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## **Westpac Australian Community Idol 2009**

Communities in Control Conference  
Melbourne, 15 June, 2009

**Melanie Tate**

**Executive officer, Edmund Rice Camps**

**Natalie King**

**Camps and youth coordinator, Edmund Rice Camps**

## Melanie Tate:

We are both delighted and honoured to be selected as finalists for this award. Today Natalie and I are speaking on behalf of the many volunteers, children, young people and families that make up the Edmund Rice Camps.

We've been providing these services since 1990 and believe we create real and lasting change for children and families in South Australia. Although camps back in the beginning were a far cry from the way we operate today - a ute, a few tents and some borrowed equipment was all that was needed back then – the heart of why ERC was providing the services remains true today, providing kids in need a break from their everyday lives and planting the seed of the idea within them that anything is possible, while at the same time helping young adults develop leadership skills and belief in themselves that they can make a difference.

As we've been in operation for a number of years now we are able to see the results of some of the seeds that ERC has planted with participants. At one camp there was a group of volunteers, most of whom were female, who were eagerly looking into a newspaper to check their Year 12 results and see what courses they got into. Some young female participants on that camp wanted to see what all the excitement was about and asked volunteers what was going on. After being told what the volunteers were doing, the participants shrugged and said, "What's the point? Girls don't get into courses that mean anything important anyway."

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The volunteers on that camp took the time to discuss their aspirations for study and future employment with the participants and let them know too that these paths could be possible for them if they wanted them.

Many years later we have learned that some of those participants have indeed successfully gone onto tertiary education.

From our humble beginnings, we have grown to become one of SA's leading organisations for respite and holiday programs for children, young people and families. Additionally we have become leaders in the field of adult education through child safe environment training.

For me, it's a privilege to work with our small but exceptional operational team which consists of only five staff members but the many generous extraordinary people who volunteer to assist ERC. At present we have over 400 active volunteers.

Our volunteers work in just about every area of the organisation's operations, from administration and management through to service planning and delivery of camps and trainings.

When I visited one of our camps for older boys I was met by a participant who had been making camp a particularly difficult one for others. It seemed he knew I was coming to camp and he made an effort to greet me. He asked me if it was true I was the boss. I think he was worried he was going to get into trouble. He asked me whether I get paid. I told him I did, but that everyone else on the camp was there voluntarily and they didn't get paid anything to come on camp. The look on his face was priceless. He asked me, "then why do they come on

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camps?” I said that the volunteers were there because they really cared about kids. They were there because they wanted to make a difference and they wanted to make sure that everyone on the camp had a good time.

He was totally speechless. This particular young boy is under guardianship of the Minister and lives in a residential unit, so for him to be attending a camp like ours and spending time with people that are not paid to be present with him is something that’s really special. Needless to say, for the remainder of camp his behaviour had totally changed. He left camp with tears in his eyes.

In telling you that story I want to also let it be known though that changing kids’ behaviour is, as I’m sure you’ll agree, rarely that easy.

### **Natalie King:**

The demand for our services, coupled with our ability to meet that demand, has grown enormously. Just eight years ago we conducted five camps, supporting 100 children. This year we are very proud to be supporting over 400 children, young people and their families by providing 23 camps, as well as conducting over 50 trainings for members of the community in child safe environments.

We deliberately try to ensure that our service is accessible to all of those who need it. At times this presents us with challenges. One of the many examples we have is where a young Aboriginal boy was flown down to camp from a rural area in South Australia. We arranged overnight accommodation for him prior to the camp.

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The boy had a developmental delay and was very quiet with the volunteers who met him at the airport, not saying a word. The host family though had a massive TV and upon seeing it the boy's eyes lit up and he said, "That's a bloody big TV." They couldn't stop him talking after that.

That boy has since graduated from camps and he's told us of his aspirations to start Edmund Rice Camps in his home town. This is not an isolated incident for us. We could give you so many more stories about collecting clothes, dropping off food for families, funding flights, arranging accommodation, or the many other support services we have and do provide for families when there's a need.

The outcomes of attending camps are often far more than the benefit of actual time away. One of the many traditions on our camps is to have everyone on camp write affirmations or notes to each other. These are then sent out to the volunteers and participants the week after camp. A foster carer of one of our participants told us that the notes were so special to him that once he received them he placed them in a special photo album. Whenever he has a rough day he takes the time to read those affirmations and they've really helped him through some tough times.

Looking into the not too distant future, it is hard to believe that in 2010 ERCSA will be celebrating twenty years of operating successfully as a grass roots NGO, making a positive difference to thousands of children, young people and their families.

The future of Eddie Rice Camps certainly looks exciting with new programs and services, both in trainings and camps on the horizon for the next few years.

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**Melanie Tate:**

We've been tested by some challenging circumstances. We've been encouraged by the outcomes of our initiatives and are on track to create a brighter future for the organisation and the many disadvantaged children it helps. Our agency is modestly resourced in relation to people and funds. However ERC supporters are abundant with passion and energy and we continue to achieve extraordinary outcomes.

We've prepared a short slide show that we hope will tell you a little more about Edmund Rice Camps and the services we offer. After that we were hoping we'd have a little bit of time for a camp song but I think seeing these guys ran out of time we may not.

So thank you for listening to us.

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