

EveryDay

CareSouth Magazine Issue Two

A man with a beard and a blue checkered shirt is speaking into a microphone. The background is dark with some blurred lights.

Inside

**CareSouth's
Inaugural Conference
Board Member shares his
Foster Care journey
Getting young people on
the road to independence**

ENTER



Issue Two in this issue

Our People

- ➔ Meet our Southern Region Manager NSW/ACT Tracy Mayo - 4
- ➔ CareSouth Board member Theo Boyle shares his story - 6

Our Wins

- ➔ Our \$1.5 million Nowra Infrastructure Grant - 8
- ➔ Inside CareSouth's inaugural Conference - 10

Our Programs

- ➔ Foster Carers find their purpose - 18
- ➔ Young drivers are on the road to independence - 20
- ➔ Champions build confidence - 22
- ➔ Disabilities support helps teen conquer fears - 24

Our Initiatives

- ➔ White Ribbon accreditation - 26

Ignite & Inspire was a tremendous success and the stellar line-up of speakers left us feeling reinvigorated

CEO's Welcome

Welcome to our bumper edition of the CareSouth Magazine, which features heart-warming stories from our inaugural Ignite & Inspire Conference, held over two days at the UOW Innovation Campus.

And what a fitting venue it was, with the innovative work we do celebrated by all who attended, including staff who travelled far and wide - in some cases 10 hours on a bus - to hear speakers such as Kate Alexander from FACS, Cormach Evans from Strong Brother Strong Sister, Dr Ben Rockett from KidsXpress, Li Cunxin and Kurt Fearnley.

Of all of the presenters over the two days, nobody captured the hearts and minds more than CareSouth's residential care team at Binbeal, who showcased the importance of supporting those with whom we work and each other within a trauma informed approach designed to support healing. The Binbeal team's compassion, commitment and determination is indicative of the work we strive to do every day in creating positive futures for children and young people.

Ignite & Inspire was a tremendous success and the stellar lineup of speakers left us feeling reinvigorated and eager to embrace the reforms facing our sector, of which there have been many. Whilst these changes have presented challenges there have been many more successes.

We have had some big wins this year, the most significant of which being the Office of the Children's Guardian confirming our success in achieving re Accreditation till 2022 (see page 9 for more details). In terms of our business development CareSouth was awarded \$1.5M earlier this year to support the construction of our new Head Office and Community Hub in South Nowra. With land already purchased

(awaiting final settlement) and our DA almost through the Council process we are well on our way to creating a much-needed and innovative space for our staff, those we support and the broader community. CareSouth was also named the Employer of Choice at last year's Illawarra Business Awards, a magnificent achievement and testament to the incredible work of our staff here at CareSouth.

From a social justice lens we have seen the terrific outcome of the marriage equality referendum, a momentous occasion for Australians. We also took the oath for White Ribbon and celebrated achieving Re-Accreditation last month (see page 26).

Finally I would like to thank Director Peter Murphy who retired from CareSouth's Board late last year. Peter has dedicated almost a quarter of a century to supporting and advocating for CareSouth. The Board hosted a farewell dinner for Peter and our founder and former CEO Jim McEwan, who retired in July, to formally acknowledge their dedication and commitment to improving the lives of children and young people since CareSouth was founded 25 years ago.

In this edition we would also like to share with you the incredible journey of Board Member Theo Boyle who spent his childhood in the foster care system from the age of eight until he got his first job in a bicycle shop as a 15 year-old. Theo, a Board Member for the past 11 years and proud owner of the aforementioned bicycle shop, shared his story to inspire the children and young people in our programs to follow their passion. Have the tissues handy when you read this one!

I hope the stories in this special Conference edition inspire you as much as they do me. There are many ways you could help in your community and we would love to hear from you.



TRACY MAYO

With a vision for strengthening families

With more than 30 years' experience working in the community services sector, seven of those at CareSouth, Tracy Mayo is embracing her role as Regional Manager Southern NSW and ACT overseeing our out-of-home care and permanency support programs.

"My whole working life I've been in community services. I've never known any other work, other than working with people and families," said Tracy. "I originally started my

career in disability services as a disability support worker. I worked hands-on in residential services in my early 20s and after that I worked with all types of different people in the community, providing case management support. I gradually moved into leadership roles and started working with CareSouth.

"I love that it's different every day and challenging. It makes me think. I have to be creative. I have to be responsive. I feel like

it uses so many skills but it also keeps me developing skills because one situation is never the same. I can't imagine myself doing anything else."

For anyone spending time with Tracy, it is clear that building relationships is key to her work. Having worked both at the coalface and in leadership roles, the ability to relate to people across all walks of life is a skill she is proud to have developed.

"We have to talk and relate to all different types of people, from children and young people to carers to families, and have difficult conversations at all of those levels," said Tracy. "I try to do this in a trauma-informed way, to be nurturing no matter what the experience is for people. I try to make them feel, even though we're in an office, that it's a warm environment to have those conversations," she said.

Tracy recalls a time when she had to meet with a dad who hadn't seen his son for five years and came back to engage with him.

"I want to assess where he has been and why it has taken so long. It's a personal journey and a story that he has to tell me but I want to get him into a position where he's going to share that with me. I need to understand what motivates him," said Tracy, who is a passionate advocate for keeping our kids safe.

"The Royal Commission has been instrumental in changing our practice across the sector. We are seeing much more scrutiny around the safety and wellbeing of children, and it's really significant with the current research that birth families have an insight into why the kids were removed and put into care.

"It's a difficult question to ask but if we don't ask that question, we won't know how to best support them in the steps towards restoration. What the dad told me had the historical context and was much more detailed and complex than what was written in the care order from the court," she said.

