

December 2014 - A PEEP at Christmas

It was a time for play, fun, singing and good cheer at the Benalla Rocket Park when about 170 parents, babies and young children gathered for Tomorrow:Today's early years Christmas Party.

The children gave the play equipment a strenuous work out while their watchful parents enjoyed a chat and a catch up. A yummy sausage sizzle and tasty fruit platters were provided and there was, of course, a special visit from Santa. Each child received a lovely book and it was pleasing to see so many of the parents immediately begin to read with their children.

"It was a fantastic morning with all the families coming together to celebrate the end of another wonderful year of PEEP," Tomorrow:Today Foundation executive officer Pat Claridge said.

PEEP, Parents Early Education Partnership, is free to all Benalla and district families with young children: babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers and it is coordinated by Tomorrow:Today Foundation. Six sessions are offered weekly at the Tomorrow:Today Foundation in Nunn Street and a Thursday morning session takes place at Waller Street campus of Benalla P-12 College.

PEEP's main focus is on supporting parents as their child's first educator, but it is also a great way for families to socialise, share their knowledge and experiences and to access a wide variety of information and support from the program's many local professional partners. These include Benalla Health, Benalla Rural City, state government departments and local schools and kindergartens.

Anyone interested in finding out more about PEEP can phone PEEP Coordinator Cath Warnock on 5762 1211 or 0419 882 504 or email admin@tomorrowtoday.info.



October 2014 - Connect9 students rapt with progress made

A great get-together was held recently at Benalla Airport to mark the conclusion of the seventh Tomorrow:Today Foundation Connect9 program. Connect9 is a mentoring program for students in Year 9. Students are individually matched with a well-connected local volunteer who gives their time to support the young person to learn new skills, try a new sport or hobby, investigate career options and build their local connections.

Research has shown that programs such as this improve student wellbeing by helping young people to feel more part of their community, and also increase the likelihood of them continuing their education.

The 12 latest Connect9 participants, their mentors, families and friends gathered at the Benalla Gliding Club for a barbecue lunch to celebrate the completion of the 10 week program. Earlier in the morning the young people enjoyed the concluding activity for Connect9, a free glider flight, giving them a birds-eye view of their home town.

In kicking off the formal part of the proceedings, Tomorrow:Today Foundation Executive Officer Pat Claridge thanked the many partners who assist with the program, Benalla P-12 College, FCJ College, Benalla YMCA, Benalla Library and Friends of the Library, Benalla Gliding Club as well as many other local clubs and sporting groups who offer try out sessions for the young people. She commended the students and their families for committing to the program and made special mention of the mentors who gave so freely of their time, talents and expertise to support youth in our community.

Following the barbecue it was time to hear from the mentors and their young charges about their experiences over the preceding 10 weeks. The students all indicated that they really enjoyed the program and were especially grateful to their mentors. One young man raised a laugh when he commented, "Well from this experience I learned I am terrible at lawn bowls," but went on to add "My favourite part was getting out into the workforce in Benalla and going to SP Ausnet".

A number of young people mentioned that they had enjoyed meeting new people and trying new things. The mentors were also fulsome in their praise of the program, saying that they had learnt as much as the mentees, and that that it gave them a new appreciation for the young people in our community.

Anyone interested in becoming a Connect9 mentor in 2015 can contact Cathy Hair, Student Wellbeing Coordinator at Tomorrow:Today Foundation on 5762 1211.



September 2014 - Let's read 10,000

Can the Benalla community read 10,000 stories to our babies and young children aged 0 to 8 by November 30? That is the challenge laid down by Tomorrow:Today Foundation in partnership with other members of the Benalla Early Years Network.

The Challenge follows a trial in 2013 where Tomorrow:Today introduced "Let's Read, Benalla." Parents and carers participating in the Foundation's Early Years programs were invited to see how many books they could read to their young charges between September and December. Benalla families proved they were champion readers with more than 6,000 children's stories read in just 15 weeks.

