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press clip

Youth crisis

Outreach worker warns of rise in 'worrying trends'

By Jason Gillick

CHILD prostitution, teenage pregnancy, chomping, drug use, violence and homelessness are all on the rise in Frankston, says youth outreach worker Byron Wilson.

"Frankston Council would be better off employing eight outreach workers who can address the issues at the cause rather than eight private security guards," Mr Wilson said.

The 25 year old has been working the streets of the south-east suburbs, including Frankston, for three years as part of Open Family Australia's outreach youth worker program.

He is on call 24 hours a day for people aged 15 to 25 who find themselves in trouble due to neglect, exploitation and abuse. Mr Wilson's brief includes helping at-risk youth access treatment programs, safe accommodation and a range of other services.

He may be called out to act as a witness for someone who has been arrested or to collect a teenage mother and her children after they missed the last train.

He also spends time at well-known hot spots such as stations and beach car parks to offer services to young people.

"I chuck on a hoody and hang out at the known areas where the kids are and try to engage the ones who have fallen through the net."

He says he has observed a number of worrying trends on the rise in Frankston such as the chomping becoming more acceptable, young girls living in squats and rises in street violence due to the use of methamphetamine.

"We work at the bottom and our main aim is to get kids out of squats, where they are abused by adults, and into rehab and suitable accommodation," Mr Wilson said

"A lot of kids – increasingly girls – are thrown out of home because of drug problems, pregnancy and mental health issues with either them or their parents."

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Byron Wilson

He says he worked for Melbourne-based agencies before realising the need for outreach services in Frankston, the community where he grew up.

Open Family was started in St Kilda in 1978 by outspoken South Melbourne priest Father Bob Maguire who, with local business support, developed new ways to engage and help the young and destitute.

"They were unique methods designed to work for the Australian underbelly; that's before *Underbelly* became fashionable," said Father Maguire, who is no longer with Open Family.

"We said to business and governments, 'you give us the tools and we'll finish the job'. You have to go out to where the people are. Nobody else was going there so we trained street teams to get out and engage people on a street level."

Father Maguire criticised Frankston Council for jeopardising public housing projects in the CBD.

"It's all for one and one for all – the people on Olivers Hill have to realise they have to share their community with the people in the Pines."

SEE Helping hand for young homeless – page 3



press clip



Bad times: Byron Wilson says Frankston's youth are exposed to increased violence and uncertainty on the streets of Frankston.

Picture: Daryl Gordon