



YOUTH REZOLUTIONS

A BIGGER PICTURE

Anne Bonnefin talks with Shai Mikus and Michelle Comito from Youth Rezolutions



Youth Rez is a service of Saints Care and is funded by NSW Government Specialist Homelessness Services. It supports young people 16-25 years including young parents from the Blacktown, Hills and when needed the Parramatta and Cumberland regions.

Anne: Tell me a bit about yourself and your role at Youth Rez.

Shai: I've been working at YouthRez for over a year. I started as a youth case worker and facilitator and now I've moved into the position of program lead. My role involves doing case management work with our young people and also overseeing the launch of our Mentoring Program - which is very exciting! We are trying to recruit university students at the moment and get them trained up to link with young people as a mentor.

Anne: What universities are you working with?

Shai: We have a few different universities that we are recruiting from at the moment. Western Sydney, UNSW and ACU to name a few.

Anne: And are they students that are studying Social Work?

Shai: They are students that are studying a degree that is related to the field. So they may be studying Social Work. They may be studying Psychology. They might be studying Criminology. Their degree needs to be related to the Social Services Sector.

Anne: And is this role a placement? Do they get credits for working with Youth Rez?

Shai: No it's a voluntary position. The good thing for the volunteers is that they get trained in accredited programs like Youth Mental Health First Aid and Accidental Counselling. So they receive skills and training in areas that will help once they are looking to start their career.

Anne: Is there a set amount of time that they volunteer?

Shai: They are going to be volunteering while they are connected to University. And the way that it will work is that once they are matched up with a young person they will be working with that young person for a period of three months and then we will be reviewing the plan with that young person. They can work with the young person for up to a period of nine months.

Anne: Is this program already up and running?

Shai: At the moment we are in the recruitment phase. So right now we have put out emails and advertising to get the university students to our Expression of Interest page. Then in the new year we'll be running

our orientation and induction and then be looking at matching.

Anne: How exciting!

Shai: Yes it is!

Anne: So I guess, your role is really facilitation - making it happen.

Shai: Yes, I'll be supporting the mentors with the work that they will be doing and if there is anything that comes up with the mentees that might not be within the mentors scope that would be my responsibility also.

Anne: What do you see as the main issues in Australia that confront young people currently? Young people that you see or young people in general.

Shai: For the young people that I work with I would say the biggest issue that they are facing is family and domestic violence or lack of parent education and therefore parent support to the young person who might be facing something like a mental health concern or gender diversity. So they are not having that acceptance. When the education for the parent is failing this results in a lack of acceptance which might also then boost those levels of family and domestic violence. So it's around discrimination of young people who don't fit the mainstream. Such as young people who are dealing with gender diversity. Maybe they aren't presenting as either male or female the way that they were biologically assigned when they were born or maybe they are experiencing mental health issues and the family are under-resourced and unable to support that young person.

Anne: How do the young people know to contact Youth Rez?

Shai: We get referrals from other service providers. So that might be another specialist homelessness service. It could be a mental health services. It could be a school. It could be a community group. It could be the police. It might be the justice department or it may be a self referral. We do get a couple of young people who do come through our website and self refer as well. So we get them from all over the place.

Anne: So the recent webinar that YouthRez conducted was a bit of an eye opener to me because it was talking about the connection between domestic violence and youth homelessness. Is there a major correlation between the young people who present to you and domestic violence?

Shai: Yes - the majority of young people are coming from that background. Where there has been family breakdown and home is not necessarily a safe or supportive environment for them. Being able to have a safe and stable base is what's required for you to be able to make improvements in your life whether that's

for your mental health or for your education or your employment. All that stuff is really hard to manage or progress if you don't have a safe, stable home to do it from. You need to be able to have that safe stable place where you can return to and be comfortable and not be in a constant state of survival to be able to make progress.

Anne: How will the mentors assist the young people?

Shai: Our mentors will be working with young people who are no longer experiencing circumstances that require that level of support from a case worker. So they may be a young person who has gone through our case management program and are actually ready to go but they still want to be connected and require a little bit of general guidance as they are finishing off with Youth Rez or they may have been with another service that has done a similar thing and they just want somebody to stay connected for a light, soft close.

Anne: Is there a clear path or stepping stones that you take young people through within YouthRez or is it individualised ie. Do you work with the emergency situation of housing and then you look at the other needs of that young person?

Shai: When a young person is referred into our service we have our intake and compliance worker Georgia. She goes over a big intake and triage process with that young person or the referrer. And so as the case workers we get a bunch of information about different domains in their lives. Home and living situation, physical or mental health, social relationships. That kind of gives us an overview. We will have our initial meeting with that client where we explain our service, we will get consent and then we will talk with them about what they feel are the most pressing issues. It might be that they need emergency accommodation or they need to be housed asap. That's the case managers role to assist them with that. The case managers will look at not only just their housing situation but also living skills, education and employment and will explore all those areas with them through our living skills assessment to determine if there are other areas that we need to support them in. So all of that sort of stuff is done at a case management level. Once they are in more of a stable setting; their circumstances are stabilised, they've got secure housing, potentially they have been set up with employment or education and they are in more of a stable spot, a mentor can step in and go "Hey, just here to give that general guidance." And potentially the young person might go "I just want to get better at cooking." Or "I want to get better at talking to people." Or "I want to get better at creating a study schedule." So those lighter touch, not as intensive intervention level is what the mentor will be doing.

