Parent Talk | Term 4 2014

Welcome to Parent Talk our termly newsletter for parents of children in Catholic schools from your Council of Catholic School Parents (CCSP). Since 1995, the CCSP has been communicating with parents and schools about issues that affect all of us.

In this issue, we bring you one Aussie mum’s experience attending America’s largest religious congress and we look at the myriad of ways our Catholic students are making a difference in the wider world. Whether it is taking a stand against children in detention or signing up for volunteer work during their gap year, with kids today, it’s very much a case of ‘think global, act local’.

Linda McNeil
Acting Executive Director

FAITH’S JOURNEY

By Angela Wedesweiler

We come today, gathered from around the world, a community of hope, bound together by a common mission: to light fires of hope and to set our world ablaze with God’s amazing compassionate love and mercy.

Put 40,000 plus people together in the one conference centre just across the road from Disneyland. Add hundreds of workshops and talks mixed with liturgies staged in a massive arena the size of the Sydney Entertainment Centre. Add lights and music and you have the 2014 Los Angeles Religious Education Congress. As is the American way, everything about this event was on a grand scale. After all it is that nation’s largest gathering of Roman Catholics with attendees from every US state as well as the UK, Canada, South America, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand. Even the Youth Congress held the day before main Congress, was attended by more than 15,000 students from public and Catholic high schools.

When my husband Alan and I arrived at the Anaheim Conference Centre on the day of the Youth Congress, we found ourselves amongst throngs of young people, chatting and singing as they walked to and from their workshops. There was a real buzz in the air. The atmosphere was amazing and it was wonderful to see so many young Catholics keen to find out more about their faith, and share it with others. Their sense of hope and joy was inspiring.

This feeling continued throughout the whole weekend. Despite the huge scale of the Congress, it was more than just ‘smoke and mirrors’. The positive atmosphere was underpinned by something very genuine and substantial, the element of our faith that I really value. And there was the opportunity for intellectual rigor as the Congress’s world-renowned speakers challenged us with their information and opinions. I loved that keynote speaker, author Father Robert Barron, encouraged us not to dumb down the message of Catholicism for our kids. “Why, he asked, can’t high school students who read Shakespeare “be introduced to Aquinas, Augustine, Newman, Chesterton, Dante”? Why not, I thought.

The scale of the liturgies at the Congress was simply enormous. And yet despite this, each liturgy was personal and special and unlike anything I have ever been to before. Take for example the Native American Indian liturgy attended by thousands of people in the huge main arena. Imagine a 20-minute opening procession with hundreds of Native American Indian people, including children, dressed in traditional clothing, dancing with bells on their ankles. One child I spotted was wearing the
headgear of an eagle. Other children wore feathers of different colours. A traditional smoking ceremony followed the procession. After this, a blessing from the four different directions of wind, during which we turned each time in unison to the north, south, east and west. At the end of the Mass the priest, an American Indian, spoke of the plight of his people describing them as traditionally the most underprivileged and poorly educated in the US with high rates of unemployment and alcoholism.

Surprisingly, it was at the Urban Fusion liturgy organized by some young American rappers that a priest delivered one of the most memorable homilies I have ever heard. Monsignor Raymond East was quite the showman, almost evangelical, who processed into the liturgy dancing to hip hop music. He called the community ‘Church’ and often paused to ask us, “Isn’t that right Church?” to which we, the whole congregation replied “Yes”! While it does sound a bit corny and not at all Australian it was actually lovely and very genuine to be included and encouraged to yell out “Yes” to our beliefs. “You must make peace with all your brothers”, he urged us, “before you can share the meal at Jesus’ table.” Quite confronting words yet so important to what we are about as Catholics.

The final liturgy in the main arena was again, on a grand scale, with lights, a full choir and band, hundreds of liturgical dancers and a long procession of priests who had attended the Congress. Despite the capacity crowd it was a genuine and very moving liturgy and an opportunity for reflection and renewal after the pace of the past three days. Being in a massive arena filled with people all together to share their beliefs and celebrate Mass was overwhelming. After prayers, readings and songs in English, Spanish and Vietnamese, the Mass ended with a group of 17 people coming to the altar for a special blessing from the Archbishop of Los Angeles, José Gomez. These people were part of a larger group heading to Rome to ask Pope Francis to advocate for immigration reform in the US. Amongst the group were three Mexican children whose parents had been deported back to Mexico leaving them behind in America. I realized then that the inhumane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers is happening not only in Australia but America too. Despite being different from Americans we also have a lot in common.

Angela Wedesweller attended the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress as a representative of the Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT.

