



Community Relations Commission  
*For a multicultural NSW*



# Community Relations Youth Symposium 2006 Report

## Youth Leaders' Day

## **Community Relations Commission “*For a multicultural NSW*” and the NSW Multicultural Youth Network**

The Community Relations Commission of NSW is dedicated to promoting a cohesive and harmonious multicultural society based on mutual respect and responsibility.

The Commission continues to facilitate meaningful dialogue and collaboration between the government and our culturally diverse community to promote community harmony, maximise the benefits of cultural and linguistic diversity, and encourage the participation of all people in NSW in public life.

Each year, the Community Relations Symposium brings together experts and leaders from across New South Wales to address emerging issues and showcase the latest initiatives in multiculturalism.

The need to encourage and foster youth leadership, particularly in ethnic communities, was a central theme emerging from the 2004 and 2005 Symposia. The Youth Leadership and Mentoring Workshop conducted at the 2005 noted that many young people from ethnic communities feel under attack as result of negative media coverage, and that young people are not adequately represented by existing ethnic community organisations or community leaders.

In response to these concerns, the Commission established the NSW Multicultural Youth Network in late 2005. The Network is a group of dedicated young advocates from various cultural backgrounds committed to working together to promote cultural identity, awareness, understanding and acceptance.

In 2006, for the first time, the annual Community Relations Symposium was expanded to a two-day program with the first full day dedicated exclusively to the young people of NSW.

The NSW Multicultural Youth Network played a key role in facilitating the development of the Commission’s inaugural Youth Leaders’ Day.

### **CRC Youth Leaders’ Day: Outline of the Day**

On 22 August 2006, over 180 young people from across NSW came together at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Parramatta, to discuss current social issues in Australia.

Delegates included students from public and private schools, university students, and representatives of various youth advocacy organisations.

The program for the day was developed in association with the CRC Multicultural Youth Network, with input from youth delegates themselves, who were given the opportunity to suggest topics prior to the event through a survey.

Mr Stepan Kerkyasharian AM, Chair of the Commission, observed in his opening address that this forum:

“...is a chance for you future leaders to cut your teeth on public debate and advocacy about the social issues which you will have to navigate in the near future.

“We have long argued that senior leaders should stand aside and allow young people to start running community organisations. Otherwise young people might just drift away and lose interest. Those valuable skills of culture and language which the children of immigrants learnt at home and which have such economic and social value to our society will be lost if young people are given their chance.”

We are all aware that to date very few young people have emerged in the mainstream as spokespeople for cultural, religious or language communities. We want to turn that around. The Commission knows many young people of very high quality are out in the community. They need to be given opportunity and encouraged to step up. We know that immigrant children are well and truly over-represented at the top of the HSC results, and have been for many years. However we have yet to see many of those bright minds enter public life. We hope this Youth Leadership Day will prise open the door.”

Mr Kerkyasharian then presented the *SBS Youth Power Award* to Ms Rebecca Chedid, who performed her beautiful award-winning song for a captivated audience.

Commissioner Wajiha Ahmed welcomed youth delegates to the 2006 Community Relations Youth Leaders’ Day and outlined the program for the day.

Five workshop sessions were held from 9:30am to 11:00am and then continuing from 12:00-1:00pm. Each workshop addressed an issue identified as priorities for participants and pertinent to the day’s broad themes of leadership, multiculturalism, drugs and masculinity.

During the special sit-down lunch the masqueraded Horizon Theatre Company captured the audience’s imagination with their unique performance piece, *Love Thee*, and students from the Beverly Hills Intensive English Centre gave an upbeat performance at the end of the workshop sessions.

The keynote address for the day was delivered by 16 year old Sydney Grammar School student, Vikram Joshi, who had previously won the national finals of the Annual Plain Speaking Awards. Vikram approached the complex topic of racism through the use of humour, also stating that “I refuse to believe that the average Australian is a racist. I refuse to believe that the Cronulla riots showed everyone that a deep vein of racism ran through this nation.”

Full transcripts of the speeches by Stepan Kerkyasharian and Vikram Joshi can be viewed at <http://www.crc.nsw.gov.au/crc/forum/index.htm>

## **Emerging themes of the day**

The information below is a summary of the emerging themes from each of the workshops.

