

## COURAGE TO CARE OPENING - GEELONG

MONDAY 23<sup>RD</sup>. MARCH 2009

What has Steve Bracks, former Victorian Premier, and his wife Terri got to do with this Exhibition?

Who on earth was Joice Loch and what has she got to do with this Educational Program?

And why do stories from the European Holocaust of 70 odd years ago have relevance to the students of Geelong and other regions throughout Victoria that this exhibition continues to visit?

Let me quote from the award winning Indian author Vikram Seth and then I can try to answer those questions for you.

Seth in his autobiographical work "Two Lives" relates his experience of living as a student with his Indian dentist uncle and the uncle's German Jewish wife. From them Seth learnt of some of the realities of the life for Jews in the Germany of Adolf Hitler. In summarising, he writes – "the Holocaust has lessons for the descendants of the perpetrators, of the bystanders and of the victims, and of those who had nothing to do with it at all. It is not only the lessons of history writ large and the avoidance of gross political errors that can be absorbed.....It is also the lessons of history writ little that may be taken to heart – the sense that the acts and decisions of ordinary individuals, trivial or momentous may lead, sometimes by imperceptible gradations, sometimes by sudden jolts, and not even always in the same direction, towards making the world a humane and reasonably secure home for all its denizens or a riven and uncertain place of grief and injustice, fear, hunger and pain."

Courage to Care, organised by B'nai B'rith – a Jewish service organisation established in the U.S. over 150 years ago - is all about "the history writ little" – the example of those individuals, families, villages and countries in a time of legislated anti-Semitism, racism and discrimination who risked their very lives to take a stand against those distortions of a fair and just society. The example of the acts and decisions of these heroes, most of whom were ordinary individuals continues to serve as a model for every generation.

Already this year over 2000 students from around Beaconsfield and from the De La Salle College in Malvern have participated in this program. Here in Geelong with the help of more than 38 volunteers, including 8 Holocaust survivors, over 1500 students from more than a dozen different schools will be involved.

These students will see a film that gives a context to the stories they will hear. They will hear the experiences of a survivor of those horrible times, many of whom are here to tell their story only because of the actions of one of those recognised as one of the Righteous or one of the many other unsung and unrecognised heroes and heroines.

The Exhibition itself allows the students and other visitors to read and learn the stories of a small sample of these heroic people.

But the main message we seek to deliver is not about the horrors of the Holocaust, but to use the examples the students have learnt about in our discussion groups. Here our goal is to encourage students to consider the relevance of the messages from those times in their world. We are challenging them to consider their own attitudes towards issues such as discrimination, prejudice and intolerance.

- Do they know or have they experienced what it is like to be a victim?
- Do they understand the natures of the human characteristic of prejudice and where this comes from?
- Do they choose to be bystanders in the conflicts that they are witness to in the school yard or in their communities?
- Do they understand why people (including themselves) choose to be bystanders and that this choice, in fact, condones and supports the action of the perpetrator, the bully, the one making the racist remark?
- Do they understand the differences between tolerance and acceptance?

We know that quite apart from the curriculum requirements of many individual subject areas that the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, set by the Victorian Department of Education & Early Childhood Development, expects students to acquire knowledge in an area referred to as Civics &

Citizenship. It is knowledge and awareness in these general areas that hopefully keeps Australia a humane and reasonably secure place for all of us. No reasonable person wants to see a repeat of the Cronulla race driven riots. And, it is particularly in uncertain times, like today, with rising unemployment, loss for some of self respect and of income, that scapegoats are sought and “the other” can become the victim.

So what about the Bracks’ – returning home to Williamstown across the Westgate Bridge recently they noticed a man attempting to climb the fence at the side of the bridge. Here comes the moral choice – do they act as if they saw nothing, do they act as if they had simply imagined what they had seen, do they drive on because it is too difficult to stop or do they decide to stop?

They chose to stop and Terri Bracks walked over to the distressed man and started to talk with him, to calm him, to stop him from taking his own life. Subsequently, with the help of two other passers-by, the man was restrained, police were called and he was taken appropriately to hospital for assessment. An example of choosing not to be a bystander! Would any of us have taken the same action?

And who was Joice Nankivell Loch, described by her biographer as Australia’s most heroic woman. She was born during a cyclone in Ingham Queensland in 1887 and grew up in poverty as the daughter of an unlucky and unsuccessful farmer both in Queensland and here in Gippsland. After marrying, she left Australia in 1919, headed for England. She had an adventurous life, a life that was very much devoted to helping “the other” – first in Ireland as a journalist , then in Poland which had been devastated by war with Russia, then in Greece helping the 1½ million refugees from Turkish persecution. Finally in an action known as Operation Pied Piper that started in Bucharest Rumania in September 1940, she led a group of over 1000 Jews and Poles that sailed from there to Istanbul, to Mersin in Turkey, to Cyprus and finally to safety and survival in Haifa in the then British Mandated Palestine. A truly courageous, remarkable and, within Australia, virtually unknown heroine! She died at the age of 95 in Greece where she and her husband had eventually settled. At her funeral she was described as one of the most significant women of the 20<sup>th</sup>. century.

“It is the lessons of history writ little that may be taken to heart – the sense that the acts and decisions of ordinary individuals, trivial or momentous may lead, sometimes by imperceptible gradations, sometimes by sudden jolts, and not even always in the same direction, towards making the world a humane and reasonably secure home for all its denizens or a riven and uncertain place of grief and injustice, fear, hunger and pain.”

These are the lessons that we feel the next generation should learn from the earliest possible age.

This exhibition will be open to the community each day that we are here at Clonard College from 9am to 4pm and on Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup>. April from 6 – 8pm.

On Monday 6<sup>th</sup> April and the morning of Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup>. April, the exhibition will be at the Waterfront campus of Deakin University with a Public Forum there at 4.30pm on that Monday.