

Putting youth in the picture

By JAMES NASON

ONE bad decision can ruin a young life. It is a fact that Toowoomba solicitor Adair Donaldson knows only too well. Over the past 15 years he has witnessed a steady stream of young men and women arrive at his office door, their lives shattered by a poor split second decision involving alcohol, drugs, violence or motor vehicles.

And invariably these are not "bad kids", but good people from good families, including many from country areas. Their experiences serve as proof that simply living in the bush provides no guarantee that parents can shield their children from the consequences of bad decisions.

What most struck Mr Donaldson, he said, was that most could have been avoided had the young adults involved possessed a better knowledge of the law surrounding common social situations.

"What really alarmed me was that a lot of those young kids coming before us had no idea what the law was and so they thought they would be okay," he said.

What prompted Mr Donaldson and fellow solicitor Peter Shannon, his partner in Shannon Donaldson Province Lawyers, to finally take matters into their own hands was their disillusionment with expensive but clearly ineffective Government approaches to the problem.

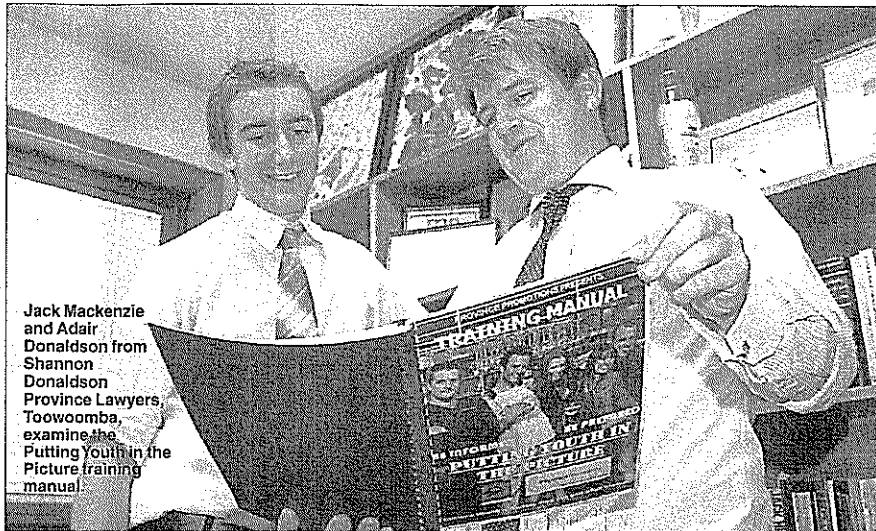
When the Federal Government mailed brown envelopes to every household in 2007 as part of its \$47 million How To Talk To Your Kids About Drugs campaign, Mr Donaldson said the feedback from parents was clear. They thought the information was great, but it was not making them have a conversation with their children.

At the same time school-based youth health workers were being given boxes full of Government funded stress balls to give away but had annual funding of just \$500 a year to address the key issues.

In 2007, Mr Donaldson and Mr Shannon decided to act. They reached deep into their own pockets and funded the development of an educational program targeted at 15 to 30 year olds.

They sought direct input from those who know the target audience best – teachers, health workers, nurses, parents, police officers – and, of course, 15 to 30-year-olds themselves. They also paid a young movie maker to develop several short films aimed showing re-enactments of common social situations in which young people make bad decisions that land them in trouble with the law, or as victims of assaults or accidents.

Three years after developing the Putting Youth in the Picture program, its effectiveness has been highlighted by the more than 120 schools that have used it, and the many large and iconic employers



Jack Mackenzie and Adair Donaldson from Shannon Donaldson Province Lawyers, Toowoomba, examine the Putting Youth in the Picture training manual.

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a one-off presentation or advertising campaign that is likely to be quickly forgotten. And it is hard hitting. Each scenario shown in the DVDs is based on an actual legal case. Some are highly confronting, but that's the point.

"Our message is that we shouldn't be sugar coating these issues," Mr Donaldson said. "These young people are smart and empathetic. I think they're a wonderful generation. So rather than imposing solutions on them, we have said, why aren't we showing these situation warts and all, and then allowing them to tell us how they could be avoided."

The program has reached thousands of young adults across Australia and the feedback from students has been overwhelmingly positive about its effectiveness in helping them to understand the legal consequences of their decisions.

While the program has received widespread praise, what Mr Donaldson and Mr Shannon would like most is meaningful Government backing to enable the program to be spread throughout the entire community.

However, despite boasting a real-world take-up rate that would be the envy of any Government department, the Queensland Government's response remains disappointingly dismissive on that score. Mr Donaldson said that despite continual attempts, he has barely been able to get a hearing from a policy advisor, let alone a Government minister.

Toowoomba South MP, Mike Horan, told Queensland Parliament recently the State Government had spent \$700,000 on an unproven internet campaign but was

choosing to ignore an effective and evidence-based resource that had been produced in regional Queensland.

"If this Government wanted to, it could ensure that it was available to every school, business, community organisation and sporting club throughout Queensland for a fraction of the cost of what this Government has just spent on an unproven, flashy internet campaign looking at a single issue," Mr Horan said.

Mr Donaldson said that despite "wonderful congratulatory letters from state and federal government organisations" there had been no assistance with funding. "Personally I think that the government seems only interested in initiatives they have thought up themselves. They presume that any resource developed in regional Queensland will have been filmed on a Handycam and be accompanied by duelling banjos.

"In contrast our resource rivals anything that has been produced by a government organisation and we have achieved this at a fraction of the cost."

● Visit www.puttingyouthinthepicture.com