

Derby chaplaincy a job like no other

The role of a chaplain can vary dramatically from school to school, and this is especially true for Derby District High School chaplain Nikki Stinson.

The remote Kimberley town of Derby has a population of about 4500, with about 700 students at the high school. About 85-per-cent of the school are indigenous.

Nikki divides her time between various tasks such as ‘intentionally loitering’ – walking around during breaks to see if any students need to chat; or one-to-one sessions in her office with students, teachers and parents.

“I also do Suicide Risk Assessments, and regularly liaise with the School Psychologists, Deputy Principals and Department of Child Protection and Family Support,” she said.

“I regularly do home visits to encourage and assist families, meet with parents at the KindiLinks program or drop in at the Early Learning Centre at Mowanjum, the nearest Aboriginal community, as often as I am able.

“When I see - or teachers report to me - that students are ill or injured and it’s not being attended to, I contact parents, and with their permission, may take the child to receive medical care.”

After several suicides in the area, the manager of the local radio station dropped off some CD’s of local musicians encouraging choosing life.

“I rang to thank him, and by the end of the conversation I was booked to do an hour-long weekly radio program called Chaplain’s Corner,” Nikki said.

“That was almost two years ago, and the radio program has become a way to do mass home visitation, to talk about parenting, health, emotions, and the many issues that students and families deal with every day.”

Formerly of the US Navy, Nikki felt called to make a life change and along with her husband and three children, moved to Italy, Egypt and Thailand, before settling in Perth in 1995.

“Those years taught us to rely entirely on the Lord, as he was our only support,” she said.

“I taught English as a Foreign Language during our travels, and have taught in mainstream primary and secondary schools in the US, Egypt, and Australia.

“When we moved to Derby I thought I would be teaching at DDHS, but the Lord made it clear that chaplaincy was what he had in mind, so I became the first chaplain at DDHS.”

Nikki is also an artist and has naturally incorporated art therapy into her role as a chaplain.

“I keep a file of photocopies from adult colouring books on my ‘talking table’ along with a basket of markers and crayons, and I would say that is my greatest art resource,” she said.

“When kids, or adults, come in upset, angry, stressed, they’ll head straight for the file and start colouring and talking follows.

“I colour right along with them, partly because I enjoy it, but also it helps to keep me from making too much prolonged eye contact, which is culturally inappropriate up here, and tends to make people uneasy.”

Bubba – Nikki’s tri-colour small dog - has also become part of the school family.

“The vet thinks he’s part Jack Russell, part Collie, and part a few other things,” Nikki said.

“Most importantly, he adores children and has the patience of Job. He was invited to come to school not long after I started working by a couple of the deputy principals, and was such a hit with everyone that he’s been attending almost every day since then.

“He has a little vest made out of an old-school shirt with a ‘Therapy Dog’ sticker on it, so that parents know he’s there for a reason – his job is to make people feel better, and he does.

“Everyone that passes Bubba has to pet him, and as lines of students go past it looks like a Mexican Wave in reverse as each student stoops to pat Bubba as they pass.

“When students are upset, angry or sad, there’s nothing like a cuddle with Bubba to make them feel better. It works for teachers too! And when we’re ‘intentionally loitering’ at recess or lunch, Bubba has a way of knowing who needs to have a bit of a yarn and leads me to them.”

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