

## ANZSOG Case Program

# Mutual respect: Tackling youth crime in Blacktown (B)

2017-192.2

Blacktown Local Area Commander Mark Wright had cracked down on disruptive and illegal activities in the 'Chernobyl' of Blacktown CBD, and had started to gather some information about who was coming there to cause trouble and why. Traditional law enforcement tools such as bail conditions enabled him to exclude from the area outsiders who were coming in to organise fights, but he still needed a plan for dealing with local youth who congregated at the shopping centre and train station. He wanted to engage the kids in fun and beneficial activities, help them feel ownership of the local area, and connect the different cultural groups with each other – but he knew he couldn't do it on his own.

### Strange bedfellows

A number of youth-focused NGOs operated in the Blacktown area, and in September 2009 Wright invited several of them to a very unusual meeting at Westpoint shopping centre. He had an idea to share with them.

They showed up somewhat cautiously at first, as government funding models tended to pit them against each other. Wright explained:

There were multiple local service providers who were committed to the area but lacked any coordination. ... An example was a homework club that was being conducted by four different NGOs, on the same night. The challenge to secure the funding was dependent upon the number of attendees and had become a competition.

This case was written by Sophie Yates for Professor Paul 't Hart, Utrecht University. It has been prepared from field research and from published materials as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The assistance of Mark Wright, George Giannikos, Cate Sydes, Joanne Tau and Alan Pendleton is appreciated, but responsibility for the final content rests with ANZSOG.

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Some of the people around the table had been in direct rivalry with others for government funding, said Marist Youth Care CEO Cate Sydes: “Not-for-profits, it’s a novelty, and only probably very recently, that we work side by side with each other rather than having government tenders put us in competition with each other”. She also recalled that some local NGOs were displeased at not being invited too, but this had been a very deliberate strategy on the part of Wright: “I was very conscious of saying ‘I don’t want 40 people at the table, because we won’t actually achieve anything’. So I hand-picked the group of eight or nine”.

Other attendees included Westpoint Operations Manager George Giannikos and representatives from Blacktown City Council, the NSW Department of Juvenile Justice, and two members of local church Breakthrough.<sup>1</sup> Jojo Tau from Breakthrough had done some community organising in the past, but wasn’t sure what she and husband Joe were doing there. Unbeknownst to her, Wright had systematically targeted them as people with community influence who would want to be involved for the right reasons. Tau recalled how Mark’s opening statement captured them all:

Mark spoke about what he was trying to achieve, and that was about us all coming together to fill the gaps, and to really impact the youth and make them part of the community, and feel like they had that ownership. We were on it, we were going to be part of this. And that’s where the journey started.

### Ask them

Pretty quickly, everyone was on board with Wright’s vision of creating a diversion program for local youth that would help them build skills and relationships, and feel ownership of the area. But they didn’t want to do it in a top-down way; as Wright put it, “what we had to do was organise something that attracted them, that they were actually interested in doing”. He realised that until now nobody had asked these young people what they wanted, at least not in a systematic fashion:

I used to have blews with the Council all the time. The Council wanted to build a skate park. These kids play basketball. A skate park is what the parents wanted – Council would say they’d done a survey of the community households, well who fills out a community household survey? The parents.

Here is where the newly minted partnership started to come into its own. With Wright’s tactical team still securing the area, three NGOs were able to send their youth workers out onto Blacktown’s streets. Over 12 separate evenings in late 2009, these workers interviewed over 1,500 young people to ask why they were ‘hanging out’ at the station and the shopping centre, and what activities they’d like instead.

A picture started to emerge of a group of young people who not only knew what they wanted, but had clear hopes and aspirations for the future. Cate Sydes reflected that this was a pivotal point for the partnership:

We had two ways of going. I know when we originally started, we started saying what we were going to do to these kids, and then after reading all the survey responses, we realised they should be doing it for themselves.

They decided to call themselves COM4unity,<sup>2</sup> and set about facilitating the programs the young people had said they wanted.

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<sup>1</sup> A full list of partners can be found at *Exhibit 1*.

<sup>2</sup> This stood for “connecting our minds for unity” – with a reference to level 4, which had been the most troubled spot in Westpoint.

## The dream team

From September 2009, COM4unity met once a month on level 4 of Westpoint. Despite some initial ‘hiccups’ resulting from NGO competitiveness, the partnership quickly realised they had a lot of power to get programs moving. Some of this seemed to be about the passion of those around the table for helping young people, but some was about the seniority of those involved. Everyone could make decisions right then and there, and offer pieces of the resourcing and logistical puzzle to make an idea come to fruition. For Sydes, this was key: “Having senior people was really important, because I could say ‘I’ll supply five youth workers on Thursday night’, and could sign off on the overtime”. And they were all equal partners in the endeavour: Wright didn’t want the strategy to rely on his leadership alone, because it would be likely to fall apart if he left. Also, despite the police force’s command and control culture, he was used to looking for a better way to do things and knew that this kind of complex social problem wouldn’t yield to one person “at the top of the pyramid” calling the shots.

