

# The seeds of hope

AFTER the initial handshake, Paul Weight's big, cheeky grin can sell the virtues of the straight life to society's most marginalised.

The Geelong youth counselor can always see the positive side to life and the bigger picture – even when others can't.

For the past decade Paul has been the first face drug users, alcoholics and the suicidal encounter at Geelong welfare organisation BAYSA.

"It's about sowing the seeds of change – that's the way I've looked at counselling," he philosophises.

"Then it's up to the individual to water those seeds and flourish."

Paul has also been on the wrong side of life's tracks – but not by choice.

"I grew up in a fairly challenging area at Stawell," Paul tells.

"It had the commission homes and young people going through a number of issues like domestic violence and alcohol.

"It gave me an insight into the challenges some families face."

Paul had to learn to deal with tragedy early in life.

He never knew his father who was killed instantly in a boating accident.

The youngest of three children was just one month old.

Paul explains it was his grandfather, a schoolteacher like his mum and a tough footballer during the Great Depression, who provided a role model.

"He was a good mentor and he instilled a genuine rapport with people," Paul recalls.

"There was a sense of overcoming (my father's death)

## Local Legends



ANDREW MATHIESON

through friendships, camaraderie and maintaining perspective on life."

But at age 10, Paul's grandfather died after a heart attack.

"If I didn't have that great a relationship I could have very easily been a very angry teenager," Paul reckons.

After contemplating more lucrative careers in graphic design and school teaching after university, Paul discovered counselling.

The biggest task the 39-year-old has taken on so far has been the BAYSA youth outreach program, which won a national award last year.

"They now have access to success after having access to failure," Paul remarks.

He says nothing is more confronting than seeing in troubled kids' eyes "complete distance" from the counsellor.

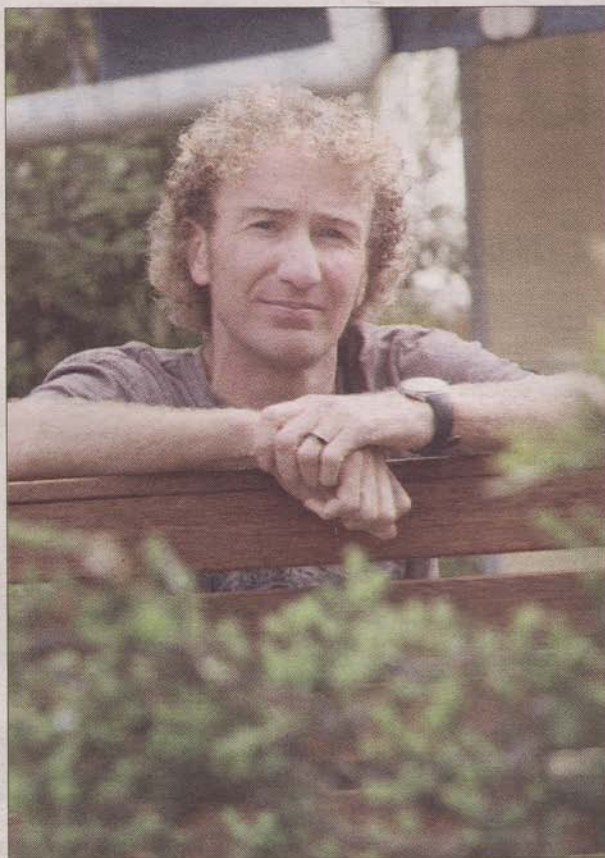
Paul has also found some peculiar ways to ease tensions when confronting potentially explosive situations.

While approaching a house drowned out by raised voices, a distressed man was pacing up and down in a bedroom.

Baby powder was spilled throughout the room and wafted out a half-open window.

With thoughts on how to approach an intervention, the best Paul could do was make light of it all.

"The first thing I said to him



**Counsel:** Paul Weight has worked to brighten the futures of some of the region's most troubled youths. **Picture:** Mark Farrugia

was that he had wasted a lot of powder, the baby stuff that is," Paul remembers.

"In that moment the situation was diffused because it was a moment of humour within the seriousness of him wanting to harm himself.

"He eventually just broke down crying, though."

Paul this year has traded BAYSA, now Barwon Youth, to start Groundswell design and

health promotion from his home to spend more time with his wife Felice and their three children.

The move is all about staying young and remaining young at heart, he laughs.

"I often joke to Felice that I still legitimately feel like I'm 25 – and I think that's important.

"I hope when I'm 80 I'm still feeling like I'm 25 in my heart."

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