Three year old Lucas enjoyed more than 500 stories during the 2013 challenge. Mum Nicole said it was not too hard to get those kinds of numbers. "Lucas loves his stories. We have always shared books with him from a very early age", Nicole said. "We know how important it is for his development, but it's also become a very special time we enjoy sharing together."

Reading stories together fosters closer relationships, helps develop early language and communication skills, aids concentration and the development of logical thinking and is directly linked to children doing well at school. Research funded by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development found the positive outcomes occurred in children regardless of parental income, education level or cultural background. Children who are read to more often keep doing better as they age than other children.

A number of Year 9 students from Benalla P-12 College are participating in the 2014 initiative by reading weekly to children at Kids' Cottage day care centre and Munro Avenue Preschool.

The launch of "Let's Read Benalla - 10,000 stories by Christmas 2014" took place during Book Week, with free 'Let's Read, Benalla' folders being distributed around the town. Everyone with young children is invited to get involved. So come on Benalla, help share 10,000 stories with our babies and young children by Christmas. Pick up your free reading folder from Tomorrow:Today Foundation, Maternal & Child Health, your school, pre-school or day care centre. For more information, phone Tomorrow:Today Foundation on 5762 1211.



September 2014 - Students evolve

An enthusiastic group of Benalla teenagers undertook a five-week paid, part-time work course offered by NE TRACKS Local Learning and Employment Network in partnership with the Tomorrow:Today Foundation. It was the fourth program the organisations have partnered in since the inception of the pilot program late in 2012.

The course focuses on teaching young people how to go about applying for part-time work, how to approach employers and how to present themselves for job interviews. The five weeks of training are held after school on Tuesday evenings from 4pm to 7.30pm at NE TRACKS LLEN where the students are expected to behave like young adults and to demonstrate the behaviours of prospective employees.

Ten local employers have given time and valuable information to assist the students to practice interviews, cold-call on businesses and give general advice about expectations they have for their young employees. The students practised doing online job applications, researched their employability skills and developed their covering letters and resumes.

Khyra Rheese from Estancia Garden and Gifts has supported all four programs during the past three years because she believes the opportunity for young people to acquire paid part-time work after school hours plays a vital role in assisting them to mature into valuable employees later on.

A highlight of the program is to have former participants return and talk about their experiences in part-time work or traineeships. Program leaders Louise Wright and Keith Wrest described a presentation by former group member Zac, who is in Year 11 at Benalla P-12 College as an "inspirational and outstanding speech".

The program culminated yesterday with a graduation ceremony. Following the graduation, support and follow up will be given to the students as they start their search for part-time work.

Local employers wishing to offer paid part-time work (up to 10 hours per week after school or weekends) to any of the course graduates should phone the NE TRACKS LLEN office on 5762 7777 to discuss their requirements.

September 2014 - Career guidance on offer

Benalla-born street art curator Shaun Hossack returns to town next week as guest speaker at the Benalla Jobs, Skills, Careers and Volunteers Expo.

The whole-of-community expo will feature jobs, skills and volunteer engagement opportunities in the municipality all under the one roof. More than 40 employers, further education providers, community groups and government agencies will be on hand to offer jobs, skills and training opportunities, while on the main stage a range of seminars will offer practical advice for those seeking new beginnings.

One hundred and thirty Year 10 students from local schools will be participating in their Careers Day in the morning before visiting the expo in the afternoon. Two highlights of the day include the launch of the online North East Victorian Jobs Hub at 1.45pm, plus guest speaker Shaun Hossack's involvement in Fitzroy's Street Art on the main stage at 5.15pm.

The recently formed Benalla Street Art Committee will also be on hand to discuss its vision for Benalla to become the regional street art capital of Australia and ways the community can get involved.

