

Street kid busts out and beats the odds



REACHING OUT: Youth worker Esben Kaas and Street Connect success story Rocky (foreground) with youth outreach worker Scott Nodwell and youths (background). *Source: PerthNow*

ROCKY'S redemption started with a Vegemite sandwich. At the time she was 16 and living on the city streets after running away from a tumultuous home life.

Dressed in black, with kohl-rimmed eyes and dark-painted lips, Rocky was trying to survive with only a backpack of possessions.

"You just lived day by day," she said. "I was very sick, and very tiny. There were so many bigger, older men, so I was constantly terrified.

"I used to sleep in car parks behind the air conditioning vents or in squats in abandoned buildings.

"It was never an hour of sleep straight; it was 10 minutes here or there.

"You'd get moved on by police all the time. They'd see your bleeding arms and take you to hospital, the hospital would stitch you up and send you on your way. They didn't have the facilities for someone to be there with me and help me."

After months of eating only day-old food donated by a local bakery, Rocky, who doesn't want her full name published, reached breaking point. She was with a group in Forrest Chase when one of the girls took them to the Street Connect bus, where youth workers were handing out Vegemite sandwiches.

Rocky started returning to the bus regularly, and her life started to turn around.

With the help of one of the Street Connect youth workers, Rocky finished her Year 10 education, found a share house, repaired her relationship with her mum and started dealing with her depression.

Now 23, Rocky has a full-time job, a three-year-old daughter and is in a happy relationship.

"All they did was care," she said. "If I was 16-year-old me again and someone told me who I would end up being, I would tell them they're dreaming. I didn't think I'd be alive to see myself have a daughter."

The Anglicare-run Street Connect program, which has helped at-risk youth in the inner city for more than 20 years, is now in danger of shutting down because of a lack of money.

Anglicare youth services general manager Philippa Boldy said that in the past it had received funding from the State Government, but it had recently been cut.

A one-off grant over the past year was used to pilot a new approach for Street Connect, focusing on at-risk people in the 18-25 age bracket, but that funding will soon run out.

Ms Boldy said the program needed \$450,000 a year to run successfully. "We haven't been able to secure funding to continue the program beyond June," she said.

Ms Boldy said the program had helped reduce crime in the city and it had developed a working relationship with police and City of Perth rangers.

"Quite often, Street Connect can prevent a situation from escalating into a police matter," she said.

"If it closes, chances are those young people's social problems may well get worse and their interaction with the public on the street and the way that they access public space in the city may well deteriorate."

In the second half of last year, Street Connect helped 189 young people on 1491 occasions.

Part of the work includes referring vulnerable young people to specialist services, including drug and alcohol treatment, legal assistance, mental health services and Centrelink.

Youth Affairs Council EO Craig Comrie said: "I do think this is an opportunity for the Government to step up and commit to supporting this particular demographic of young people."

Rocky said she would be heartbroken if the program closed.

"These guys caught me in time," she said. "It's worth it just to save one life."

katie.robertson@news.com.au

If you believe that you can help in any way! Please contact:

**Esben Kaas-Sorensen
Coordinator**

**Street Connect
ANGLICARE WA**

Tel: (08) 9263 2028

Mobile: 0403 048 683

Web: www.anglicarewa.org.au