CareSouth's out-of-home care (or foster care) program is currently evolving with the NSW Government implementing reforms aimed at giving children in out-of-home care more stability than they've had in the past. The new Permanency Program recognises that the best option for children is for them to stay with or return to birth families. Where that is not safe there is a need to look at permanent options, such as guardianship or kinship placements with extended family or open adoption for non-Aboriginal children."

Tracy is positive about the benefits the new reforms will bring.





"If you look at the number of children coming into foster care, it's clear something is not working... permanent, life-long solutions is what we're looking for," she said.

"We will always need foster carers but we really need carers now who can work with us short-term while we do work with families and while we explore restoration options with families. And that might take us up to two years. We're constantly looking at ways to find family.

"The role of foster carers is still to provide the loving nurturing home that children need. But now it's about being able to be open to working with birth families. And to be able to extend their home and themselves to the broader life of the child, to support this child to be with their family."

Tracy believes it is vital to the success of the new reforms to equip foster carers with the skills to develop and maintain a healthy relationship with birth families, where it is safe to do so. The effort will be a collaborative one, between CareSouth, FACS, birth families and carers working together in the best interests of the children and young people.

"We have to look at training foster carers in working with birth families. It's touched on in the initial Shared Stories Shared Lives training. But I think that we can go into much more detail about what some of the challenges might be. And I really like the use of stories. Carers sharing stories of the birth families that they've worked with over many years, and now they have guardianship they continue to support the birth family to visit," she said.

“I really believe that it is in the best interests of a child to be connected to their family.”

One of the most significant developments for CareSouth has been embracing trauma-informed training, not just for staff but also for carers. One of Tracy's goals is to include birth families in the carer training program.

"We're forging new pathways into how we work. And I see the bigger vision as foster carers, birth families and staff being trained together in certain areas of our work. We're all adults who care about children," said Tracy, who has a clear vision in both her hopes for the future of out-of-home care and the organisation's goals.

"What I hope for is more collaborative work in the area of guardianship and permanency planning pathways. I'm really focused on how we can best support children and families to be together safely. It's a different solution and support plan for every family.

"I really believe that it is in the best interests of a child to be connected to their family. Whether it is their mother, their father, their grandmother. That energy and support we put into a foster care placement, we need to apply that wrap-around service around their family. And when it can be done safely, we keep a child at home. And they're connected to their culture, their identity, their community, their school. It just makes sense to me. And I'm excited about where the future is going. We need to be constantly working on that."

THEO
BOYLE

Passion for bikes

helped Theo stay on

Dressed in shorts in the middle of a freezing Southern Highlands winter, CareSouth Board member Theo Boyle vividly recalls marching through the cold as an eight year-old, towards the massive gates and pitched roof of the Anglewood Boys' Home – a “spooky place” where he would spend much of his childhood with two of his seven siblings. “I came up through the ranks of child welfare,” said Theo. “I was one of eight kids and the whole eight of us went through the system. Anglewood was a pretty scary place for a little kid. They took us there by train then they marched us from the station, in shorts in the middle of winter in the Highlands because that was the clobber you wore. “I remember walking through those gates and seeing kids on the floor scrubbing them clean. That was it, that was

life. You were looked after but there was a lot of meanness there. I can't remember how long we were there for, it felt like forever.”

Fast forward 50 years and Theo is a successful businessman and a long-serving member of CareSouth's Board of Directors.

Theo was asked to join the Board by former CareSouth CEO Jim McEwan after the pair crossed paths at Nowra Cycle Centre, the Haigh Avenue bike shop Theo has owned for almost three decades. Jim approached Theo to donate some second-hand bikes to a boys' home in Bowral and the pair struck up a friendship. When Jim discovered that Theo had also spent his childhood in the "system" as Theo calls it, Jim recognised the contribution he could make to CareSouth, then a fledgling organisation based solely in Nowra.

Theo embraced the opportunity to help vulnerable children and young people because he walked the same path and wants them to know that with a bit of support, resilience and hard work it is possible to achieve great things.

"I was eight when I got chucked in the system," said Theo. "Mine was a dysfunctional family unit. My father was an alcoholic and my mother had eight kids and wasn't coping. My father wasn't an idiot, he was a smart man, but he was an idiot because he ruined eight people's childhood."

Theo recalls he and his two brothers, who were with him at Anglewood, were restored to his parents for several months in the late 1960s but that went "pear-shaped pretty quickly" and Theo was sent to Woodford Boys' Home in the Blue Mountains.

"It was a little bit better. You went to school. At Anglewood they taught you on site, you weren't allowed to go out in public, you only went into public for church on Sundays."

But it was a move to Berry Boys' Home that proved to be the turning point in Theo's life, so much so that he and his wife chose to get married on the grounds of the Home in 1980.

Berry was where Theo was able to pursue his passion – building and riding bikes. And most importantly it was where he met the two mentors who would help set him on his path to success.

The first was a psychologist who was "a bit before his time," said Theo. "He had a different attitude to kids. He wanted to help kids so he introduced us to bicycles and we would go to Nowra tip and fossick through the junk for parts to make bicycles."

Long after leaving care Theo would ride from Nowra to his mentor's home in southern Sydney to spend time with him and his family. It was a friendship that set him on his future career path as a successful businessman and owner of Nowra Cycle Centre.

The second mentor who helped change his life was a caseworker, appointed to support Theo after he left care.

"When you left the boys' home you got your big Globite bag, a couple of pairs of shoes, socks, shorts and shirts and then

myself and my brother for four weeks in the school holidays – a bit like respite care. You'd go on holidays and spend Christmas with them. They made a real difference too. I could've turned out totally different. I put it down to those two particular blokes and that foster family.