### **Workshop 1: The Renewal of Multiculturalism**

Youth Facilitator: Angelique Vongsaya, NSW Multicultural Youth Network

**Craig Laffin of Nagle College** presented on the Festival of Flags, organised by the College every two years as a way of binding people together and acknowledging their heritages. Nagle College is a Girls High School in Blacktown South with students from 80 different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The school has 90-100 flags from approximately 60 different communities. The Festival of Flags evokes strong positive emotions of unity in participants. Guest speakers in the past have included the Governor of NSW and the chair of the Community Relations Commission.

**Karen Shekata, Principal of Arncliffe West Infants School**, presented on the Interschool Harmony Committee, which is a group of 8 public, Catholic and independent schools who have combined to provide their school communities with a deeper knowledge understanding and tolerance for one another. This is achieved through a range of cultural appreciation programs and activities including play productions and combined sport carnivals for students between the ages of 4 to 7, as well as principal and teacher meetings. One program resulted in a new Children's book by well-know author, Nadia Wheatley, to be published in 2007.

**Gambhir Watts and Murli Dharan from Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Australia** presented DVD highlights from the World Culture Concert and Arts Festival 2005, which promoted Bhavan's ideal of "the world as one family" and its motto, "let noble thoughts come to us from every side".

Emerging themes of the workshop:

- Start embedding the ideals of multiculturalism from young age
- Be proactive rather than reactive
- Use the terms "understanding and acceptance" rather than "tolerance"
- Needs Govt backing
- Use and recognise the benefits that diversity already brings
- Rethink and open up debate to analysis and assessment

### **Workshop 2: Masculinity**

Facilitator: Myriam Bahari, Community Relations Commission

**Jioji Ravulo of Mission Australia** presented on Youth Offender support programs in the South West Sydney region which aimed to reduce the risk of recidivism among young offenders. Jioji spoke about his experience working with young people from Pacific communities and the need to consider the influence of different cultural understandings of gender and masculinity on young people.

**Andrew Anderson of the NSW Department of Education and Training** spoke about DET's initiatives in raising gender awareness and facilitated an interactive

workshop in which participants responded to media images of masculinity and were challenged to think about what masculinity meant for them.

Emerging themes of the workshop:

- There was a strong focus on the influence of culture and tradition on ways of being 'masculine';
- Traditional modes of masculinity and images of masculinity portrayed in the media can sometimes come into conflict with expectations about the roles of men and women in the wider society and provide conflicting role models for young men;
- Participants enjoyed the opportunity to talk about these issues in a 'safe', non-judgemental environment and indicated the need for greater opportunities to discuss the issues in this kind of context.

### **Workshop 3: Underage drinking, drugs and gambling**

Youth Facilitator: Gisselle Gallego, NSW Multicultural Youth Network

#### **Francine Seeto of the Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre**

(DAMEC) spoke on strategies and messages that have been used to address drug and alcohol abuse among young people, and asked participants if they thought these were effective. The presentation focused on the empowerment of young people through the exercise of informed critical choice.

**Charlie Fruean and Charles Lomu from Mission Australia** presented on the SWYPE (South West Youth Peer Education) initiative to engage disadvantaged young people aged 12-24, many of whom have been affected by drug abuse, in creative programs aimed at improving educational outcomes through art, drama, cultural awareness health and fitness. Programs like the U-turn canoe carving project and hip-hop workshops aim to promote self-confidence and personal development and train participants to be peer educators. The presentation concluded with a dope hip-hop performance.

#### **Echo Morgan, Manager of the Multicultural Problem Gambling Service (MPGS)**

explored some of the social causes of problem gambling problem and how problem gambling in culturally and linguistically diverse communities impacts on young people.

Emerging themes of the day:

- Young people need have the opportunity to exercise informed choice in relation to drugs;
- The importance of role models and the need for young people to be inspired and motivated by their culture were key themes of the discussion;
- Building bridges for those who have dropped out to return to education pathways.

