

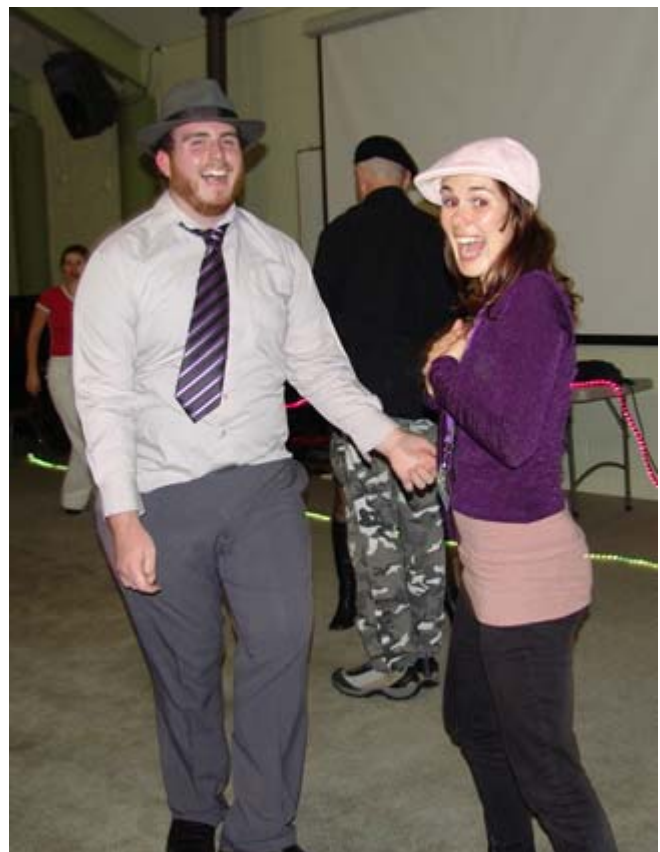
Just Do What You Can – Young Carer Project

by Laird Darren Gallagher

With the world being so full of hustle and bustle, and more so than ever time really being of the essence, many of us find it hard to take on anything new. For families, it could be the children's sport or music lessons that takes up most of their time. Consider this for a moment - If you have four people in the family and each person has something that they do in their downtime, then it can become a real mission just to get to that one-hour piano lesson, soccer training or charity meeting. Lately, I have found myself discarding the term, 'I'll do that in my spare time' and replacing it with, 'I'll do that when I get time', and, believe me, there is a difference.

Last year, I became aware of the Young Carers camps that are run by Carers NSW and I thought to myself, 'Gee, this is something that I'd really like to have a hand in somewhere'.

To give you a quick overview, Carers NSW is an association for relatives and friends who are caring for people with a disability, mental health problem, chronic condition or who are aged and frail. They are a non-government, non-profit, apolitical organisation incorporated under the Associations Incorporation Act (NSW).



The Young Carer Project, formed 11 years ago, was developed to make a positive difference to the lives of young carers (25 years and under) and their families.



Young Carers are children and young people who care for and support a family member who has a long-term physical illness, mental illness, disability, drug or alcohol problem. The Young Carer Project aims to: promote the issues and needs of young carers through state-wide programs; develop a young carer support network in partnership with relevant agencies and schools; coordinate a variety of young carer activities in the short term; support referrals to local services who can assist young carers and their families; develop and distribute other appropriate resources; and review and evaluate existing support activities.

The camps themselves consist of activities such as skiing, drumming, water sports, playing games, dancing (*which, for those who remember our Winter 2006 edition of dfm, is where I fit in*) and doing other things that they might not get the opportunity to do often because of their caring role. Camps are a great chance for young carers to meet other young people who care for a family member with an illness or disability. Young Carers are able to make new friends and have time away from their caring role. They get time to talk about what it's like to be a young carer and to think about what support they may need or want. Young carers often say that they come away from camp feeling more relaxed and better able to deal with issues that come up in life.

So, I thought about the idea of just doing what I can, where I can and when I can. Because my wife and I are (amongst other things) dance teachers, I volunteered our services should the camp need them, and Kylie Brown of Carers NSW was more than happy to take me up on the offer. Through a twist of fate, at a representational ANZAC Day school visit, I began talking to Abbey Van Capelle, a Blaxland High School Student and recipient of an ADF Long Tan Leadership Award in 2007. She has been involved in dance at the school and indicated that she would love to come and help us out. So my wife Tova, Abbey and another RAAF volunteer, Flying Officer Luke Headley, packed up our sound gear and all headed down to the camp which was held in the beautiful Royal National Park just south of Sutherland in Sydney.

What I marvelled at, apart from these bright and clearly courageous young children, was the cross section of places who provide support for the project. It is funded through the NSW Carers Program and is administered by the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care. However, at the camp, the counsellors (who were all volunteers) ranged from off-duty police officers to university students, plus a whole bunch of qualified counselling staff to handle the specialised components. The real benefits for the young people who come to the camps are as individual as the young people themselves. Common themes from the feedback suggest that the benefits are simply the opportunity for carefree time-out from their caring role; increased social contact and reduced isolation; the opportunity to develop peer relationships and gain support from other carers; and, above all, the ability to seek professional support and guidance both during and after the camp with the appropriate referral.

Now this is the important bit. One of the big obstacles that Carers NSW faces is actually identifying the children who really need the support provided by this camp. If you know someone who you think might be a young carer, you can find out more information by contacting the Young Carer team on 1800 242 636, or by visiting their website.

Young Carers: www.youngcarersnsw.asn.au

Our bit on the night was easy, because all we had to do was make it fun and help them to get to know each other by hosting a dance. I'll confess to having had a great time myself, although I'm now acutely aware of just how uncool I am! It's a good thing we had Abbey along as youth liaison, or we might have really been in trouble. We taught a fun dance lesson and then played DJ for a great dance party for all the kids. Having now made that contact, I have volunteered our services for the camp in coming years. What the camp has really emphasised to me personally is that many hands truly do make light work, and I can spare one night a year to do this for the camp. There is certainly no requirement for every member of our community to be involved in everything, but as long as we all just do what we can, then I think we will certainly get a better outcome for everybody.

Yours in dancing and un-cool related matters,

Ciao for now.