"I had to put in a lot of hard work myself too. But if I could give any advice to kids in the system today it would be just try. Try hard, there will be a lot of hard knocks. But things do work out if you just keep trying. Get yourself on track and have some purpose in life.

"I've been quite successful but I've worked for it. You've got to have something that gets you out of bed in the morning."

For Theo this purpose and passion was bikes and his family.

Now that his children have built their own successful careers and family Theo's focus has shifted to building cubbyhouses and going on adventures with his grandchildren. He has also reconnected with his siblings over the years and formed strong bonds with all but one of them.

"There were good experiences and bad being in the system. Bad is not seeing your siblings and parents," said Theo. "My youngest brother was six months-old when he was fostered out. I never saw him until he was 28."

Because of his experience in care Theo recognises the importance of keeping sibling groups together wherever possible.

"Sibling relationships are very important. Back then homes would be for certain age groups of boys and others for girls and a lot of siblings were split up. That's one thing we do much better these days, keeping siblings together.

"There were some good people who made a real difference in those days and there are good people making a difference these days."

track

you're on your own," said Theo. "I was 15 and nine months when I started working in the bike shop and I've been there ever since. A bloke came to check on me every so often and he was a very nice chap.

"Those two blokes were the people that made a real difference to my life, they encouraged me to do things, to have a purpose. There was also a young couple, they took

\$1.5m Regional Jobs for new Nowra office

CareSouth was awarded \$1.5million earlier this year to support the construction of our new Head Office and Community Hub in South Nowra, as part of the Federal Government's Regional Jobs and Investment Packages.

The funding will be used to construct a new multi-purpose facility containing office space, meeting rooms, training facilities, our call centre, family contact rooms and a Community Hub.

For the past 26 years CareSouth's head office has been housed at Haigh Ave, in Nowra. But the organisation's significant expansion over the past quarter of a century has seen CareSouth outgrow its original home.

When CareSouth first opened its doors in 1992 only a handful of employees shared the Haigh Ave office space with a saddlery and squash courts. CareSouth now employs more than 300 staff across our wide geographic footprint and of those 300 staff, more than 70 work out of Nowra.

"With land already purchased (awaiting final settlement) and our DA almost through the Council process we are well on our way to creating a much-needed and innovative space for our staff, those we support and the broader community," said CareSouth CEO Debra Tozer.

When Debra proudly unveiled CareSouth's purpose-built Berkeley office in 2013 her vision was to provide a space which belonged not just to our staff and clients but also to the local community. She shares the same vision for our Nowra space and a centrepiece of the build will be a Community Hub.

Activities in our Berkeley Community Hub include weekly homework mentoring sessions for students across our programs, as well as supported playgroups to encourage

literacy, learning, play, and movement for children who are not yet in school. Every six months CareSouth holds a Health Hub, where those within our programs as well as the wider community are offered free dental clinics, eye-screening tests, hearing checks and obesity workshops. Staff also host monthly communal meals in the Hub with the wider community.

"Our Nowra building will include a Community Hub which, like our Berkeley Hub, will become a one-stop shop for clients to access specific CareSouth programs, along with programs for the external community," said Debra. "One of the things I am extremely passionate about is giving back to the community. And we will continue to develop partnerships to help strengthen what we do for the community."

"We also envision that our Nowra building would be a central meeting point for all regional management meetings and staff conferences and there would be a steady stream of CareSouth employees from across



Grant

66

One of the things I am extremely passionate about is giving back to the community.

our footprint relying on the Shoalhaven hospitality and tourism industries.”

CareSouth’s Clinical Services team, which includes psychologists, an occupational therapist and speech therapist, will also have a suite of rooms in our new Nowra building where they can provide holistic therapeutic interventions from a trauma-informed framework.

The short and long-term employment opportunities generated by the project will be significant - employment for builders and building-related trades, and increased social sector staffing - and will benefit the Shoalhaven well beyond the project period.

“We have engaged external consultants to design our new Nowra building in line with our company vision – to create a positive future for children, young people, individuals, families and communities,” said Debra.

Reaccreditation



CareSouth is thrilled to announce that the Office of the Children’s Guardian has confirmed our success in achieving Re-Accreditation until 2022.

CareSouth CEO Debra Tozer said this successful Re-Accreditation was achieved due to the support of so many people across all program areas of CareSouth.

“I wish to sincerely thank everyone for the role they played in making this possible, well done and congratulations,” said Debra.

“Everyone worked incredibly hard to support this comprehensive audit of our practice, with the ultimate goal of ensuring quality services and processes are in place that promote opportunities for each child and young person to reach their individual potential. And most importantly to ensure their safety and well-being is paramount.

“Thank you so much to our Support Workers, Carers, Caseworkers, Team Leaders, Managers, Regional Managers, Compliance Manager, Corporate Services, Human Resources, Policy and Research, Information and Technology, Community Relations, Executive Office and CareSouth Connect.”

Debra made special mention of the work carried out by Manager Compliance Administration, Bernadette Robertson who has worked tirelessly to see this terrific result realised and the very important role played by CareSouth’s dynamic Clinical Team.

“It was noted by the assessors that the high quality and timely advice and supporting documentation provided where CareSouth have internal Clinicians was evident, and recognition of a high standard of work,” said Debra.

While it has been a time of great change within the Out-of-Home Care sector, with the Re-Accreditation and Permanency Planning, this has only strengthened the resolve of our staff to meet best practice standards, every day, said Debra.



GUEST SPEAKER

Li Cunxin

You learn the most from life's darkest moments



Life was so bleak for Li Cunxin at one point that he and his siblings ate the bark off trees to ward off starvation.