Anne: What motivates you Shai and why have you chosen to work in this field?

Shai: For me - I do have some lived experience and experienced similar circumstances when I was growing up and that probably started my interest in this work but it's actually a massive privilege to be trusted enough to be invited into a young person's world and be allowed to support them - that's what keeps me going. It's a massive privilege and being able to show young people that despite what challenges they may face things are still possible for them. That they can achieve goals they set for themselves and that they can access and do deserve the same access to things that everybody else gets. Being able to share in their wins is really great! Being able to be a part of that is just a massive privilege that gives me lots of warm fuzzy feelings. Even little things like finding out that a client has established a romantic partner last week - I was like "Yeah!" Because that was a win for that client. Being able to share in these things is a JOY!

Anne: Michelle - could you share a little about yourself and your role at Youth Rez?

Michelle: So my role is to manage the Youth Rez services. There are lots of elements to that. A big part of my role is to support staff who are delivering the front line work. To nurture them in their capabilities and their own progression in their practice and to make sure all of the practice that we are delivering is safe and evidence based. As well as that there is the administrative role and the bigger picture, maintaining funding and compliance and making sure we are working within legislation and also fulfilling an advocacy role. Where we identify gaps, we advocate on behalf of young people and communities to help fill them.

Anne: Michelle, how much of your role is administrative and how much is collaborative. Do you get involved with cases?

Michelle: I guess I provide supervision to the staff both formally and informally. We are constantly talking about clients, scenarios, groups and ethical dilemmas - all those sorts of things - yes - I'm that backing support for these guys. If anything gets escalated I get involved and I'm there to help address that situation. If there is maybe a really complex client and there is high risk there then maybe I'll step in a little bit more side by side with that worker to support them more so. But our workers are very skilled and very passionate, and I do trust them. So they do their thing and I provide that support and guidance along the way.



Photo by Quinton Coetzee on Unsplash

Anne: What is the reach of YouthRez?

Michelle: We cover the whole of western Sydney. That includes The Hills, Blacktown LGA, Parramatta and Cumberland. However according to our funding our priority areas are The Hills and Blacktown which is why we have physical hubs in each of these spaces. But our clients come from all over. So our outreach is across the region. Our outreach is to clients and we deliver groups across the region.

Anne: What age do you mostly deal with?

Michelle: We are funded to deal with 16 to 25 year olds and I am currently doing some work to see if we can acquire funding to support from 12 years up in the Hills area. There is not one service that provides case management support to 12 to 15 year olds in our area. Where as, in other regions there is at least an option of at least one service that has that funding. In The Hills they don't have that funding at all. So what happens is that all the school services, communities where crisis happens they don't have anywhere to send that young person. So schools are trying to manage the issue within the school but they are very limited and the problems are just escalating. The population is at an increase. The Hills is the second fastest growing populated area in NSW from the latest census and also holds the largest populated public school in the state and it's a ticking time bomb. So what we are trying to advocate for - "Let's have support and intervention now. Why do we have to wait until crisis. Why can't we prevent it now." This is a part of our advocacy work.

Anne: Is the role of Youth Rez to advocate for families or for young people?

Michelle: There are family services but these services don't necessarily engage with the young person. What the gap is having a worker or service that works directly with the young person. So there are family services that support parents but that isn't enough because obviously this has been going on for many many years and so what we are saying is "Twelve to fifteen year olds deserve to have their own worker." If you are a caseworker for a parent, chances are you are not going to be able to meet with that younger person because that young person already is judging that case worker - "You are on mum's side already." "You are on dad's side so I'm not going to talk to you." That's where the barriers come into play and so that's why lots of other regions have youth case workers for that age group. The youth case worker advocates and supports the young person and then works with the family case worker for the best outcome. But in the Hills they don't have that options so things just bubble and bubble.

Anne: So the main issues you are seeing with young people are homelessness and issues within families?

Michelle: Domestic and family violence is the biggest cause of youth homelessness across the state. Data tells us this as well as experience. This is biggest cause of why young people walk through our doors across all our services. There are lots of other issues. We have a growing number of young people accessing our services who are identifying as being a part of the LGBTQI+community. They have issues of people not accepting their identity and not understanding them and this is why they might access our services. Cultural identity is also another big one. There can be a lot of generational cultural conflict and so we have a lot of young people from various different cultures that maybe haven't been accepted by their family because they haven't followed a certain cultural value or something like that.