Instead, each partner played to their strengths – as Wright recalled, “there was no challenge we couldn’t address as a group”. Tau and her husband were experienced and passionate youth organisers, but that was just the start:

So Joe and I came up with this program, and then we were like ‘we need a venue’, Westpoint goes ‘I can get the venue for you guys’. And then ‘we need some food for the kids’, Hillsong was like ‘I’ll bring that’. We needed some help, Marist said ‘I’ll bring some youth workers for you’, and that’s exactly how it worked for a long time. It wasn’t about trying to look for someone to fund or donate, it was about bringing what we had and making it work.

According to various partners, Westpoint’s involvement – through Operations Manager Giannikos (known as ‘G-Unit’ by kids who couldn’t pronounce his name) – was indispensable to the success of their vision. He could authorise the use of venue space, brief his security team on more lenient ways of operating, encourage vendors to employ young people in their stores, organise food donations, and even employ young people directly in the centre’s offices. He created an environment in which Wright’s mantra of ‘mutual respect’ could flourish. But things weren’t all smooth sailing further up the corporate ladder:

QIC [the parent company], being a very conservative Queensland government corporation, didn’t like that sort of thing. They’d ask ‘what’s going on down there?’ I got a lot of flak from my head of operations up in Queensland, and I said ‘you’re not here to see what we’re dealing with. Instead of fighting fire with fire, we’re trying to extinguish the possibility of a fire’.

Wright was also having to placate other groups who’d heard about COM4unity and wanted to join. He clung to his vision of a selective group of high-powered decision-makers, but wanted others to feel involved in the efforts too:

I would simply say, ‘what can you bring to the table?’ So if they were able to provide a band or something I’d say ‘that’s great, but you don’t need to sit at the table as a COM4Unity member, you need to work with one of the members who are delivering the music’. So it was very much about streaming.

## The United Nations in Blacktown

COM4unity’s first big program, spearheaded by Jojo and Joe Tau, was a dance showcase. They called it Switch, because “it was like a light switch, you dance to come out of the dark and come into the light”. Ambitiously, they planned to hold this showcase on the very stage where previously groups of young people and security guards had clashed. And they were going to require much more of the participants than just attending a few choreography sessions. Tau explained:

Our programs were centred on not letting the adults run it – let the kids run it and take ownership of it, let’s mentor them so that they take pride in what they’re doing. They will also believe in what they’re delivering.

Every Friday night for six weeks, increasingly large groups of young people would come to the gym at Westpoint for a two hour session. It would start with a mentoring and icebreaking component, so the kids could get to know each other. The facilitators would pick leaders from the young people to help mentor the others, and be advocates for COM4unity out in the community. Then there would be a choreography session, finishing with a freestyle 'jam' session and a meal. As the date of each performance got closer, the youth workers mentored participants in how to run the event itself: risk assessments, run sheets, sound and light production, and emcee duties were all managed by the young people.

Switch performances were always held on a Thursday night, to replace the chaos of 'fight night' with a positive showcase of youth talent. Mayor Alan Pendleton came to every show and sat down the front next to Wright.<sup>3</sup> Having been a COM4unity champion behind the scenes at Council meetings, he was keen to demonstrate his support publicly and provide a symbol that these people mattered to Blacktown Council:

As Mayor of a city of 250,000, it was a 24/7 day and you're just trying to work everything in. But I always made time for this, because I felt the benefits we'd get out of it if we could involve [the young people]. ...I've still got my Switch t-shirt.

Sometimes he'd get dragged up on with the kids, alongside the police Youth Liaison Officer, who would come in a penguin mascot costume and get down on his hands to break dance. To further show his support, Pendleton twice invited COM4unity groups to perform at Blacktown Council's Christmas party. Tau recalled: "He opened up opportunities like that to really show the community what these kids were doing. They weren't just ratbags hanging out, look at what they've been able to accomplish".

Most importantly, according to Sydes, Switch broke down the barriers between the warring groups of young people:

This is a perfect example of social cohesion. The gangs of kids that were hanging around hated each other, but they didn't know each other. Once they started organising this stuff, the Africans saw that the Filipinos were actually nice people ...And then because they were the key people in those groups, they brought their teams with them. We would have the United Nations on the stage, it was just a magnificent thing.

At the same time, Marist Youth Care were running a retail accreditation course, after a third of the young people surveyed had said they were interested in retail training or employment.<sup>4</sup> This kind of program killed several birds with one stone, as it taught the young people jobsearch and employment skills, enabled some of them to actually find employment, and increased their sense of ownership of the shopping centre.

Other COM4unity initiatives included a musical program (Switch Sing) and the COM4unity Cup – a yearly soccer tournament with police, local high school students, and NGO teams. Westfield Operations Manager Giannikos would play too, and he reflected on how it humanised them for the young people:

It was so funny, our terms of reference was COM4Unity and the police lose to all the schools, either draw or lose but make it look funny. But when we played the police, it had to be serious. What was so powerful with these kids was "look at these two guys that are dictating terms to police and security guards and staff, but they're here talking to us like human beings, and playing soccer with us".