“My mother, with utter desperation, would scrape together what food she could. And if there was nothing she would beg and borrow,” said Li. “Before we even started eating we knew we were going to go to sleep starving again. Our parents would say they were not hungry. They would starve to make sure one of their children did not die that night.”

Li told the star-struck audience at CareSouth’s inaugural conference that ballet saved his life. It was an escape from the desperate cold and starvation of village life in rural China. But there was one small problem. Li did not like ballet. He danced only to put food on the table for his family.

As a scrawny 11 year-old Li was one of 44 students selected by Madame Mao’s cultural advisors to attend the Beijing Dance Academy. During his audition Li tore both hamstrings. “But I kept smiling and said ‘no it doesn’t hurt,’” said Li. “I knew if I cried out in pain that would be the end of my dream, my secret dream to save my family. To rescue them from starvation.”

Li trained from 5.30am-9pm every day for seven years.

“I was so homesick the first few years. I missed my mother desperately. I hated ballet with a passion. I was one of the worst students. I was naughty, unmotivated. In my second year I was on the verge of being chucked out when a new ballet teacher came into my life. He was inspirational. He focused on nurturing us and inspiring us.”

It was this positive student/mentor relationship that helped Li – now the Queensland Ballet Artistic Director – to love dance.

“One thing that helped me find my passion for ballet is that this teacher wanted to find out what made his students tick, he wanted to motivate them. He wanted to find out what I liked. He found out my dream to rescue my family.

“My teacher taught me to be the best dancer I could be to help my family. And one day I fell deeply in love with ballet. That was the day my life had meaning, had colour. One moment changed my entire life beyond recognition. That moment made all the difference in my world and that is what the magic of the little moments in our life is truly all about.



Li openly admits that he had no more natural talent than the other 43 students in Mao's Academy.

"What made the difference was I had more tenacity. I worked harder. I was more determined. I had more resilience."

As a child Li suffered horrific motion sickness. The key to being a star ballet dancer is the ability to leap high and the ability to turn.

"Before I even started turning, mentally I was defeated," said Li. "So what did I do? I would get up before the other students, strap sandbags to my legs and hop up flights of stairs. At night I would light a candle in the dark and turn, and turn and turn. If I could leap high with sandbags I could leap higher on stage. If I could spin in the dark, I could spin faster in the light."

At 18 Li was chosen for a ballet scholarship at the Houston Academy of Ballet.

He didn't speak a word of English. After a two-day crash course in English he learned the phrases 'oh dear me' and 'upon my soul'. Before leaving for the US he was instructed by Mao's foot soldiers to never say no and always smile and nod your head.

"My family taught me to live a life of honesty with integrity, with dignity. Those values became so clear to me that night. I chose the second option, I told them (the Chinese Government) they could do whatever they want but I would not go back on their terms."

But it came at a cost. Li was exiled from China and he lost all contact with his family.

"I lost everything in China, my mother, father, six brothers. I lost my homeland. No matter how successful I was as a dancer I knew deep inside me I was not a happy human being. The emotional trauma we went through lasted many years and the heartache was indescribable."

"But often you learn the most from your darkest moments. I truly believe the darkest moments of one's life are the



**But often
you learn
the most from
your darkest
moments.**



greatest learning moments, those kind of moments truly define a person's character. It is during these dark times you are most likely to discover the key to your personal success."

Eight years after Li's exile, Barbara Bush, a Houston Ballet Board Member, heard of the dancer's heartbreak at losing his family and his homeland. With her help Li's parents were granted permission to leave China and watch Li dance in the Houston Ballet.

"What an impossible dream," recalled Li. "That night I would remember forever in my heart. That was the most special moment of our lives."

Li's first performance in the West was The Nutcracker. Last year he returned to ballet after an 18-year break to dance in the Queensland Ballet's performance of The Nutcracker.

When asked if he had come full circle Li replied: "My life is all in circles. It is about how you make that circle as full as possible, by making a positive difference, by having the resilience and determination to get through those tough times and by surrounding yourself with people who will encourage you and support you."

These tips led to an awkward moment during his first meal at a restaurant when Li smiled and nodded, said no when asked if he had eaten enough, and the food kept coming, and coming and coming!

It was also in Houston that Li faced one of the darkest moments in his life. He had fallen in love with a US-born ballet dancer. But the Chinese Government did not approve. "They did not recognise my decision to marry the person I loved," said Li.

In 1981, locked in a small room deep inside the Chinese Consulate in Houston, the 20 year-old faced an impossible choice; obey his government's order to return to China or refuse and "my life would end there".

GUEST SPEAKER

Cormach Evans

Mentoring key to raising strong kids



“

It's so important for our kids to have someone to look up to, to give young kids opportunities to achieve what they want to achieve.

”

Cormach Evans has faced titanic struggles throughout his life; drug addiction, mental illness, inter-generational trauma, not to mention paddling a canoe made of an old tree across the Torres Strait for days on end in horrendous weather conditions and tearing his shoulder during an open water paddle on his surfboard in the middle of nowhere.

Despite the physical pain and mental heartache Cormach has faced over the years he never gave up. Cormach, the founder of The Paddle for Aboriginal Health and Strong Brother, Strong Sister Aboriginal Youth Mentoring Program, puts this down to the fact that someone always had his back, no matter what.

“The power of mentoring cannot be underestimated,” Cormach told a packed room at CareSouth’s Conference. “I have had amazing mentors and role models to guide me to where I am today and I’m really thankful for that.

“My journey has been a really rough trot at times. I was the only Aboriginal kid in my school so I faced racism and discrimination on a daily basis. My Dad was a member of the stolen generation and my own disconnection with my culture and my identity contributed to my depression and anxiety.

