

► New beginnings start with the Y

Commander Gary Budge has been a policeman for over 30 years. During that time he's spoken at many meetings and forums about the problem of broken families and children without opportunities. Too many times, he's had to deal with the end result of family breakdowns and young, repeat offenders.

Gary sits on a Youth Services committee, and it was there that the Y's Chris Camwell introduced him to the YMCA Perth Bridge Project.

The Bridge Project, launched in May, is a new YMCA Perth program to reduce re-offending rates among young people, in particular, Aboriginal young people. It creates employment opportunities and offers education, training and workplace mentoring following their release from detention. It's designed to break the cycle of re-offending by forming a connection between young offenders and the community.

The program is based on a highly successful model from the YMCA in Victoria. Over 100 participants completed The Bridge Project in Victoria from 2006 to 2010 with only four individuals returning to custody.

'I thought the Victorian results were amazing', said Gary, 'and I immediately wanted to become involved in the Perth project. In the Police, we have to deal with the messy end result of family breakdowns, but I really liked the Y's idea of getting involved early and helping prevent the problem occurring.'

'Cops are good at catching and convicting but it's good to see the Y putting more time into preventing and deterring young would-be offenders. The breakdown of our community structure is a huge problem for us; a real challenge.'

Many of the young offenders helped by the Bridge Project come from families where crime is a way of life passed down from generation to generation. By early intervention, supporting young offenders and getting them job-ready, this cycle of crime and re-offending can be broken.

Gary sees the Y's mission around building Stronger People, Stronger Families, Stronger Communities as a perfect fit with the police's philosophy.

'I've found working with the Y to be a very positive and inspirational experience', says Gary. 'They are a great

organisation and I'd be very happy to be involved in similar programs in the future – especially in regional areas where at-risk youth definitely needs positive role models and programs such as the Bridge Project.'

The Perth Bridge Project currently has funding for two years.



► The Bridge Project makes a real difference

The Bridge Project creates employment opportunities for young people and offers them education, training and workplace mentoring.

Kye is just 17 years old and before he discovered The Bridge Project, he had a few problems in his life. He was going to bed late and waking up late. A typical day involved sitting around the house doing very little.

He'd also had a few run-ins with the police and, as a result, the juvenile justice system. The State's Youth Justice and Education Department put Kye in touch with the Y's Derek Fagan, Manager of the Bridge Project.

Derek helped Kye get a job interview with Active Plumbing. Some basic interview technique training meant Kye did well at his first meeting and was offered a work experience position right away. Just one week later, Active offered him an apprenticeship.

'I was blown away,' says Kye. 'I'd always wanted to learn a trade because I knew it would give me a job for life.'

Now, instead of wasting the morning in bed, Kye is picked up for work at 6.30 am and in October, will start studying with the Master Plumbers Association.

'This opportunity has totally changed my life,' Kye says. 'I've grown up quickly and have a lot more confidence when I'm talking with people. It's also improved things at home. I get on much better now with my mum and sister. I can even afford to pay my board.'

Kye's mum, Rose, agrees. 'I was always nagging him to do something with his life, but I didn't really know how I could help him,' she says. 'I'm really proud that he managed to do all of this on his own with help from the Y. It's been really good for Kye and things at home are much less tense than they used to be.'