**FILLING THE GAP**

*By Sue Finn*

When my son was studying for his Higher School Certificate, I was often asked if he was going to take a gap year or go straight to university. “Oh no”, I used to reply (only half-jokingly), “once both my kids finish school, I’m going to take a gap year”.

The reality is 30 years ago when many of today’s older parents left high school it was a choice between work, TAFE or heading straight to university. Those that were offered a tertiary place grabbed it, scared that if they took time off they would never return to study. Those students who deferred often did so to earn money for university. Taking a year off to travel the world was an option for only the wealthy or the brave.

Times have certainly changed. Fast forward to 2014 and an increasing number of school leavers are ‘doing a gap year’ before throwing themselves back into study. Now, more than 10 percent of year 12 students who receive a university offer will decide to defer. Some say it’s because they want time to recover from the HSC, others are unsure about the career path they would like to follow and many simply see taking a gap year as a rite of passage.

Whatever the reason, the gap year is growing in popularity for school leavers. We’ve come a long way from the gap years of the 70s, 80s and 90s when post-HSC students backpacked their way through Europe, South America or Asia supplementing their travels with work as an au pair, waitress or bartender. While that is still an option for many (and can be incredibly rewarding), an increasing number of school leavers are now seeking a more enriching gap year experience, combining their travels with boarding school jobs, cultural immersions, service placements, internships, volunteer work, or even time in the Australian Defence Force.

There’s also been a notable shift in people’s attitudes towards the gap year. Rather than being a ‘wasted year’, it’s well accepted that a gap year can be an opportunity to gain life skills, travel extensively, gain a global perspective, learn a language or give back through community and volunteer work. There’s a growing movement that sees taking a gap year as an asset in the work place, providing young people with new skills and the confidence and ability to relate to other cultures.

And recent studies have confirmed there are academic benefits to be gained from taking a gap year. According to a 2013 study of Australian undergraduate students, conducted by Sydney University’s Faculty of Education and Social Work, “students who gained post-school life experience outside the classroom are greatly benefited”. The study found one such benefit is maintaining good marks throughout the entire span of their degree. Another study back in 2007 by two West Australian economists found that “students who take gap years do on average 2.3 percent better than those who don’t”.

It’s not surprising then that the gap year has become an industry in itself. Google “gap year options for Australian students” and watch how many results come up. Just like the SBS promo there’s “six million stories and counting”!
The options can be overwhelming and potentially expensive, so it's important to spend some time planning ahead. Talk to your child about how they want to fill their gap year, where they want to go and the budget. Encourage them to do their research. Talk to other parents whose children have completed a gap year or might be considering one. Get your child to speak to the school career's advisor about upcoming gap year information days. Ask whether your school has any arrangements with overseas schools or subscriptions to resources like the careerworks website. Find out what the deadlines are to apply for gap year placements. Get your child to put together a rough plan and then encourage them to start saving their money.

In the meantime, we’ve put together a list of websites and programs providing some useful information on how to make that gap year a reality.

**TAKING A STAND**

The young women of Bethlehem College in Sydney's inner west made media headlines recently when they spoke out against the indefinite detaining of children in Australian immigration detention centres.

As more Catholic school students becoming actively involved in social justice issues, Virginia Francis from the Sydney Catholic Education Office (CEO) reflects on the myriad of ways that our kids are making a difference.

**SNAPSHOTS**

Keen to talk to your kids about issues facing asylum seekers? Have a look at the educational Roads to Refuge website which helps users to understand everyday situations facing asylum seekers.

By now parents with children in year 3, 5, 7, & 9 should have received a written report of their child’s NAPLAN test results. Want to know more about NAPLAN? Check out the NAPLAN parent resources on the BOSTES website.

The NSW Board of Studies (BOSTES) now has six HSC exam workbooks available as ebooks on the iTunes app store. The ebooks are among 14 HSC exam workbooks produced by BOSTES in 2014.

**HAPPENINGS**

**QUICK LINKS**

http://www.partners4learning.edu.au/
http://www.btadvisorybodies.catholic.edu.au
http://www.parents.catholic.edu.au/
http://www.ccsp.catholic.edu.au
http://www.catholicsuper.com.au

Schoolzine has transformed the humble school newsletter into a multi-functional, interactive platform that can be accessed wherever you have Internet… at home on your PC, via your mobile or perhaps on an iPad - at your convenience. This is not simply emailing home a PDF copy of your old print newsletter. This is truly revolutionising the flow of information and communication between home, school and the broader community, resulting in the best possible outcomes for the youngest members of the community - our children!

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=docqRB7KdCU