

COURAGE TO CARE
OFFICIAL OPENING – ST. FRANCIS XAVIER
COLLEGE BEACONSFIELD
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“Wuss!”

Who wants to be called a wuss?

In September last year five young men doused petrol on the front door of the Rosebud home of a defenceless loner, known as Smokey, threw some over him as well and then torched it. The consequence was that Smokey sustained burns to 60% of his body.

Part of the plea of the barrister for one of those accused in arguing for the court to show leniency towards his client is quoted as follows.

“He admits he didn’t walk away and he should have, but he was concerned the others would think he was a wuss.”

He was not the main perpetrator, but he was a complicit bystander – a moral choice had been made!

Courage to Care challenges students and others to think about prejudice, racism, discrimination, victimisation and bullying. While acknowledging that it is never easy to stand up for what one knows to be right, nevertheless we confront students with the potential consequences of choosing to be a bystander.

In the Herald Sun the other day reporter, Steve Perkin, wrote how he had been involved in a car crash and while he and the woman in the other car sat there by the side of the road, not one of the passing motorists or witnesses stopped to give assistance or even ask if help was needed! Except one motorist, who slowed and as he drove by swore at them for slowing the traffic and not moving their wrecked cars off the roadway.

He reflected on the contrast between this experience and the heart-warming response that the community has shown to the disastrous bushfires. "Big fire – big help! Little car crash – little interest!"

Unfortunately a day hardly goes by when one reads in the paper or sees on TV another example of individuals choosing to be bystanders.

And yet the Australian community, far and wide, has shown its generosity and its care for others who have suffered through the fires. The entire community has rallied in support of the victims of this tragedy, from the actions of government but more particularly from ordinary people, young and old. We hear of countless stories of the heroism of individuals, the selflessness of so many. A couple of examples:

- the CFA firefighter who having lost his house and all his possessions continued with his unit in fighting the fires.**
- in the fire storm, with visibility down to zero, cars were crashing and people were then stuck in those cars. A driver coming past in another vehicle, already packed full**

of people and dogs, stopped, got out on to the fiery bitumen, pulled the injured man from the crashed car and pushed him into the packed car to get him down the mountain.

Such stories affirm, even in the most cynical of us, the inherent goodness of so many of us human beings.

The Courage to Care Program celebrates the heroism of similar individuals, but very specifically and deliberately, uses as its model, the actions of those known as The Righteous Amongst the Nations – those individuals, families, villages and countries that put their own well being at risk to save Jews during the time of the Holocaust.

These were very special people in times when the worst example of man's inhumanity to man was demonstrated, when prejudice and discrimination was enacted as legislation, leading then to the gradual diminution of human rights towards many groups, to the ultimate horror of the so-called Final Solution to the Jewish Problem.

In this exhibition we pay tribute to a small handful of the heroes of those times, many of whom have a Victorian connection. Their actions serve as the model for our discussions with students about victims, perpetrators, heroes and bystanders.

Having learnt by way of film and personal testimony of those times in Europe 60 – 70 years ago, we encourage the students visiting the program to consider their response to the examples of prejudice and discrimination

that they may see in the school yard or in their wider communities. Are they victims themselves perhaps or are they heroes, standing up for “the other”. Or are they like most of us – not wanting to be seen as a wuss, and so become complicit bystanders.

We hope that for many, having been involved in this program, that they will listen to their conscience when confronted by circumstances that they know to be wrong and find a way to become a hero themselves.

Let me finish by quoting Eli Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, noted author and Nobel Prize winner – “In those times there was darkness everywhere. In heaven and on earth, all the gates of compassion seem to have been closed. The killer killed and the Jews died and the outside world adopted an attitude either of complicity or of indifference. Only a few had the courage to care. These few men and women were vulnerable, afraid, helpless – what made them different from their fellow citizens?... Let us remember: What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor but the silence of the bystander.... Let us not forget, after all, there is always a moment when moral choice is made.... And so we must know these good people who helped Jews during the Holocaust. We must learn from them, and in gratitude and hope, we must remember them.”