The expo has something for everyone; businesses, job seekers, school leavers, those returning to work or looking for a career change. The expo is free and will be held on Wednesday September 17 between 2pm and 6.30pm at the Lakeside Community Centre, Benalla (showgrounds/football club).

The Benalla Jobs, Skills, Careers and Volunteers Expo 2014 is an initiative of the Benalla Rural City Council, Tomorrow:Today Foundation and North East Tracks Local Learning and Employment Network.



Photo: Courtesy of Benalla Ensign

August 2014 - Students connecting

“I loved the Masterchef Challenge. I got to meet a lot of people and make some delicious food.” That was the enthusiastic comment from a student who recently completed Tomorrow:Today Foundation’s 10 week Connect9 program.

Eleven year nine students were matched with 11 community mentors who gave their time, skills and expertise to connect the students to a wide range of sports, hobbies and career opportunities they might otherwise not have been able to access.

Research shows that if young people feel positive about themselves and are connected with their local community, they have a greater chance of successfully completing school and finding careers.

The Connect9 Program features an ‘Amazing Race’ around Benalla Library, free 10 week admission to the Benalla Aquatic Centre, a Masterchef Session at Benalla College’s Stephanie Alexander Kitchen, a life/career planning session and even a glider flight over Benalla.

Each week young people get to try a different activity focused on fun and stepping a little bit out of their comfort zone. The activities foster fitness and skill development, planning and organisation, teamwork and cooperation. Interestingly, feedback from students who recently completed the program nominated the best things about the program as ‘connecting’, their mentors and the glider flight.

More than 80 young people and over 50 mentors have participated in Connect9 since it was developed by Tomorrow:Today Foundation in 2011. Many of the mentors have assisted with the program multiple times as they gain so much enjoyment from it. “Connect9 is a great opportunity for young people to explore their passions and set them on the path to careers that make sense,” one mentor said.

Tomorrow:Today will run two Connect9 programs in 2015. Benalla residents interested in being mentors can phone Cathy Hair at Tomorrow:Today Foundation on 03 57621211 for more information.



July 2014 - Program completed

Benalla P-12 College parents and carers celebrated the completion of their Work Pathways for Parents program last month. The program had six weeks of workshops including espresso coffee making, responsible serving of alcohol, computer skills, job seeking skills and information about applying for work.

Based on Boston's Parent University program researched by Benalla P-12 College staff, this was the third group of graduates. Program coordinator Sue Oakley said feedback from parents, carers and grandparents was positive.

"Not only did participants enjoy learning new skills, but they also identified that this program gave them more confidence and built their self-esteem," she said. "Thanks must go to the Tomorrow:Today Foundation. Without their financial support we would not be able to deliver this quality, inclusive program."

During the past few weeks Benalla P-12 College has been proud to share this program with the wider Victorian educational community. This has included a visiting researcher from University of Melbourne and a formal presentation to career practitioners from government and non-government schools in the north-east region.



July 2014 - Options explored

Students from Benalla P-12 College and FCJ College gained a greater understanding of further study options after a visit to Universities in Melbourne last month. Ninety local students toured University of Melbourne in Parkville, Latrobe University Bundoora, Deakin University and Monash University Clayton campuses.

Remoteness from big cities, lack of transport options and reduced economic circumstances mean that country students often struggle to explore all available options for further study, in particular how to choose a university course, fund their university studies and how to find a place to live.

Benalla Rural City Council project worker Amanda Aldous, organised former Benalla students who are now at university to join the tours when they reached Melbourne.

“This trip was a great chance for current students to meet a number of former local students, including Claire Thomas, Ben Sidhu, Katrina O'Brien, James Morrow, Anna Sonogan and Jacob Chacko,” FCJ College careers teacher Tim Gerrish said. “It is great to see former students do well and inspire our current Year 12s.”

Benalla Rural City is establishing the Country2City mentoring program across Benalla and Mansfield, where current Year 12 students are linked with university students originally from both towns who can offer a bit of support in the first few months of their course.

