

# Hope and realism in juvenile justice

BY FIONA POWER

IN HIS ROLE AS CATHOLIC Chaplain at the Parkville Youth Justice Precinct, John Shaw takes a long-term approach. "I work out of hope," he says. "Despite all that's happened in these young people's lives, I hope that a light will go on and they will ultimately be OK."

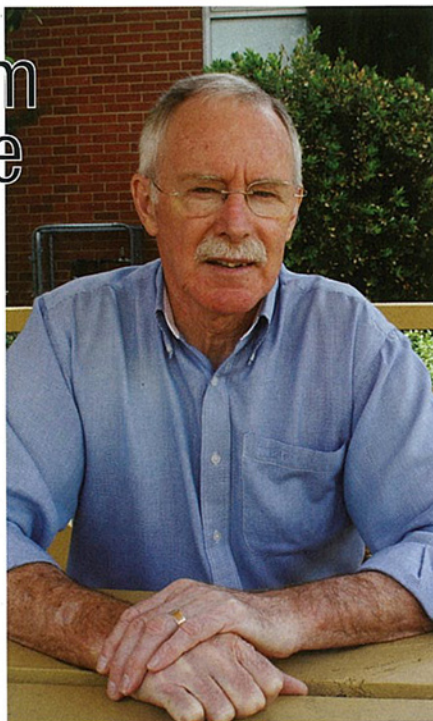
Mr Shaw has been the Catholic Chaplain at Parkville for more than six years. It is one of two chaplaincy positions. The other is filled alternately by the Anglican and Uniting churches. The Catholic Chaplaincy has come under the auspices of Centacare Catholic Social Services Victoria since 1 January 2008, having previously been the responsibility of Catholic Social Services Victoria.

The Parkville Youth Justice Precinct provides custodial accommodation facilities for remanded or sentenced young people in Victoria. The Parkville Youth Residential Centre accommodates boys from 10-14, young women from 10-18 and those 18-21 sentenced to a youth training facility as an alternative to prison. The Melbourne Youth Justice Centre accommodates remanded or sentenced young men from 15-18 and those from 18-21. A third centre for young men aged 18-21, sentenced by the adult courts to youth training centre as an alternative to prison, is at Malmsbury.

In Victoria, unlike other states, youth training centres are operated by the Department of Human Services, rather than the Department of Justice. Mr Shaw believes this affects the approach to young people at the centres. "Our emphasis is definitely on rehabilitation," he says.

Mr Shaw's role as Catholic Chaplain includes holding church and memorial services for deceased friends and relatives, and organising religious support for all faith backgrounds. Fundamentally, it is one of support.

"At base I am a Christian presence in the place," he said. "It is about living the Gospel and being present to



Catholic Chaplain John Shaw at the Parkville Youth Justice Precinct.

PHOTO BY FIONA POWER

vulnerable people."

The young people in the centres are often from disadvantaged and dysfunctional backgrounds. "Most of the young people have practically no family structure behind them," Mr Shaw says. "They're economically, emotionally and socially disadvantaged. Their literacy is poor. They've been neglected, abused – some have intellectual disabilities or acquired brain injuries." Mr Shaw added that many come with drug and alcohol problems.

The residents are ethnically and culturally diverse. There are often many Koori and Pacific Islanders and smaller groups from the Horn of Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Psychological, medical and psychiatric services, and a Koori liaison officer and cultural worker are made available to the residents. A TAFE provides computer and general education programs, as well as pre-apprenticeship training.

Mr Shaw says some take the opportunity to tackle their problems.

"While they are here they can be contained, drug free," Mr Shaw says. "While it can be violent at times, the young people are generally good to deal with. The trouble is they often go back to where they came from. Despite support on the outside they struggle. Often they are

unemployable or tell their employer to 'shove it'."

Mr Shaw says the lack of stability, parental absence, family history with the prison system and a violent social culture compound their vulnerability; and many lack the verbal skills to express their feelings.

"We'll often have quite serious chats about their life and where it's going. I might see the same chap the following day and he doesn't want to know me. He'll have something on his mind. The next day he wants to have another chat. Underneath, they're just normal young people with normal passions and feelings and a great sense of loss and sadness. Their self-esteem is just shot."

One of Mr Shaw's main roles is grief support. "They're very close to death – relatives and friends dying in car accidents, overdoses," he says. "Often I can't do anything but just be with them when they are at their most vulnerable. The more I can connect at that level the more they can start to move and think about their life: 'maybe one day things will be OK' and 'what can I do to make it OK?' They respond to a meditative, quiet mood if you set the scene for them. It's unusual for them – something still amid the chaos."

Mr Shaw says it is easy to be pessimistic but that things would be a lot worse without the centres. "We have to be realistic and keep pushing forward. When we are dealing with humans, it's so messy! Each young person is so different. Some you never get through to. But I believe that if they can meet someone who can be with them, be a fulcrum in their lives, they might just be OK." ■

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