Invisible crime victims who inspire South Australia's communities

By Rebecca Baker
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Ryan Knowles is the kind of man and upstanding young citizen most parents hope their boys grow into — only he's done it despite his mum and dad, rather than because of them.

The 20-year-old was just six months old when his mum was jailed while interstate for "doing bad stuff" — and she's been in and out of prison since.

So too his late father, a drug and alcohol addict, who he never really knew.

But Ryan Knowles is a suburban Adelaide council's newest Young Citizen of the Year, handed the accolade just months after receiving a Premier's Community Award in recognition of his service to the community.

The polite, softly spoken award-winner who dreams of being a youth worker says he's been touched by the unexpected recognition.

"I don't do the things for accolades, I do it because I like helping people, especially those who are in the same situation I was once in," says the volunteer camp leader at Second Chances, a SA charity aimed at helping prisoners' kids, or "PKs" as they are called.

Dubbed "invisible victims", it is estimated there are 4000 children of prisoners across the state — for many, both mum and dad are on the lockup merry-go-round.

Life for the youngsters left at home can be pretty bleak and they're forced to wear the stigma of their parent's crime — whether they like it or not.

Many are bullied at school, many go hungry, many live in a seedy underworld where adults are addicted to drugs and alcohol.

Many are encouraged to steal and lie and disrespect authority.

The proof is in the statistics; the children of prisoners are six times more likely to end up in jail than kids from law-abiding families.

It's a sad fact not lost on Ryan, adopted as a baby by his great grandmother and brought back to South Australia, who first came in contact with Second Chances SA, as a nine year old.

The four-year-old Adelaide-based organisation, a breakaway from Prison Fellowship Australia, makes contact with prisoner parents, seeking permission to buy birthday and Christmas presents, on the prisoner's behalf, to boost the children's perceptions of themselves and make them feel more like their classmates.

It also offers nine adventure camps throughout the year, aimed at giving the children experiences they might not otherwise get, its efforts supported by a range of SA not-for-profits, government funding and money raised through the charity's own furniture warehouse and op shop.

For Ryan, the chance to take part in a camp — and to meet the man who would become a lifelong mentor — was life-changing.

"My Nanna was really, really good to me — she was very strict when it came to discipline but extremely loving towards me at the same time … she helped mould me," he says of the matriarch who adopted him but died when he was 11.

"The other major positive influence in my life has been Les (Dennis) who I met at the very first camp. I could have gone down a completely different road — and even ended up in prison — without having met him.

"Through him, I've seen the world, the community, needs people like him, to mentor and help others and be good role models. When he walks into a room, the whole room lights up.

"He is a great man and has taught me to believe in myself … he had constant belief in me and saw my potential, and that I could do great things."

For an impressionable nine-year-old who had no one to cheer him on at sports day or do the regular family things kids do, the friendship of the 77-year-old volunteer stalwart meant everything.

"My mum would come in and out of prison and I didn't ever really get to meet my dad," he says, the few memories he does have are scattered with drugs and violence.

Today, his heart breaks for the young people he meets on camp.

"I can only imagine what some of these kids are going through in their life," he says.

"I always think that as bad as I had it, a lot of these little kids have it much worse … sometimes they'll tell you stuff about their lives that you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy

"They are just innocent little kids … an no one really ever thinks about them.

"So, I try to be the type of person they can look up to, young kids are really impressionable."

Ryan is just one of many of the shining lights Second Chances chief executive Helen Glanville is proud of.

So too former SA Victims' Rights Commissioner Michael O'Connell who has just taken on the charity's newly-formed role of Victims' Advocate.

"I heard some of the stories of these young people and don't mind admitting to the fact it caused me to shed a tear or two," he says.

“To hear what these young people have lived through as children, to see how they have been able to rise above their personal circumstances to achieve and be successful is both inspiring to others but hopefully, aspirational … hopefully, it will encourage other young people to seize the opportunities offered by organisations such as Second Chances.

“(People such as Ryan) are prime examples of why we need to walk this journey with these young people … by giving them the appropriate support, helping them seize opportunities, they can become fabulous, worthwhile citizens playing a role in ensuring the place we live, South Australia, is as rich and liveable as it is. I think everyone deserves that.”