“I never wanted to go down the path of drugs and alcohol but it was a mask, it masked my pain. My Dad went down that path and I promised my Mum I never would. But I did and that was a learning journey. It helped me see a strong need for positive Aboriginal mentors and I made it my mission to help others, to give back. Growing up as a kid I wasn’t that proud of being an Aboriginal but now I am as proud as punch.”

Through the Strong Brother, Strong Sister program, based in Geelong, Cormach and his team provide a safe space for Aboriginal youth to reconnect with their culture and identity.

“Strong Brother, Strong Sister is run for young people, by young people. They know what issues they face – higher rates of teen pregnancy, youth suicide and incarceration – it is about us giving them the tools to overcome these issues.

“We work with each individual and focus on their strengths and passion. We recognise that each young person has different needs and we get kids back into school, the workforce or training.”

Cormach - a proud 27 year-old Yorta Yorta man who grew up on Wadawurrung Country - stressed the importance of tailoring programs for young people to their strengths and passions. He said Strong Brother, Strong Sister’s Return to Country program, where young people and their mentors travel to their spiritual homes, was a turning point for many Aboriginal youth in the program.

“We have had 10 young kids in our

main program who have lived in over 200 houses between them, so return to country is really important for them.”

It was his own visit to a sacred spot, on country, that helped Cormach turn his life around.

“It’s so important for our kids to have someone to look up to, to give young kids opportunities to achieve what they want to achieve.”



Alexander

GUEST SPEAKER

Kate Alexander

The right language can help restore dignity

Kate Alexander, from the NSW Department of Family and Community Services, Office of the Senior Practitioner, doesn't mince her words when she talks about the need for us to communicate better.

Kate, one of the keynote speakers at the CareSouth Conference, is passionate about using language to build better relationships within the Community Services sector.

Kate reminded us all that relationships are key in the work we do, and to build these relationships we need to be mindful of the way we talk.

Her wise words - change the way you talk, change the way you think – resonated strongly with the hundreds of staff, carers and guests at the Conference.

It may seem like simple advice but often we get caught up in habits, writing or speaking in jargon and bureaucratic speak that can be alienating for families, said Kate. She urged practitioners to use "very plain language". "Talk about people as if they are in the room."

"Words have such a lasting impact. They influence how we understand and how we make decisions. They show compassion, uphold dignity, give hope and inspire change," said Kate. "By focusing on dignity, respect and changing our language we are enabling a different story to be told."



Kate gave many examples of how language needs to change to help those navigating the Community Services sector to maintain their dignity.

“The way we talk about violence matters,” said Kate. “When we write ‘the children were exposed to a domestic violence incident between their parents’ this language fails children. The words ‘exposed to’ downplays hurt whereas ‘living in fear of’ doesn’t. An ‘incident’ implies a beginning and an end but an ‘episode’ conveys a pattern of violence. Using the term ‘between’ implies equal responsibility when violence is about one person’s deliberate actions to hurt another.

“If we know who did what to whom and we know its impact we need to say: ‘The children saw their father hit their mother, they heard her crying and they were frightened.’ Children need us to be brave in our words and our actions.”

Kate’s role with the OSP – established four years ago to inspire, influence and review child protection practice – is to review child deaths, lead evidence-based child protection approaches and facilitate learning through conferences, publications and coaching strategies.

Kate, who has more than 25 years’ experience and a Master of Social Work, was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 2010 to research child protection systems in the UK, Norway and America. Her research led to the development of the NSW Practice First Framework and the NSW Practice Standards. The Practice Framework practitioner mandate states: “We work hard to give dignity, partner with parents, families and communities and use collective wisdom, skills and courage to keep children safe. Family strengths are valued, resilience is nurtured, dignity is upheld and enduring connections are formed.”

Kate’s work with the OSG in reminding practitioners about the importance of language and relationships was a Conference highlight.



“

**Words
have such
a lasting
impact.
They
influence
how we
understand
and how
we make
decisions.**

”



GUEST SPEAKER

Kurt Fearnley

Lack of expectation is disabling, not the disability itself

The first thing that strikes you about Kurt Fearnley is not his athleticism but his high-wattage grin. When Kurt entered the room at the CareSouth Conference as the final speaker after a lineup of impressive talent, the applause was thunderous.

His tenacity and resilience, both physically and mentally, is the stuff of legends and everyone in the room was in awe of a man who has not only won 43 marathons, a swag of Olympic medals and sailed the Sydney to Hobart, but also crawled the Kokoda Track.

An amazing feat for someone born without the lower part of their spine. But this never held Kurt back. He was 14 when he got his first taste of wheelchair racing - on a grass track in his normal wheelchair on the school oval. From then on he was hooked. He was also picked in the Australian Junior basketball team but chose to focus on racing.

"I know who I am. I am extremely strong and I am extremely resilient. But it takes a lot of work to get there. It takes a community of support," said

Kurt, recalling how his school principal spent his school holidays cementing every path at Carcoar Public School so he could navigate his wheelchair around the grounds.

"Concrete is a luxury growing up in the bush. But my principal stood up for me, advocated for me and fought for me when I couldn't fight for myself. He gave up his time to cement and pay for, out of his own pocket, paths so that I could be a part of the school community."



And when Kurt decided he was going to become a professional athlete it was his community who helped get him over the line.

"The town raised \$10,000 in two weeks when I first started wheelchair racing; 200 farmers and cockies and carpenters did everything they could to make sure I could be the person I felt like I was meant to be," said Kurt. "A community that demanded that I was going to be a part of it and paid for it."

For Kurt his racing wheelchair "is like an extension of my body". At his peak training,

he would spend about 40 hours a week in his racing chair and another 10 hours in his hand cycle.

"In an average week I train twice a day, six days a week and travel about 200km," he said.