### **Workshop 4: Youth Leadership (1) - Engaging Politics**

Youth Facilitator: Reynato Reodica, NSW Multicultural Youth Network

This workshop tackled issues about youth engagement in our political system, political activism, and how youth can bring about change through our political process. This workshop encouraged young to think more about how they can become politically active leaders in our community.

**Alexandra Moore, Chair of the Bankstown Youth Advisory Committee and representative on the Canterbury Bankstown Community Harmony Roundtable**, used examples from her own experience to give participants an idea of how to navigate through existing political and community structures to as “to be the change you want to see”. Alex pointed out some of the advocacy and representative mechanisms available to young people in schools, universities, and government advisory bodies and community networks. Alexandra is actively involved in community development and in 2003 was awarded the ‘certificate of commendation’ by the order of Australia in recognition of ‘outstanding service to the community’.

**Darren Rodrigo, policy adviser to the Minister for Housing and Minister Assisting the Minister for Health (Mental Health)**, stimulated a lively discussion about how and why young people become involved in politics. Darren stressed that while it is easy to talk about ideas and to complain, the hard part is fighting for ideas, thinking of solutions and implementing those solutions.

**Joseph Hanna, Acting Director of Parliamentary Services in the NSW Premier’s Department**, kept the discussion going by asking participants key questions like: what does politics mean to you? When do we see politics at work in our everyday life? What is power and how is it distributed? Darren stressed that there are plenty of important reasons for young people to engage in politics today and showed some of the ways in which young people can get involved. In 2001 Darren was awarded the Centenary of Federation Medal for Services to the Community.

Emerging themes of the day:

- Young people need to know they can make a difference by getting involved in the political process;
- Need to promote and raise awareness of leadership opportunities and avenues available for enacting change;
- Involvement in community service – care for others – is a form of leadership;
- Be an Active, Involved student;
- Education means educating yourself;
- Increase youth representation in the media;
- Multiculturalism is more important now than ever;
- Participants and presenters were very enthusiastic about having participated in this workshop.

### **Workshop 5: Youth Leadership (2)**

Youth Facilitator: Harry Whelan, CRC Multicultural Youth Network

**Mehal Krayem, University of Sydney student, volunteer with the Muslim Women’s Association, and coordinator of Reflection Magazine**, spoke about the aim of Reflection to educate Muslims and non Muslims about Islam by focussing on the common misconceptions generated by mass media; on the importance of being a

young leader in today's society and on what Reflection does in order to achieve its goals and promote youth leadership.

**Sheetal Challam, coordinator of the Small and Emerging Communities Project at Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre**, spoke about her work in empowering and engaging refugee young people through capacity building projects and social assistance programmes.

**Michelle Robson, teacher at Merrylands High School**, spoke on promoting leadership amongst school students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The workshop discussed some of the available avenues for students to get involved in leadership positions.

**Jennifer Bulley of Holroyd City Council, and Peer Educators Shabnam Rassoli and Katheryn Lee**, presented on the Holroyd Youth Peer Education Project "Youth Helpz YoUth" which aims to provide leadership and mentoring opportunities for young people aged 15-19 years. The program focuses on youth health issues such as sexual health, mental health, drugs and alcohol, body image, rights and responsibilities, bullying and peers pressure and other topics.

Emerging themes of the day:

- helping young people gain access to and awareness of leadership opportunities;
- increasing awareness of leadership opportunities that exist outside of the school context;
- to become a leader you need to have the right attitude; vision, you need to know what you want to achieve; passion, you need to believe in what you are doing; resilience, leadership is about serving others not others serving you;
- participants agreed that we need to promote these ideas to the young people of our society;
- Intergenerational networking and supporting parents needed to empower youth from multicultural background to be leaders;
- need to identify strengths of young people and build self-esteem

## **Outcomes of the 2006 Youth Leaders' Day**

In summary, the Commission achieved the following outcomes through the 2006 Youth Leaders' Day:

- 180 delegates participated in the day;
- 80 delegates (45%) completed evaluation forms, with 85% of responses rating the overall format of the Youth Leaders' Day as good or excellent.
- Many student delegates reported feeling special being at the Crown Plaza and being treated to a sit-down lunch;
- Many participants reported enjoying the opportunity to meet people from different cultural backgrounds.