

Eye Contact inspires an empathetic mindset

Manie Strydom

As I write this, I have my office door open. In the distance, I can see a large display board, maybe six feet tall. On it is a black and white image of a man called Scott. His head is cradled in his hands.

Scott's image is part of an exhibition on homelessness called *Eye Contact*, curated by the Rotary Clubs of Perth and Heirisson, and hosted around Wesley College. The exhibition contains twenty stunning portraits of Western Australians who have experienced time living without housing.

The images are haunting. The focus on each person's eyes draws the viewer in, encouraging us to ask how could this have happened, and what action are we prepared to take to help?

The exhibition would stand out wherever it was on display, but here at Wesley College, the disparity between the life enjoyed by our students and the experiences of the *Eye Contact* subjects is especially stark.

Our students live in a world of great privilege - they know it too. Not because they are told that they are superior, thanks to the advantages they've been given - but because of the exact opposite.

An intrinsic part of a Wesley education is embracing the Uniting Church ethos of serving the community. To act with God alongside the oppressed, the hurt and the poor. Day in and day out, students at the College are asked to consider how they can help others. They understand that it's their duty to seek out those in need and to extend a helping hand.

This starts in the Junior School with, among other things, the *Uniting WA Cosy Toes Winter Sock Appeal* and the conversations that take place around homelessness and where the socks will be distributed.

In the Middle School, Wesley has a program called *Katitjin* - a unique experience where Year 8 students leave our campus for a term and relocate to the CBD to take part in a number of workshops helping people dealing with homelessness and disability. The students spend time at Uniting WA's Tranby Day Centre and see first-hand that their actions directly affect their community.

By the time the students reach the Senior School, they have been allocated specific community service hours which they are expected to fulfil. The boys help in many innovative ways, but common placements include Uniting WA, the South Perth Senior Citizens Centre,

the Cancer Council, Tangaroa Blue and the Red Cross Soup Patrol.

So, Scott's image grabs the attention of the young minds at Wesley, not because they feel better than Scott - but because it's their instinct to empathise and consider what they can do. It's a mindset in the spirit of the Uniting Church and at Wesley College that should be celebrated.

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