Kurt announced his retirement from racing at the recent Commonwealth Games after winning a gold medal in the marathon. It may be the last time he pulls on the Green and Gold jersey but Kurt will continue to fight for better outcomes for those with disabilities.



“

I know who I am. I am extremely strong and I am extremely resilient. But it takes a lot of work to get there. It takes a community of support.

”



Kurt is a passionate advocate for improving the lives of those with disabilities and pointed out that two-thirds of those in the world who require a wheelchair will never see one.

“When people see disability they see this presumed fragility but when we’re willing to cater for that disability, to do everything we can to make sure that person can be the person they believe they need to be, there is no weakness there, there is only strength,” said Kurt.

It was Kurt’s humility, along with a quirky sense of humour and good old-fashioned country charm, which had the Conference audience laughing out loud for much of his time on stage. But there were also sombre moments, particularly when he spoke about his time crawling the Kokoda Track, an experience he described as “damaging”.

“When I was crawling for 53km I kept telling myself there’s been worse things that people have gone through on this track. Kokoda is the hardest thing I have ever done. When I finished I was 46kg.”

But he never gave up. It is this determination that he shares with audiences across the nation, particularly school students. As a trained Physical Education teacher, most of his speaking engagements are with students, and it is easy to see why he is such a popular guest speaker.

“Sport and education can be used to empower people with disabilities,” said Kurt. “A big part of sport is learning about positive affirmations, positive self-talk. I could not do what

I do without that conversation, those positive affirmations every morning. It helps build that brain muscle.

“Self-talk is everything it’s cracked up to be. Why aren’t we teaching kids that in school? It can help kids in their day-to-day life with bullying, building resilience.”

For Kurt the key to his success is resilience.

“I am grateful for many things in my life but that expectation placed on me as a kid, that I could do anything I set my mind to, that’s been everything to me,” said Kurt. “I know that when I’m out there on that fringe and I do that job that nobody expects me to do, things like the Sydney to Hobart, and I do it well, I drag the community’s expectation along with me. So the next time a guy in a wheelchair drives to the shops he’s not told he’s amazing, or a guy in a wheelchair speaks about wanting a family he’s not told he’s incredible.

“That lack of expectation is disabling, not the disability itself. But my parents placed expectations on me as a kid that I could do anything. Mum let me crawl away from our house for kilometres with my brothers and sisters and I would be covered in cuts and bruises. Those cuts and bruises that I got as a kid were a privilege. Those cuts and bruises made me who I am.

“Mobility is the least interesting thing I see about you. Choice and the choices we make are the most powerful.”



Foster Carers find their sense of purpose

Ask CareSouth foster carers Rob and John what raising a seven year-old boy has brought to their lives and their answer is simple – a sense of purpose.

“When I wake up in the morning now it’s not ‘Okay what am I going to do?’ Now we have somebody to look after,” said John. “He wants to do things and get out and about. He gets us both out of our comfort zones. He’s such a joyous little ball of happiness. He just runs everywhere and generally has a positive attitude about everything,” said John.

“He’s gotten me on a bicycle again,” said Rob, grinning.

The couple’s love for their foster son is evident in the way their faces light up when they talk about him.

And while it hasn’t all been smooth sailing – the first few months establishing routines was exhausting – the couple are quick to point out they got “really lucky” when they welcomed the young boy into their lives.

“He just fitted in perfectly,” said John. “And he was adamant he was staying with us from day dot.”


“I think that CareSouth have done an excellent job at looking at what the kids need and what carers have to offer,” said Rob.

Rob and John’s foster care journey got off to a bumpy start when the first agency they approached to become carers told them they were not eligible because they were a same sex couple. So the pair were referred to CareSouth.

“We knew CareSouth was a great organisation and everyone was so supportive from the very beginning,” said John. “We previously didn’t want kids at all. I loved my double income no kids but then I heard an advertisement for foster carers. I think I shocked Rob when I brought it up.”

“I thought I had put that away (raising a child) for life choices but there were some good points to it. And ultimately it was a really good decision. We have the time and we have the resources. With the right agency like CareSouth, it’s been a really positive outcome for us,” said Rob.





“From the outset we knew we would be in this for the long haul.”

The couple have worked hard to help the young child feel safe, secure and supported, while also ensuring he stays connected to his biological family. From the very beginning of their foster care journey Rob and John recognised the importance of building positive relationships with the young boy's family, particularly his siblings.

“That part was really easy,” said Rob. “They are really wonderful and really welcoming.”

“It was a piece of cake,” said John. “I think what helped most is that they saw an instant improvement in him. His sister says to me when I talk to her on the phone that she can sleep at night now, knowing that he's okay and in good hands.”

Rob and John have embraced the child's siblings as their own and have welcomed them into their home. They spend Christmas and school holidays together, either travelling to Western NSW or inviting the child's siblings to stay with them.

“It is really good to see him with his siblings again. Last time his sisters visited they read him a bedtime story and it was adorable,” said John.

The pair have also met the young child's parents and that proved to be a turning point in their relationship with their foster son.

“It was a massive deal for him that I met his mum and he saw us talking to each other, being civil,” said John. “And his dad saw that he really does care for us. That was important for him to know.”

Rob and John acknowledge that the support they get from their caseworker, and the training opportunities they are offered, has made the transition from a family of two to a family of three so much easier.

“We can call our caseworker anytime, not just because there's a problem but because we want to share a funny story or a win,” said John.

“From the outset we knew we would be in this for the long haul,” said Rob.



Driving instructors give young people

Jason* has been in care since he was four. Now 17 and living in one of CareSouth's Residential Care homes, Jason does not have the family support that many teens take for granted. This makes getting a driver's licence difficult.

