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25 YEARS OF CHANGING LIVES

Ballarat-based KIDS Foundation helps children who have experienced trauma and teaches others how to stay safe

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SAFE: KIDS Foundation founder Susie O'Neill surrounded by Seemore Safety paraphernalia, the teaching toys used to give pre-schoolers the skills to assess risk and keep themselves safe. **Picture:** Kate Healy



RETURNING SMILES TO KIDS

Susie O'Neill was a trainee teacher when she noticed a little girl with cigarette burns on her hands. That encounter more than 25 years ago turned her world around, and in turn she's changing the future for thousands of Australian children. MICHELLE SMITH reports.

SUSIE O'Neill believes everything happens for a reason, even really horrible events that irrevocably change the lives of innocent children.

It's that life-affirming positivity in the face of trauma that has fuelled her passion for turning around the lives of vulnerable Australian children.

Ms O'Neill's KIDS Foundation, which celebrates its 25th anniversary today, looks after children who are survivors of traumatic injury and works to prevent injury – the leading cause of death among children in Australia.

The special children whose lives she touches, and who touch hers, have experienced horrific trauma from fire, car accidents, dog attacks, violence, crime, abuse and other tragedy.

Some of their injuries are confronting and disfiguring while others are hidden, but all have a massive impact on their lives.

At KIDS Foundation camps they learn there are others like them who "get" what they go through.

"Out or everything bad comes something good. You've always got to find the positive

that comes out of that situation and I suppose ... I believe there's a reason for things that happen and that a lot of people who deal with hardship have strength that some others may not," Ms O'Neill said.

"You've got to harness what is positive out of a situation and build on it."

It's a philosophy that spurred her to work with at-risk children after encountering a young girl with cigarette burns on her hands. Soon after she met a 12-year-old boy recovering from injury in a ward at the Queen Elizabeth Centre with three elderly men because, at that time, Australia had no rehabilitation centres for children.

So she decided to act and, on September 1, 1993, the KIDS Foundation was born.

The foundation's work first began with a safety education and injury prevention program aimed at primary school pupils, then moved in to recovery programs.

In 2000 the foundation opened its first child rehabilitation unit Pete's Place at the QE Centre. Its first patient was a burn survivor who, when it was time to return home, could not find a support network to help his recovery. Ms O'Neill then started the Burn

Survivors' Network.

Out of a non-descript grey office in Burnbank St, Ballarat, Ms O'Neill's KIDS Foundation now has a national reach and currently has about 120,000 children in its recovery and prevention programs.

That number will increase further after the foundation received \$1 million from this year's federal budget to roll out their SeeMore Safety prevention program to more kindergartens across Australia.

That program equips children in kindergartens with the skills to safely explore the world around them, assess risk and drive injury prevention and safety in their family homes.

"The government has provided us with funding to go in to 5000 kinders and about 180,000 Australian homes ... which is extremely rewarding but it hasn't come easily," she said.

It's the result of 10 years of research, during which time Ms O'Neill completed her PhD in education at Monash University titled *Developing Safety Risk Intelligence in Children* and had research published in international journals.

weekender.



LEFT: Dress-ups were the order of the day when KIDS Foundation camp participants visited HMAS Ballarat on the West Australian coast.

BELOW: Susie O'Neill with some of the children who are part of the extended KIDS Foundation family.

ABOVE: KIDS Foundation participants from Western Australia had a visit to the HMAS Ballarat, which is a strong supporter of the organisation.

"It's recognition not just for what we do for children or helping children to understand their capability, but in changing family practices," she said.

"Our theory is kids have a great education and we have to give them the right opportunities. I don't believe in bubble wrapping children. We should give them lots of experiences so they learn how to manage risk rather than us protecting them from risk."

It's important work, with research showing more than 5000 Australian children are injured in accidents every day, including more than 100 who require hospitalisation.

The bright yellow Seemore Safety mascot, dolls, books and paraphernalia that are the key to the safety program are everywhere around the KIDS Foundation head office, ready to be distributed to kinders and children taking part in the program.

While Ms O'Neill can't meet every child who takes part in the safety program, it's a different story for the survivors, most of whom she gets to know on annual camps.

The foundation holds six camps each year - a family camp in Queensland and survivor camps in Victoria, NSW, Queensland, South

Australia and Western Australia.

At the survivors camps, which usually have 30 to 50 young participants, children are paired with volunteer adult buddies and take part in lots of fun activities.

"We have kids for life, even if they don't come on camp every year," Ms O'Neill said.

"A lot of the children we support have very supportive families and therefore with the right support can progress, but then we have children in unhealthy family environments that probably gain the most from you but need your continued support.

"They can all flourish with support."

The stories of each and every one of them form a part of Ms O'Neill's own story, and many of those who received support from the foundation in its early years have gone on to be successful and have families of their own.

"We had a little girl who had been burnt in a house fire. Many years later her mum and dad separated, she went to live with dad, he went to work and she lived with another family member but was abused and ran away to a women's refuge.

"We found her, brought her in and placed

her with another burn survivor family. She went on to do school there and was doing really well but was involved in another car accident."

Another young boy who was horrifically burned in a hot water explosion, sustaining 85 per cent full thickness burns and 95 per cent burns in total, has a special place in her heart.

"Dalton probably had the highest injury of burns we've seen. He inspired the younger children on camp where he learned to swim and basically did everything, if not in his wheelchair he dragged himself along the ground. He really had a can-do attitude." Sadly, Dalton Moule drowned, aged 14, in the 2010 Gattton floods.

Sometimes children need help feeling comfortable in their own homes.

"We have been really successful in being able to assist children through post traumatic stress disorder by helping put strategies in place," she said.

"For example if kids are having nightmares, we sometimes go in to their home, reset their bedroom, bring in calming things like salt lamps and music and make sure the

environment they are in is totally different to the environment that may be associated with the trauma.

"Then we put together a pattern of what time to go to bed, what they should do before they go to bed to be calm before they go to sleep, then we check in each day and maybe on night one they slept in the room on their own, night two them went to bed on time and night three they slept and felt okay."

The hope that the camps and support bring to survivors is life-changing.

"If you ask a survivor in our program, many say they wouldn't want their life to have changed because they believe they are part of a big family - that KIDS Foundation is an extended family for them that has brought other opportunities in life."

Several years ago it was Ms O'Neill herself who needed assistance. While training for an Ironman event, a fellow athlete who was a GP noticed her heart rate was too high. Investigations revealed a tumour on a heart valve, which led to open heart surgery. "Ironman saved my life. The tumour would have killed me if I didn't find it," she said.