There is also a bigger picture of our space as well. Affordable housing across the board is a massive issue. Doesn't matter if your income is stable or not finding affordable housing in the current climate is huge. So what we are seeing in the homelessness space there are more and more people having to access support services and it is not just people who are living in low socioeconomic areas. It's people who are owning mortgages and houses and now can't afford it because the markets are going crazy. There are impacts to incomes and jobs. There is a higher rate of mental health at the moment because of all these big impacts so young people are now growing up in this climate - watching their parents really stressing, watching their parents declining mental health because they can't maintain mortgages and this has a ripple effect on young people looking to their future thinking "I'm never going to own a house." Or "If I have a house - what's the point." So their mental health declines. It's a bigger picture we are seeing. The scope of young people we see are from all sorts of backgrounds. It could be from a family with a lot of money to families with no money. We see young people across the spectrum.

Anne: Gosh - that's given me a lot to think about. Do you support young families and young mums?

Michelle: We support young families - we have parents who are 16 right through to 25 with children. They can access all of the support that we have. Shai can you explain how we support young families?

Shai - Yes - I have a couple of clients that have children. I'm working with a young mum at the moment who is in a relationship where she is acting like a single mother. So we support her by linking her in with mum's and bub's groups. We are linking her in with parenting courses to not only skill her

up but also provide her with more opportunities to network with other people than just her partner. I also have another young family where we assist with brokerage resources and are helping them set up a family home. We have helped them with things like a dining table and lounge and items required for their children. And then the other side of the spectrum is that we work with young people who have actually had their children removed from their care due to concerns so they are going through the restoration process and trying to meet tasks and trying to fight for that restoration - so supporting them through that process. And that will be linking them in again with education programs to up skill them in their parenting levels like the triple P parenting course or potentially they might need support with substance misuse. They might need support with mental health concerns and we are also supporting them through the court process as well - not necessarily supporting them from a legal aspect but providing them with a support person who is available to be there with them when they are attending meetings and to support them emotionally throughout the process.

Anne: Marvellous - Michelle there must be more young people than you can possibly help. Are you able to meet the demand in the area?

Michelle: No! We have a wait list that makes me cringe and the guys are under the pump as it is. I don't think that any service could say that they are comfortably meeting the needs in their area. None of us are, because it takes big decisions up above in order to assist and flow down to our field. We are all reliant on government funding therefore we are reliant on decisions that get made in government. And that can change because government changes and services change. That's why we have the advocacy element in our sector and why we collect data and analysis outcomes and advocate for communities. We make noise so the decision makers can hear. Saying "Hey we need a bit more help here to resource." We have peak bodies that speak on behalf of services. Being a homelessness service we have Y foundation (<https://www.yfoundations.org.au>) which is a peak body for youth homelessness and HomelessNSW (<https://homelessnessnsw.org.au>) - They advocate on behalf of the sector. There are a few things that they are putting through to parliament at the moment. There is a state election next year in NSW so ultimately they are asking for more funding for services to manage the demand and more access to housing properties. This is generally what they are advocating for and in the big scheme of things the amount of money that they are asking for is not that big of a deal in the scope of Australia's budget. So this all links into the economy and the bigger picture that drives the government. We are a small piece in a big picture but it all contributes.

Anne: Are there many indigenous people that YouthRez supports?

Michelle: All of our clients are across Western Sydney. For last year the stats showed that almost 30% of our clients identified as being either aboriginal or from Torres Straight Island background. I can already see that looking at our stats this year (from July to November) we are probably going to hit higher numbers this year because we have already got so many within the service. So we have First Nations People accessing our service. We really try to make sure we are accessible and we are appreciative and really respectful of the country that we are on and the culture that we live and are a part of. And so we really work side by side with our First Nations People. It's a two way street. We learn from them - they learn from us. I think about one of the families that I went out to visit with one of our other workers. They were a very strong aboriginal family and I chatted with the aunty of the young person we were involved with. The aunty told me of all her experiences growing up on land and country and how she used to cook her food and how they used to go out hunting. It was an hour long conversation of just hearing her stories and that is a big part of our service - we actually are embedded in community. We are on First Nations Peoples land so that recognition is a big part of our service. We work pretty closely with a service called Baabayn (<https://www.baabayn.org.au>). They are an aboriginal service in Mount Druitt. We do some work with their mum's group and they also have assisted us with some aboriginal and Torres straight Islander workshops. They have done painting for us. They are designing an aboriginal artwork (it's almost finished) to display in both of our hubs - we should be picking this up soon. We are really grateful for their work. There are other services as well that we connect with: Kimberwalli is an education service for young people set up to help them stay engaged in their education. There are also other bigger bodies such as the Aboriginal land council that we liaise with especially when we are needing to get certain documentation.

Anne: Finally what motivates you Michelle - why have you chosen to work in this field?

Michelle: I do genuinely like to support other people to be the best that they can be. So whether that is young people or families or community members or people that I work with, I'm very passionate about helping people reach their highest potential in whatever that looks like for them. So that's what motivates me. When we hit goals - it's a boost of motivation and it overlaps the days when we don't hit our goals and those goals go in opposite directions. The times when we do keeps me going. And being part of a community motivates me as well. Being part of a community that is making change.