

## NORTHAM YOUTH FORUM

### *Statement*

**HON MIA DAVIES (Agricultural)** [9.55 pm]: I rise tonight to talk about a youth forum that I attended in Northam yesterday entitled “Have Courage: Communication Counts”. Four schools participated in the forum—Toodyay District High School, St Joseph’s Secondary School, Bindoon Catholic Agricultural College and Northam Senior High School. There were some 300 students at the Northam Recreation Centre and the forum was supported and sponsored by the local community. The number of sponsors for the forum shows that there is great community support. I will read them out because there is a wonderful array of people who turned out to show that they cared about some of the conversations that these kids were having about some pretty serious subjects. The sponsors were Regional Home Care Services, Toodyay and Districts Community Bank, Bendigo Bank, the Department for Child Protection, Toodyay Op Shop, Toodyay Lions Club, Avon Youth Family Services, Water Corporation, Holyoake Wheatbelt Community Drug Service Team, Regional Development Australia Wheatbelt Inc’s Youth Connections Program, Rural Youth Mental Health Services, Wheatbelt Mental Health Services, Grove Wesley Art Designs, and Toodyay Bakery, which put on a wonderful feed for all the students.

The forum really came about as a response to the loss of a young man’s life. He completed suicide in Toodyay and his family knew that the community and his friends were really suffering. It is very hard for a young person to know how to deal with grief and loss if they have not been faced with it before. The group was formed and included student representatives from the four schools I mentioned. The idea of hosting a youth forum came about with some very strong influence from the parents of this young man. The steering committee wanted to cover topics like cyberbullying and internet safety, but also peer pressure, how to communicate and who to communicate with as a young person, and to explore some of those issues around the burden of keeping secrets, loneliness, self-esteem problems, building confidence and giving young people confidence to talk to the right people when they need to.

Speakers on the day included a representative from WA Police who gave students information about cyberbullying and the importance of being safe when using Facebook, Twitter and all of the things that every young person uses these days. Mrs Pamela Walsh and Mr Karl Walsh talked about dealing with grief and coping, and mechanisms for dealing with that within a person’s immediate peer group, and also as a school organisation and community. The keynote speaker was Gary “Angry” Anderson, which was a pretty big coup, because the kids had got together and said that they really wanted him, given that he had had some involvement with youth issues and they had seen and heard about him in that forum. They wanted to invite him to come to speak about some things that he had been through. The subjects covered were pretty grim; it was not a light-felt day, although there were some of those moments. We know that at any point in time, young people in the community are dealing with these issues every day, and sometimes in isolation.

Members might not be aware but “Angry” Anderson was a victim of sexual and physical abuse as a child and his abuse started at the age of five. He told the forum that he was a very isolated and introverted child who grew up into an angry, violent adult. In his own words, rock ‘n’ roll legitimised his behaviour, but by his own admission he was in a pretty self-destructive place. His message to the students was about having the confidence and courage to speak out when they are in trouble and when they feel like things are getting out of control, and to make sure that they do not deal with things by themselves. Very clearly, he was saying that life could be tough and that people will get knocked down; he did not pull any punches. He said people will get knocked down, but their resilience, and what they need to do, is about getting back up and knowing where to go for help.

As I have read out, there were many support organisations in the room that day to offer kids really good advice about how to go about dealing with times of crisis, but also ongoing problems in their own families and friends’ groups. I think they left the forum knowing that there were organisations in their communities that were there to help when they got to a point in their lives at which they could not cope by themselves.

There was also a strong thread running through the whole forum of building understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. I think it is true to say that so much conflict experienced by young people is about being different—whether someone is Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, whether they dress differently, whether they look different or whether they speak differently. When someone is young problems seem insurmountable, and it is very unfortunate that sometimes in that situation they think they have nothing left to do apart from completing suicide. Certainly, there were tales of that being talked about during this day. Like I said, it was not a light-hearted day for many students because they were dealing with the grim reality that some of their friends had completed suicide and they were now dealing with the aftermath.

I would like to record my appreciation and commend those who were part of the organisation of the day, in particular Mr and Mrs Karl and Pamela Walsh, and all the students who had input into creating the day. I would really like to see that those students who went through this process continue to organise forums like this into the future and be able to pass that skill on to students coming up through the ranks. It is really important that they are able to participate in the design of things that are there to assist them and I think they had a really strong sense of ownership, along with Pamela, Karl and others. Dealing with loss, stress, anxiety or mental illness as a young person does sometimes seem insurmountable and I think if the event can evolve into a regular forum for and by young people, something good has happened out of what was really a very, very tragic event. These people have taken it and done something positive for the community and I really commend them for that.

*House adjourned at 9.59 pm*

---