"Getting a driver's licence really depends on where kids come from and how good their relationship with their family is," said Jason.

"I don't have a relationship with my family and you really need a good support network to be able to afford the driving lessons and to make up the hours."

That is where CareSouth's Driver Mentoring program comes in. The program began two years ago when CareSouth Residential Care staff identified that paying for driving instruction is a major barrier to independence for young people in Residential and Foster Care.

One of the main roles of Residential Care staff is to help young people work towards independence, and being able to drive – to TAFE, University or work – is a major part of gaining living skills.

"We found that young people in care have little to no capacity to achieve the 120 hours driving experience needed for their licence. It is cost prohibitive to pay for driving lessons and these young people need to trust and feel safe with instructors that they know," said Residential Care Team Leader Daniel van Anen.

"To achieve this, CareSouth developed an internal Learner Driver Mentoring Program to help young people to reach their required driving hours. Residential Care staff are trained in driving instruction through Wollongong City Council and become mentors for young people so they get driving experience and recorded log-book hours."

The Learner Driver's Mentor Program trains mentors to take clients with their L-Plates out for lessons once they have had 10 hours with a qualified driving instructor.

people independence

“

I think everyone deserves the opportunity to get their licence.

”

Mentors complete the Helping Learner Drivers Become Safer Drivers workshop and transfer this knowledge to the young people they are teaching.

The program helps young people understand and avoid risks and crashes by giving them the skills to keep themselves and others in the community safe while on the road.

A Go-Pro is used to record all driving lessons with a young person and mentor and this is used to evaluate gaps in their abilities and help them overcome them.

Since the program was launched 18 months ago three young people in Residential Care have acquired their Provisional licence.

Jason, who started driving lessons six months ago through the Mentoring program, is hopeful to become the fourth. He has set himself a goal to get his P-Plates by May.

“If I didn’t have access to the Driver Mentoring program I wouldn’t be able to get my licence for another two years,” said Jason.

“That would mean I probably wouldn’t be able to get to work as easily and most employers wouldn’t want to hire me knowing I didn’t have my licence.”

Jason is driving three days a week to rack up the required hours and is conscious of the responsibility involved in getting on the road.

“I think everyone deserves the opportunity to get their licence,” said Jason. “But it’s important to make sure they get as much training and support as possible. Resi staff have been really supportive in helping me learn to drive.”

*Name has been changed.



Champions

Five to

Mentoring program

When Nowra couple Kaylee and James Wood joined CareSouth's Aunties & Uncles Program four years ago they were matched with Lily*, a "loving, kind, sensitive child who never stops talking" and was petrified of the water.

This presented some challenges for Kaylee and James as the family spend most of the summer months in their backyard pool.

"Lily was seven when we met her and she was absolutely terrified of the water when she first came to us," said Kaylee. "Because we have a pool and we are always in it during summer I wanted Lily to learn to swim. So I asked her Mum if it was okay if I paid for some swimming lessons."

Kaylee signed Lily up for a term of swimming lessons and picked her up every Friday afternoon to take her to the local swim school.

"Every time she would say that she wasn't feeling well in the car," said Kaylee. "Then she would scream and cry in the pool, she was just petrified. It was pretty horrible."

But Kaylee persisted.



“Being a part of our family gives her the confidence to do okay in life.”

“After 10 weeks I thought ‘this is such a waste of money and I have traumatised her’. But the next time we went in the pool at home she came in with me,” said Kaylee. “Then we went to the beach the next day and she went out further than me with James. Before that she wouldn’t go out past her toe!

“I felt really proud of her and it was so good to know she has the skills she needs to get out of trouble if necessary. I don’t think Lily even realises how far she has come. But now when she gets in the pool with me at home she never wants to get out.”

This was not Kaylee’s first experience with the Aunties & Uncles program, she was a mentor to a young girl before she had her son Josh, now in his early 20s. Nevertheless she admits that in the early stages, when she was establishing a relationship with Lily, she questioned whether the program - now known as CareSouth’s Everyday Champions - was right for her family.

“There were a few weeks, when we were just getting to know Lily, that it was really tough,” said Kaylee. “Lily is the youngest of three children. She comes from a household where she has to constantly compete for attention,” said Kaylee. “Because of this Lily talks incessantly. We have worked with her to help her understand how important it is to listen. She finds it so difficult but she’ll try and do it.

“Having rules, routines and boundaries has really made a difference. So when I pick Lily up we’ll go through the rules – things like no squealing, quiet time, listening. Lily has even added her own, the no running away from me rule. All of us enjoy the weekend more when we are on the same page.

“It definitely has been challenging at times but also so rewarding, knowing that we are helping someone, and not only the child but the family as well by giving them a break. And we can call on our Caseworker anytime we need to, she has been an amazing support for us.”

Kaylee said one of the highlights of the program was watching James’ relationship with Lily evolve.

“In the beginning James worked a lot of Saturdays when we had Lily so she was a little bit wary of him,” said Kaylee. “But then we started having her over a little more. Now she’ll come up and give him a great big cuddle. They’ll go for walks together. It’s really lovely to see how they have bonded. And James has realised how much he is helping her.”

Kaylee and James both work full-time so the time they spend with Lily often involves doing everyday activities like food shopping, hanging out the washing or baking cakes.

“We both work full-time so things have to get done on the weekend no matter what,” said Kaylee. “There was one week where I didn’t go food shopping with her and she said, ‘Oh I really like going food shopping with you.’ We have our routine and she really enjoys that.

“She comes to my netball games and she gets to be the water girl, she has play dates with the neighbours, we go to the library and borrow books, we play board games or we go to the beach.