Mrs Glanville says too often very young children are the “forgotten victims of crime” — something she’s fighting to change through her organisation and army of 125 volunteers.

“The current legal, prison and educational systems neglect these kids,” she says.

Last Christmas, the organisation provided 632 presents and each month gives out 30 birthday presents.

“We want the children to know they belong, that they are accepted and that they are valued,” she simply says.

“Many of these children are living with a stigma over their heads — they are teased and bullied at school and reminded ‘your old man is in prison’.”

Mrs Glanville’s, a mum of two grown sons, philosophy is simple — it’s about restoring, and in many cases igniting, a spark of hope and sense of dignity.

“These little people carry a lot on their little shoulders and minds but it is not their crime and it is not their fault — and we want them to know we are here for them,” she says.

“Unfortunately, many are living in homes where they aren’t taught the values and lessons many of us take for granted such as honesty, respect and work ethic — often, they are told very negative things, and we are talking about children aged under 10 who are told they are ‘scum’, they’re told they’ll ‘just end up in prison like your old man’.

“Some situations are just horrendous and it is little wonder many start to play up when they are 12, 13 and 14 … they start believing the lies and thinking ‘maybe I am useless’, ‘maybe I am good for nothing’. We fly the flame of hope, so they can have a chance.”

In 2017 the charity took out the Australian Crime and Violence Prevention Award for its work with children of prisoners.

Next month it hopes to rollout a new program to provide training for young people aged between 13 to 25 to prepare them in practical ways for the workforce and life as “taxpaying law-abiding citizens

An immediate focus remains on keeping kids in school.

“If we can encourage them to stay on track with their education, to prevent truancy, then we have achieved a lot … research shows us truancy is the start of a downhill slide to anti-social behaviour and crime,” says Mrs Glanville, a straight-talking former nurse.

So too is breaking intergenerational crime.

In SA, when a person is imprisoned there is not any formal record that captures his or her parenthood status.

“The failure to track the status of these children risks fostering an intergenerational cycle of crime,” says Mrs Glanville, pointing to the huge financial burden to the state – it’s estimated the cost of keeping a single youth under detention-based supervision is about $450,000 a year.

“(The kids of prisoners) are quite vulnerable to becoming welfare dependent … a lot of people who go to prison are chronically unemployable, they’ve messed themselves up with drugs and alcohol, they’ve never had any sense of work ethic — they don’t give a toss, they only care about what is going into their veins, to them that is everything.”

It is something 21-year-old Montana Tucker, also a Premier’s Award-winner, appreciates more than most.

Her mum was in and out of jail from the time Montana was four — the little girl jeered and ridiculed when she wouldn’t lie or steal.

“I would go to school as early as I could and leave as late as possible — it was my safety zone,” she recalls.

“I didn’t talk, I didn’t socialise, I did my schooling, got good grades and ignored everything else in my life.”

When asked if she feels sad for that little girl, she tears up.

“I remember loneliness and hunger … being independent at the age of seven but not being able to feed myself as there was no food and not liking the fact my family stole food,” she says.

“I had a friend when I was a kindy but that was it. We constantly moved about and I had no one.”

That is, until she was invited to take part in a Second Chances camp aged about 15.

“It was honestly, one of the best things that has ever happened to me … I felt loved and valued and that is something that I didn’t get elsewhere,” Montana says.

“The first camp I went on, I met one of the girls who has gone on to become one of my closest friends, she understands me and I understand her — we didn’t go into

details, we just both knew we'd had it hard and we were OK knowing that and helping each other."

Today, Montana is part-way through a teaching degree, specialising in high school physics, and volunteering as a camp leader with the charity that helped her.

"Through my childhood I had a lot of bad things happen but that has made me stronger and smarter ... I try to tell the little kids it will get better if you don't give up, keep trying and allow people to help you," she says.

To Mrs Glanville, Montana's sentiment is significant: "We are in the business of changing those who want to change ... we can stir people up and say there is hope, there is another way but you can't get a cattle prod out and make people change. Montana is one of those people — she grabbed it, her sister didn't."