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<sup>3</sup> See *Exhibit 2* for a picture including Mark Wright, Alan Pendleton and the Switch crew.

<sup>4</sup> See *Exhibit 3* for a diagram of COM4unity's first 10 months of operation.

## Changing lives

COM4unity's success was reflected by the changing police, security and retail statistics – assaults, train station robberies and 'code black' shopping centre brawls went down (*Exhibit 4*). Car thefts from Westpoint carpark, according to Giannikos, went from one per day to zero. The shopping centre became fully tenanted, and foot traffic increased as people felt safe to use the area again. Even Giannikos' senior management team in Queensland came around to the approach – once they saw how the metrics had changed.

But the COM4unity members were most enthusiastic about being a part of something that truly changed the lives of its participants. Sydes reflected that the thing that makes her feel best is attending Switch events, where "you see the joy of these kids, and you see that maybe this is the first time they've ever done anything successfully. I know some of these kids that have got jobs and it's turned their lives around". Tau agreed – "I wish I could just bundle up these stories and share them".

One such story was Ray, then in his mid-teens, who participated in the first Switch showcase. Now in his early 20s, he studies and works full time, supports his family, and runs his own dance crew. Mahalia was also one of the first Switch kids, and now plays on the national Women's Rugby Union Sevens team. Another boy decided to "swallow his pride" and repeat Year 12 despite all his mates moving on. He has recently got his driver's licence, and couldn't be more proud:

Things like that, those are the wins that mean a lot to them. It may not be a big thing to us, but to them it's huge. And he finished school well, and he wants to be a youth worker, that's even better.

Others became teachers, or came back as adults to mentor new groups of creative young people showcasing their talent and determination to the people of Blacktown.

As for Wright, he remained Chair of COM4unity until his transfer in early 2014, and received press accolades<sup>5</sup> and awards for his work with the young people of Blacktown. However, he credited the success of the partnership to the passion and commitment of its members:

I was very fortunate that I had such a good group of people, and that Blacktown was full of goodwill. It just needed someone to pull it together.

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<sup>5</sup> [Blacktown ethnic strife eased by program policeman put in place](#), *Daily Telegraph*, February 4 2017.

[Young talent revealed](#), *Blacktown Sun*, 9 June 2014.

[Blacktown unblackens its name](#), ABC 7:30, 5 January 2012.

Exhibit 1: The COM4unity partners\*



**OUR AIM**

To develop a pathway for young people  
to become meaningful participants  
in our community.

**WHO ARE WE?**



\* As at COM4unity official launch in 2010

## Exhibit 2: Switch Showcase

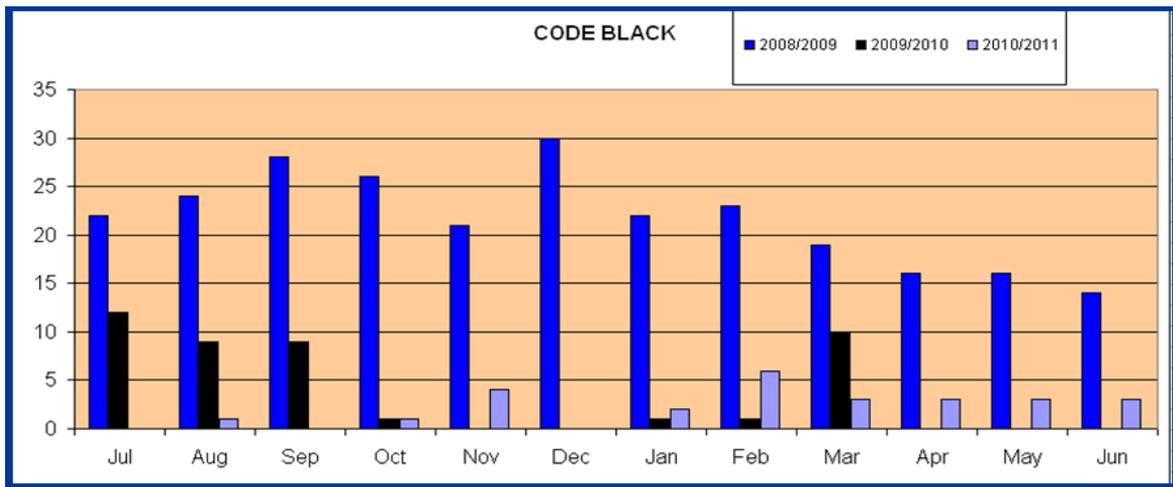


*Blacktown Mayor Alan Pendleton (back left), Jojo Tau, Joe Tau, Mark Wright (second row) and the Switch crew.*

Source: <http://www.blacktownsun.com.au/story/1738899/blacktown-program-helps-keep-youth-out-of-trouble/>



#### Exhibit 4: 'Code black' statistics



Source: provided by Superintendent Mark Wright.