“Knowing that she doesn’t have to fight for our attention is a really big thing for her. I think that one-on-one time has really helped. Being a part of our family gives her the confidence to do okay in life. If something happens at home or at school she’s always got us as a back-up to talk to.

“And we will do that for as long as she wants us to do it. I’m hoping she’ll be with us until she’s an adult. Lily says to me that when she grows up she’ll live next door to us!”

*Name has been changed.



Dwayne* is a typical 18 year-old. And, like his teen counterparts, he rarely goes anywhere without his phone. But unlike many of his peers it has taken six months of hard work and consistent practice for Dwayne to feel comfortable talking to strangers on the phone.

Dwayne is one of nine young people from CareSouth's Drop-In Support program who has a disability support worker to help him master day-to-day activities like cooking meals and using the phone to talk to people he does not know.

Support helps teen conquer his fears

“

Dwayne has taken some big, big steps and he should be so proud of himself, I'm so proud of him.

”

For six months Dwayne's support worker, mentor and good mate Belinda Bridge worked tirelessly to help Dwayne find the confidence and skills to make and confirm doctor and dental appointments and cold call transport and electricity companies to organise things like his Opal card.

These were all tasks that Dwayne found impossible to face until Belinda came into his life.

"I would give Dwayne a list of questions, then I'd give him a number to call and his goal was to spend five to eight minutes on the phone talking," said Belinda.

"On the days he knew it was a phone call day he would say 'I don't want to do this Belinda' but we would work through some scenarios and he would always manage to do it."

"I sort of find it hard to talk to strangers," said Dwayne. "With people I know I'm fine but with people I don't know I go into my hidey hole."

But with Belinda's support Dwayne has managed to overcome hurdles that previously seemed too hard. Thanks to Belinda's coaching Dwayne now has the confidence to deal with customers as part of his transition to work program at Flagstaff. He has also learned to prepare and cook meals like lasagne and desserts such as caramel slice and jam drop biscuits.

"But the caramel slice was a bit of a disaster," laughed Dwayne.

"Yeah we forgot to use non-stick baking paper," said Belinda.

The pair love to have a laugh together and there is a lot of gentle ribbing, but also a shared sense of pride in the goals they have achieved together.

"Dwayne has taken some big, big steps and he should be so proud of himself, I'm so proud of him," said Belinda who began working in CareSouth's Drop-In Support program 12 months ago.

"Coming from a Drug and Alcohol background it's been a big change and we've had a few ups and downs haven't we Dwayne?"

"Hiccups," said Dwayne.

"Yeah hiccups," agreed Belinda. "But you've helped me as much as I've helped you Dwayne, we've helped each other."

"Yeah," said Dwayne, smiling shyly.

*Name has been changed.



CareSouth becomes accredited White Ribbon Workplace

CareSouth is proud to have become one of the very first organisations on the South Coast to be accredited as a White Ribbon Workplace.

On March 26, local White Ribbon Ambassador Gerry Orkin joined CareSouth's CEO Debra Tozer and Chairman of the Board John Dorahy, along with staff and local community partners, to celebrate CareSouth's achievement and raise awareness about domestic violence.

The theme of the CareSouth event, 'Cheese for Change', is a White Ribbon initiative which encourages workplaces to start a conversation at work about domestic violence and the impact it has on the community, whilst raising funds for White Ribbon's vital primary prevention work.

"CareSouth as an organisation recognises our broader responsibility in creating social change within the communities in which we operate," said CareSouth Chief Executive Officer, Debra Tozer.

Gerry Orkin, Region Domestic Violence Coordinator for NSW Police Southern Region, has been a White Ribbon Ambassador for almost ten years. While progress has been slow, he points out that local domestic violence rates have declined.

"In 2016 the Illawarra and Shoalhaven region had 1400 domestic violence assaults recorded, down by about 12%



"As a regional organisation, we are honoured to join the cohort of accredited White Ribbon Workplaces, contributing and bringing local attention to this national cultural movement to prevent and respond to violence against women. Achieving White Ribbon Workplace accreditation illustrates CareSouth's whole of organisation commitment to preventing and responding to violence against women.

Debra said CareSouth's commitment will ensure that our employees are equipped with the knowledge and skills to address the issue of violence against women, both within the workplace and broader community.

on the previous 12 months. Of course, that's still 1400 assaults too many, but more effective procedures across the government and non-government sectors are paying dividends," said Gerry.

"Organisations who become accredited send a clear message to both their own workforce and the community they serve," said Gerry, addressing the more than 50 people who attended the event. "The message is that domestic violence can be prevented, and that we are committed to developing the skills and understanding that we need to make a meaningful contribution to that goal."

Accreditation as a White Ribbon Workplace is an opportunity to actively contribute to preventing and responding to violence against women, and make a strong stand against violence in the community.

Statistics show that one in three women experience physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by someone known to them. One in five women experience harassment within the workplace. And 94% of employees agree employers should take a leadership role in educating their workplace about respectful relationships between men and women.

You can find out more about the work of White Ribbon Australia at whiteribbon.org.au. If you are experiencing violence or suspect someone else is, please contact 1800 RESPECT for advice and support. In an emergency, call the police on 000.

There are many big and little ways you can help a child or young person in your community through CareSouth. To find out more, call 1300 554 260 or visit caresouth.org.au



Local Families Needed for Short-Term Foster care



66

You can make such a difference in the life of a child even if they're only with you for a short time."

Annette CareSouth foster carer

CareSouth are looking for short-term foster carers, so kids have a safe place to stay whilst their future is being decided.

You can help by providing emergency care, respite care, interim or restoration care.

Contact CareSouth today to find out more.

1300 554 260 caresouth.org.au

 **EVERYDAY** CareSouth