

Speech by Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce, AC
Governor of Queensland

**Youth Advocacy Centre, 25th anniversary celebrations
& launch of YAC history, *Giving Youth a Voice*, and history
display
Banco Court, Supreme Court Complex, George Street, Brisbane**

13 October 2006

Chief Justice

Members of the Judiciary

Chair, Youth Advocacy Centre

Mr Damien Atkinson

Director

Ms Rosslyn Munro

Management Committee members, staff, and volunteers

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

I acknowledge the traditional keepers of the land on which we gather,
and observe the significance of our surrounds for this celebration of youth,
and the work of few rendered as the yield of many towards young people's
empowerment, restoration, and opportunity.

In this place whose custodians and officers:

- hold in the utmost regard those principles underpinning the fair and proper administration of justice;
- and the protection of human rights as fundamental to the functioning of our civilised society.

My friends, I cannot hide the immense admiration and joy I feel in being here this evening.

Thank you for inviting me to be part of:

- a shared reflection on a rich and uplifting story of enduring human spirit, compassion, commitment, achievement, and excellence;
- and the sense of affirmation and renewal that emerges from such long-deserved open acknowledgement.

As we do these things, we must inevitably consider again what it is that matters here, what it is that lies at the unencroachable heart of twenty-five years of individual and collective effort.

Shortly before she took her own life, Sylvia Plath wrote of a mother's yearning to protect her children from all grim reality:

Little Stalk without wrinkle,

Pool in which images

Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous

Wringing of hands, this dark

Ceiling without a star.¹

¹ Sylvia Plath, *Child*, 1963

So deeply troubled herself, she had no faculty for expressing and imagining life to her children in other than the bleakest images.

Yet children have their own reservoirs of succour and hope, their depth and nourishment often inconceivable to the jaded adults in their midst.

I remember, a couple of years ago, listening to an Australian school chaplain talking about children at prayer.²

It is not so much for its content that I share it with you now, although the children's prayers and stories were remarkable and beautiful.

Rather, it was the chaplain's decision to ask the children what they thought of when they prayed, hoping to understand better young people's experience of depression.

² Vivienne Mountain, *The Spirit of Things: Children at Prayer*, Rachel Kohn, Radio National, 26.9.04

She simply wanted to sit and listen, away from the hurly burly of the classroom; just hear what the children were saying.

Children as a group don't have a real voice, she said.

We say we listen to them, and we design our curriculum around their needs, but in reality we often just push our own little barrow and do what we've always done.³

So — as the god sat in the temple grounds and watched their childish play⁴ — she listened.

³ Vivienne Mountain, *The Spirit of Things: Children at Prayer*, Rachel Kohn, Radio National, 26.9.04

⁴ Antye, 'The Gods': appearing in Sherod Santos, *Greek Lyric Poetry*, WW Norton & Company, New York, 2005, p 100

Prayer comes from within you,

a six-year-old offered.

*It's like a thought ray, a hope or a wish, it blows. It's something
that comes from the heart, from deep down in your soul.⁵*

Earlier this year the Australian Childhood Foundation published its
report, *Every child needs a hero.*⁶ The authors' opening words lament:

*an audible silence when it comes to eliciting and reproducing the
views of children and young people.*

⁵ Vivienne Mountain, *The Spirit of Things: Children at Prayer*, Rachel Kohn, Radio National, 26.9.04

⁶ J Tucci, J Mitchell, & C Goddard, *Every child needs a hero, a report tracking Australian children's concerns and attitudes about childhood*, Australian Childhood Foundation, July 2006

Indeed, they say, their voices must be heard if *adults are to better understand their needs, support them in meaningful ways, and develop services and activities that make a positive difference to their lives.*⁷

The report tells us that young people:

*want adults to engage with them, understand the way they see the world, help them to make sense of it, share their worries, reassure them that they are safe from harm.*⁸

Observations in 2006 — much like those that Fathers Wally Dethlefs and Pat Tynan made and responded to in the early days of their work as chaplains to the Wilson Hospital, some thirty-three years ago.

⁷ Ibid, Introduction

⁸ Op cit, p 21

Observations that drove the campaigns of the *Justice for Juveniles Group* whose efforts notably crystallised in the establishment of the Youth Advocacy Centre in 1981.

Ms Gregory certainly could be forgiven for saying “the rest is history”, but, as her closing words suggest, to think of it only in those terms would be to ignore the Centre’s vast energy and ever-evolving and maturing status as a leader in the community youth sector.

In fact, there is much for which we ought to be profoundly grateful this evening:

- For a group of people whose hearts bear the inscription of a child's entitlement to the best that humanity has to give;⁹
- That, no matter the challenges in your delivery, indeed threats to your very existence, this remains the sole eternal flame guiding your path;
- For your unparalleled knowledge and wisdom, your rigorous insistence that practice always inform policy;
- For the honest, pragmatic, and sensitive recording of your passage by Helen Gregory, an accomplished historian, author, and social observer, whose talents and lack of ego allow the story to speak for itself;
- For the careful and respectful representation of that story, so appropriately placed within the forecourt of this magnificent Banco Court;

⁹ Adapted from quote by Mary Robinson, former UN High Commissioner; also a reference to the Preamble to the 1959 *UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child*

- For the passion and commitment of the Supreme Court of Queensland Library, and its Chief Librarian, Aladin Rahemtula, to the highest standards of research, analysis, archiving, and publishing;
- And for the thousands of young people, whose lives you have valued not judged; whose problems you, with them, have tackled; whose families and communities you have engaged; and whose needs and views you have given voice to.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -

I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference.¹⁰

¹⁰ Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

YAC, please stay on that road less travelled, for it is there that you have and will keep on making all the difference.

Happy, Happy Birthday!

Congratulations on 25 years of extraordinary endeavour.

And now, your greatest gift: your story of a life lived thus far.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured to launch *Giving Youth a Voice*, and its visual complement within this precinct.