Northam.

During our immersion the students spent time with our NGO (Non-Government Organisations) partners to witness their work in the areas of human rights and development. Our specific intent of this social justice immersion was to walk with young people whose life experiences are much different to those of the Western Suburbs of Perth.

Many of these children we encountered are victims, often before they are born: ie put simply they are born into abject poverty, dislocation and trauma. This includes children aged between 4-15 who have been human trafficked, sexually and physically abused, become addicted to glue or other illicit drugs or been homeless and have, due to their circumstances, been incarcerated..... that is put in jail often for no reason.

On one morning we visited a remand centre for young boys aged between 8-18 with the PREDA Foundation, an NGO who supports and advocates for the human rights of children. The building we entered was the size of three classrooms, two storeys high.

One hundred and fifty young people lived in these cramped conditions. One bedroom housed 49 people!

The purpose of the facility is to hold the occupants in remand as they await trial. For many of them they have been housed there for years. We met a young person who has been there for ten years.

For our immersion students the shock of walking into the facility soon subsided once they engaged in conversation, hearing about their life story and, in the process, shared their own story. I spoke to one young man who had been there 3 years but he was hopeful to be out soon so he could go to school. Another young man had just sat an exam that would give him the opportunity to qualify for College. In all, we shared our dreams, our aspirations,and as a small token, we provided morning tea and two fans that they could use to stymie the searing heat.

POINT OF THIS EXPERIENCE

This experience for our students and staff was life defining in so many ways. Firstly, walking into a jail and introducing yourself to 150 young boys was, in itself, confronting.

Our scenario:

Students from WA, from this community enjoy the privilege, if not right, of a safe home, a good school and a high standard of living, where free will and choice is easily exercised.....

Sharing stories with other young people who are dislocated by their circumstance, not free, do not have a home and or school to go to. or the power and or privilege to get access to a judicial system which is fair, equitable and seeks to serve the rights of young children.

Despite this obvious and glaring divide, everyone in the space interacted and mingled, and shared their life stories. The chasm of life experience dissipated, was broken down by the enthusiasm and hope of young people as their collective aspirations and dreams became the focal point of the experience.

The questions often with no answers linger for our students, and now for us, as I share this experience with you.

- Why is a young person allowed to be confined to a remand centre for 10 years with no trial?
- Why are our circumstances different? Does money, power and location determine your access to privilege and or basic human rights?
- Do the wants of the rich inhibit the needs of the poor?
- Or do the wants of the powerful override the rights of the powerless

Fr Shay Cullen, the founder and leader of PREDA Foundation challenged our students to become advocates for the human rights of children. He said, Faith without good works is pointless. To be a Christian is to act, is to stand up, is to speak out, is to get involved. The dignity, the rights of victims, the rights of children are fundamental to any society. Perhaps best summed up in Matthew's Gospel....

He (Jesus) called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. ³And he said: *"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.*

Today we recognise the achievements of those who have excelled in their academic, sporting and cultural pursuits. We celebrate our Vision for Learning - Shine through Discovery, *let your light shine*, and what it represents - that we in our PK-12 College value learning, value education and the impact it will have on our destiny.

More specifically, our Vision, our Marist school values the individual dignity of each person and the gifts and the talents God has given them and the opportunity they have to *let their light shine*.

The pursuit of excellence is a decision we all have to make - what you do, with what has been given to you is your decision. In this Marist school you, we, have a place, a space where you are valued, you are cared for, loved, cherished, and supported. Education is not a privilege, it is a right. Your aspirations, your dreams are yours to live.

Our hope in this community is that you grow to be critical thinkers, to be advocates, to be change agents, who seek to make a difference in the world. Your time in school is limited but the impact it will have on your life will be defining.

As we rightly affirm and celebrate today, I want all of you to remember the boy sitting in the cramped jail cell, sitting an exam that just might get him a start in life that has already been compromised by his incarceration, and lack of support. Education is a precious gift; nurture it, embrace it, make the most of the opportunities that are afforded to you here preparing you for the journey ahead.

Thank you for the wonderful year that we have had; there are so many lights that shine in each one of you. Thank you to your teachers, your family and friends for the love, support and mentoring they provide every day.

Thank you to those Year 11 Immersion students who took a risk and put themselves time and time again into powerless positions by their experience in the Philippines. May you, may we stand up for the rights of children and seek to make the world a better place to live.

John Finneran
PRINCIPAL