FCJ College Year 12 student Alexandra Muller said the trip had helped her make up her mind on which university to go to. “It was really helpful to be able to talk to student mentor Erin Ritchie who is studying the course I am interested in (arts/law) at Deakin.”

Benalla P-12 College careers teacher Ann Forster said the knowledge gained during these trips made a big impact on the transition of students from school to university. “We found that some students who had not previously considered that university was for them, changed their minds because they could see it can be possible,” she said.

Tomorrow:Today Foundation provided funding for the buses and co-ordinated the day in conjunction with the schools, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Benalla Rural City.

“Surveys completed by students on the way home showed that most had gained information that would help them make an enrolment decision later on. For us as organisers, that is what it is all about,” trip co-ordinator Sabine Smyth said.



June 2014 - Youth forum planned

Article by Monique Freer, Benalla Ensign

The issue of youth mental health and wellbeing will be in the spotlight next month at a Benalla forum. The Youth Mental Health Forum is the first of its kind in Benalla and district, and is based on the successful model adopted in Albury-Wodonga in recent years.

The idea was in part borne from Benalla Rural City's Youth Strategy, which identified mental health as a major concern for young people in Benalla.

"The Youth Strategy brought it to the surface as being the highest priority for young people," Benalla Rural City Council's community development coordinator Leanne Robb said. "The Youth Strategy was what young people were telling us. One question on the survey was around what they saw as the highest priority for themselves. Mental health and bullying came out really loud and clear; they came out as priority actions."

However, the idea for a forum was also promoted by You Otter Be Happy, a student-led group that formed last year to promote greater awareness of mental health and wellbeing within the community. A You Otter Be Happy representative is on the steering committee for the Youth Mental Health forum, as well as stakeholders from Benalla Rural City, NE Tracks LLEN, Tomorrow:Today Foundation, Benalla Health, NECAMS, Mental Illness Fellowship and a local disability advocacy group.

"There's been a very strong partnership to get this going," Ms Robb said. "One of the key aims of the forum is to generate interest in young people to develop ideas, activities and programs so that they can go back to their own respective schools and community and improve the mental health and wellbeing of all students."

Ms Robb said 50 Years 9 and 10 students from Benalla P-12 College and FCJ College would be invited to the event, along with 20 students from other facilities. Sydney-based group Mind Blank will facilitate the morning program, which is based around de-stigmatising mental health issues.

"We want it to be dynamic, youth-friendly and high energy," Ms Robb said.

In the afternoon session there will be a question and answer panel with local providers and Benalla residents with experience of mental health issues.

"The kids will have the opportunity to put questions in a box or ask from the floor if they feel comfortable," Ms Robb said. "They will then break into groups to workshop what they can take back to their schools."

Ms Robb said brainstorming would take place with the support of key teachers from the schools, and there would be lots of practitioners on hand to facilitate 'break-out spaces' if any students found the day overwhelming.

"It's a very supported model," Ms Robb said. "We hope that this model will now grow. It's a starting point and we hope it will create dialogue with schools. We hope the next step is to grow broader."

The Youth Mental Health Forum will be held on Tuesday July 22 at the Benalla Lakeside Community Centre.

May 2014 - Parents learn new skills

Benalla P-12 College parents and carers went 'back to school' last week when they participated in the "Work Pathways for Parents" program.

The first session involved a workshop on espresso coffee making and food hygiene delivered by Carmela Fasano from The Centre, Wangaratta.

During the next few weeks the course will include topics such as Responsible Serving of Alcohol, computer skills, job seeking skills and applying for work.

The program is designed to provide opportunities for parents, grandparents and carers to meet together in a positive learning environment.

Program coordinator Sue Oakley said the program was based on the very successful Parent University that staff from Benalla P-12 College researched in Boston last year.

"Increased involvement of families in education is shown to increase student attendance and aspirations for future pathways," Ms Oakley said.

