

## **The Clontarf Foundation** (Ross Kelly, July 2008)

Why should the Kimberley Society be interested in the Clontarf Foundation? The talk given by Chairman Ross Kelly on 2 July 2008 certainly showed its relevance while revealing its genesis, mission, development and future plans.

**Beginnings.** The Foundation had its beginnings at the Clontarf Aboriginal College when Gerard Neesham was there doing some relief teaching after his four years as coach of the Fremantle Dockers. The College was not retaining its students but Gerard noticed that when the boys were involved in football activities they were more focussed and positive. So, with cooperation from the College, the Clontarf Football Academy was founded in 2000 on a budget of \$34,000.

To provide the boys with high quality coaches, good role models and mentors, Gerard engaged former Hawthorn premiership and fairest and best player and Dockers captain, Ben Allan, to assist part-time with the coaching. Claremont League Footballer Simon Nimmo, a graduate in Human Movement and Exercise Science from the University of Western Australia, became a full-time Physical Conditioner and Program Coordinator; and Percy Johnson, a former WAFL player and coach, also joined the team. In the first term, fifteen students attended the football training session, and the group grew to 25 before the end of the year. An invite to local schools for Aboriginal boys to attend a camp then resulted in 91 boys turning up, many of them unannounced and some coming from as far as Esperance, Carnarvon and Kalgoorlie. The year 2001 was a tough one with 165 students enrolled at the school and many administrative and financial problems to be overcome. The difficulties were overcome, finances were sufficient and the boys stayed at school.

### **Mission: From little things, big things grow**

*“Improve the discipline, life skills, and self esteem of young Aboriginal men and by so doing equip them to participate meaningfully in society.”*

The target of the Clontarf Football program is one of the most ‘at risk’ groups in contemporary Australian society – indigenous teenage boys. As Ross pointed out, indigenous society faces a range of disadvantages. For example: the high suicide rate and high drug, alcohol and substance abuse. Indigenous students, Australia wide, are half as likely as non-indigenous students to continue to Year 12 (even less in remote areas) and indigenous juveniles are 20 times more likely to be detained than other juveniles.

Many of these boys are caught in a generational cycle that includes poor education, inadequate parenting, inappropriate values, low self esteem and lack of life skills. Australian Rules football is considered an ideal vehicle to break the cycle: the great majority of Aboriginal people love the game and value it above many other pursuits. Aboriginal men, due to their interest in, and natural aptitude for, the game are on average better equipped to succeed at it than are non-Aboriginals.

The Academies are established in partnership with mainstream schools for young indigenous boys from 13 to 18 years of age. The schools provide for the educational needs while the Academy provides the coaching, health education and life skills.

The aims are for the boys to attend school regularly, remain at school to improve and complete their education, make healthy lifestyle decisions, set and achieve goals, have access to employment opportunities, develop their football skills and develop enhanced self esteem.

Students have to agree to attend school regularly, apply themselves to study and abide by the Academy's requirements for behaviour and self-discipline.

The staff consists of ex-AFL footballers, teachers, and social workers selected on the basis of their ability to work with this group and, of course, an understanding of Australian Rules football (although if the program is extended to Queensland and New South Wales this will have to be Rugby).

### **Development**

Since its small beginnings in 2000 the Foundation has grown considerably to Academies in 22 schools, 1500 boys, 65 staff and a budget of \$8.3 million in 2008. There are now ten Academies in Western Australia including 350 students at four schools in the Kimberley – East Kimberley (Kununurra, 2007), Halls Creek (2008), West Kimberley (attached to the two high schools in Broome, 2006) and eight in the Northern Territory.

Approximately 50% of Western Australia's indigenous male Year 12 students are enrolled in its programs. The success of the program has been demonstrated by attendance rates of better than 80%, retention rates better than 90%, and more than 75% of graduates in full time work.

The Foundation is a not-for-profit incorporated body and relies on donations, sponsorship and state and federal government funds. There is a board of eight members chaired by Ross Kelly and its patron is Kevin Sheedy.

## **The future**

The Foundation's growth has been exponential but it is felt that only the surface has been scratched.

It is trying programs with 10- to 12-year-old boys in primary schools in Kununurra and Halls Creek – this is significant as indigenous boys there frequently cease engaging with school around the age of nine years.

Sixty per cent of Australia's indigenous people live in NSW and Qld – some 150 academies and 600 staff are needed to reach the coverage now in WA and NT! The talk was enlivened by personal stories including one of two boys from Noonkanbah Station who arrived with four others with all their possessions in one brown paper bag.

At the conclusion Ross pointed out that, while there are overwhelming social and humanitarian arguments for the Foundation's work, there is a compelling economic argument – it costs the Foundation \$16 a day to keep a boy at school and the Government about \$1000 per day to keep a boy in gaol.

The Clontarf Foundation's Web site (<http://www.clontarffootball.com>) offers more information about the operation of the foundation and the academies as well as news stories that includes some from Kununurra and Broome.

*Margaret Larke*