



YOUNG AND HOMELESS

Streets of a boom State are not always paved with gold

■ Joseph Catanzaro



Ignored by the tide of business people sweeping past, “Matty” steps off the main street and into the alleyway, crossing the invisible threshold into Perth’s dark and dangerous underworld.

In the shadow of high-rise buildings, he turns a corner and enters an even smaller laneway, physically close but worlds away from the designer shops and cafes not 20m back down the dogleg.

Clean brickwork gives way to a jungle of graffiti. Cigarette butts and bottles litter the ground like spent bullet casings — the detritus of battles with addiction lost.

The 21-year-old raises his voice over the roar of the industrial air-conditioning units that cling to the walls. “We try to keep to places that don’t have doors any more, doors or gates,” he says.

“I’d rather wake up somewhere that’s a little bit cold than wake up and get done for trespassing.”

Crossing a no-man’s-land between opposing lines of bins, he climbs a rusted metal fire escape.

On the third floor, open to the elements but invisible from below, Matty sets up camp in an alcove, unrolling his swag on a mattress of flattened cardboard boxes.

For the past few months, this is where he and a group of Perth’s other homeless young have made their bed.

Like more than 5000 under-25s in WA, Matty is homeless. But like an increasing number of those young people, he is not a West Australian.

Drawn by the siren call of boom State WA, a growing number of young people from across Australia have discovered the hard way that the streets of WA are not paved with gold.

After getting into “a bit of trouble” in his home State of Queensland, Matty sought refuge in WA.

Down at a homeless youth drop-in centre in Northbridge called Passages, where he can shower and eat, similar stories abound.

Jessica, a 17-year-old New Zealander who has lived on the streets for the past two years, tells me that she moved with her partner from Queensland to WA looking for a fresh start. When the relationship broke down, she found herself homeless.

The largesse of the resources boom has failed to trickle down to the stairwells, underpasses and squats where she sleeps.

Because she is not an Australian resident, Jessica is not eligible for any form of financial assistance, a fact confirmed by Centrelink yesterday. She relies on charities, begging and the generosity of other homeless kids to survive.

“I’ve been charged with begging for money but I don’t get any other money, so that’s the only way I can survive,” she says. “There’s so many of us Kiwis out on the street and we don’t get anything.”

Recently the victim of a violent assault, she says life is “tough” on the streets of Perth.

St Vincent de Paul Society

spokeswoman Lucinda Ardagh believes an increasing number of interstate families and young people are moving to WA expecting to find work. When they don’t, the ensuing family breakdown and associated problems often drove children on to the streets.

“We’re encountering a number of people who have come to WA looking for opportunities with the boom and they haven’t eventuated,” she says.

“A lot of the young people may have come with the family and the pressure on the family to look for work or resettle in a new State may have caused family breakdown.

“This, along with mental health, is still one of the most critical issues for the homeless.”

Joshua, a 24-year-old Victorian who has been homeless in Perth on and off since age 16, says there are “a lot of people on the streets over here from other States”.

“The word gets around that WA is the place to go because there is money and there are jobs but I still find it difficult to get a job,” he says.

Recently off the streets and in stable accommodation, he says homeless youths are drawn west because it was believed charity and government services were better in WA than on the east coast.

Matty has left the alleyway. Last week, a worker in a nearby building warned the police would be called if homeless people continued to seek shelter on the fire escape.



DID YOU KNOW?

5000

The number of people under 25
homeless in WA



Pitching in: Washing up at Passages, a centre for homeless young people in Northbridge. Pictures: Bill Hatto



Bleak bedroom: Queenslander 'Matty' rests in one of the many homeless hangouts in the city



Business can do more to help needy, says Bendat

WA's booming private sector must stop viewing social welfare as the responsibility of government and charities and do more to alleviate the plight of the State's less fortunate, Perth businessman and multi-millionaire Jack Bendat said yesterday.

The philanthropist's plea for greater social responsibility came after his Bendat Family Foundation handed over the second instalment of a \$1 million donation to a Northbridge drop-in centre dedicated to helping homeless youth.

Created by a partnership between the Rotary Club of Perth and St Vincent de Paul Society, the Passages resource centre opened in 1999. Since then, it has helped people more than 80,000 times and in the past year alone has had more than 3500 visits from homeless youths aged 12 to 25.

Mr Bendat said WA had made a lot of people rich, and that those people had a responsibility to give something back to the State.

"It's better to give it back while you're living," he said. "There are so many people here in WA who



Key donors: Jack Bendat and David Reed. Picture: Bill Hatto

have means they will never spend in their lifetime."

At Passages, homeless youth can shower, wash their clothes, make a meal, access the internet, meet social workers and a Centrelink outreach worker. They have a fixed address that enables them to receive welfare payments, see a doctor once a week and receive education assistance.

Passages chairman David Reed, a successful stockbroker turned mining executive, said while new State Government plans to help youth were in the consultation phase, Passages was on hand to help now. Mr Reed said Mr Bendat's donation would see the Passages model expanded to Mandurah, where a new drop-in centre would be established within months.

To donate to Passages contact the St Vincent de Paul Society: 08 947 55400