"We are pleased, once again, to work in partnership with the Tomorrow:Today Foundation which provides financial support to deliver this program."



March 2014 - Blokes needed as mentors

The Tomorrow:Today Foundation is hoping to recruit at least four local men as mentors before their next Connect9 mentoring program commences in April. “Our mentor induction and training session is scheduled for April 1 and by then we hope to have a male mentor for every young male who registers for the program,” Tomorrow:Today’s Volunteer coordinator Sabine Smyth said. “Young men around the age of 14 to 15 years really benefit from a relationship with a supportive male adult in addition to their dad.”

Connect9 is a short term program that allows men and women to link with a local teenager for a fun 10 week experience that has positive outcomes for both. Connect9 is unique because it is run by Benalla people for Benalla’s teenagers. The program is designed to offer students different experiences such as trying out new sports and hobbies, but there is also a strong focus on help with career decisions, such as organising a visit to a work place and talking to people in the careers that interest them.

Students can choose the activities that appeal most. The program is varied and exciting, with access to many unusual experiences and places. It is supported by a number of Benalla clubs and organisations including the Benalla Aquatic Centre YMCA and the Gliding Club of Victoria.

Mentors usually find that they have just as much fun as the students and learn more about what is available in their community. Mentors and students also get plenty of support from Tomorrow:Today staff who organise group events and help with planning individual activities.

Ms Smyth said as well as being fun for the students, it is particularly the supportive relationship with a mentor that changes a young person’s life. “A mentor can have a profound impact on a young person just by caring and joining them on their journey through the program.”

While Tomorrow:Today currently has sufficient female mentors registered, males are a bit more difficult to find. Tomorrow:Today would be delighted to hear from local men who are interested in helping Benalla teenagers.

A mentor induction session will be held on 1st April at Shop 10 Cecily Court. To register for the session, phone Tomorrow:Today Foundation on (03) 5762 1211 or e-mail admin@tomorrowtoday.info.

February 2014 - Buddies help literacy

Article by Monique Freer, Benalla Ensign

A Benalla reading program will be extended to more schools across the district after evaluation found it was improving students' literacy. The Reading Buddies program, a partnership between Tomorrow:Today Foundation and Benalla P-12 College, began in 2011 at the College's Avon Street campus. It provides early intervention for identified students in Prep, Grade 1 and 2, helping students before they fall behind and begin to lose confidence in their literacy abilities.

An evaluation by University of Melbourne last year found that many of the young students involved in the program had achieved significant growth in literacy levels and academic confidence.

"Benalla can be rightfully excited about the positive results that the program is achieving," Tomorrow:Today Foundation Student Wellbeing Co-ordinator Cathy Hair said. "One of the goals of Tomorrow:Today Foundation is to measurably improve Benalla children's literacy and numeracy levels."

The program involves volunteer reading buddies coming to the school at regular times each week to spend time reading, writing and listening with their young charges.

Benalla P-12 College Avon Street campus program co-ordinator Tannis Brooks said the personal connection between an adult volunteer and the student was as valuable as the academic support they offer. "The children look forward to the days their Reading Buddies come and establish a special relationship with them."

Every reading buddy is matched to just one student, enabling the student to receive one-on-one attention and assistance. Tomorrow:Today Foundation sources and supports local community volunteers and Benalla P-12 College co-ordinates the delivery of the program, providing training for the volunteer buddies.

In 2013, the program was extended to St Joseph's Primary School and this year it will be expanded again to include Benalla P-12 College's Waller Street campus.

"We have an amazing group of volunteers already donating their time and talents," Ms Hair said. "Expanding the program to the Waller Street campus means a significant number of new buddies will need to be recruited. We are appealing to people in the Benalla community who want to make a difference in the lives of young students to come and assist with the program."

For more information about the Reading Buddies Program or how to become a volunteer, phone Sabine Smyth or Cathy Hair on 57621211.

