

## ***Launch* young people make successful impact at ACCAN Conference**

Heartfelt and moving life stories from four young people in care provoked much thought and reflection for the country's leaders at the Tenth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect (ACCAN) this year.

Presenting a keynote address in the opening speeches, Juanita, Kenneth, Renee and Janelle from the Care to Independence Youth Council, developed through Dingwall Trust's Launch and Youth Horizons Ka Awatea services, relayed their personal stories and first hand experiences of others in care and the issues that affect them reaching their true potential.

"We wanted first to make an impact and then to advocate for a change in people's thinking patterns" says Janelle, speaker on 'resilience' at ACCAN.

The determined teenagers spoke of stigma, rights, resilience and stability as the important areas that require change in order for young people to 'blossom'; the theme of Conference week.

Renee spoke out against the judgement and stereotyping of young people in care and how it is often reflected in the media that they are 'bad kids'.

"Mistakes seem bigger when you're a kid in care", she says.

She calls for all young people to be seen as unique individuals, more than a 'case number' or 'kid in care'.

Kenneth reinforced the importance for all young people in care to know their rights.

A personal story, Kenneth outlined his concern for pending discharge from care while he was still at school and encouraged CYF to continue to be a main support in young people's lives to ensure they are truly ready for independence.

"We have the right to be placed in a caregiver placement that is safe, stable, supportive and caring. Please make sure that you choose caregivers and our placements well. If you do, we have more of a chance to blossom", says Kenneth.

To enable young people to "bounce back" and blossom young people need to build resilience through nurturing and positive relationships, was Janelle's message to the audience at ACCAN.

"With every young person you give your attention and support to become resilient, the stronger our society will become", she says.

"If young people are given clear, positive and reasonable boundaries they will feel not only more secure to develop and grow, they will also be more unlikely to end up in abusive or unhealthy relationships".

The final speech came from Juanita whose focus for the Conference was on the issue of stability.

In an emotional overview of her tumultuous childhood, Juanita outlined the importance of a loving and stable home for young people in care.

“Many young people have been moved from placement to placement, disrupted physically and emotionally until any chance for them to blossom has withered away”, says Juanita.

A surprising fact, Juanita explained that the Youth Council had tallied the number of placements the 11 members had experienced which amounted to 170 placements.

The foursome wish to continue to speak out regarding youth issues along with other members of the Youth Council, striving for change in the current system.

“As a group we’d like to visit schools and raise awareness of kids in care”, says Janelle.

Currently residing at the Dingwall Trust in Auckland, Renee and Janelle are considering setting up a Foster Care Support Group at their high school.

Upon reflection of the Conference Renee is stunned at what she has achieved.

“I could never do speeches at school in front of 30 people, let alone 900 at the Conference”, she says.

Two of the girls are now considering careers in youth services or social work.

“It was the best life experience ever”, says Renee. “We know now that we can influence things for the better.”