

Synergy *Repairs*

A space for change

TO GET AN INSIGHT INTO A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE ENGAGING YOUNG OFFENDERS, JOE MCFADRIES VISITED SYNERGY AUTO REPAIRS IN NORTH MELBOURNE TO SEE WHAT THEY DO AND HOW THEY DO IT. THE VISIT CHANGED HIS VIEW OF THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM, THE DRIVERS BEHIND YOUTH CRIME AND HOW SYNERGY IS TRULY CHANGING YOUNG LIVES.

Following his involvement with a similar social enterprise in Tasmania, Rob Bartlett of Suncorp Insurance Group became the driving force behind the collaboration between Mission Australia, the National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council (NMVTRC) and the Kangan Institute of TAFE, which created Synergy Auto Repairs in North Melbourne. This social enterprise program is designed to create an opportunity for young people with an interest in cars – albeit for the wrong reasons – and harness this interest in a more positive way.

To be clear, the management and staff at Synergy are under no illusion as to who they are dealing with – young offenders who have found their way into the justice system, by which we mean incarcerated or on remand pending trial. They have been referred to the program, to some extent, as a last resort.

Troy Crellin, Program Manager said: “There are 80 young men and 20 young women in the Parkville Youth Detention Centre and another 100 young men at the Maribyrnong facility. Although I do not for one minute condone breaking the law, it is heartbreaking to see the conditions in which some of these kids have had to live from day to day. In some cases, the conditions are actually better inside the correctional facilities.”

The site in North Melbourne had previously been used as a collision



Troy Crellin.

repair facility, which the Synergy team rejuvenated with the help of major supporters including Masterbooth, Axalta Coating Systems, SAPE, Bayford, Suncorp and Kangan Institute. It opened in May 2014, processes on average 10 cars per week and runs as a commercial venture that must at least cover its costs. “The challenge is to find the commercial/social balance and, with eight young people in the program at any one time, supported by a team of tradespeople and our fulltime Student Support Officer, we are keeping our heads above water,” said Crellin.

The six-month program is designed to deliver a Certificate 2 qualification with a view to placing

successful students into an apprenticeship. In addition, the program looks to re-engage the students and, to some extent, teach them “life-admin skills” as they effectively re-enter society.

I was given a tour of the body shop by Bodie Swettenham, who entered the program two years ago and stayed with Synergy when he was offered an apprenticeship as a spray painter. “This is a great place to work and a great place to learn – the entire staff have been awesome,” said Swettenham. He is clearly extremely proud of both the facility and his own trade and was eager to explain how the Cromax spectro and colour-matching process worked. “The

Cromax people just couldn't do enough for me. They made the learning process so much easier," he added. He then showed off the car he had recently painted without any assistance. Again, the pride in his work was self-evident.

Swettenham, who was recently awarded the Kangan Institute Inspirational Student of the Year, is the envy of the Synergy Team. He introduced me to the panel-beating team and they were all keen to emulate Swettenham's success. Some of them shared their personal stories, their journey through incarceration and the feeling of having another chance. What really stood out for me was that these are teenagers who have faced significant trauma and challenges in their lives, but when you sit down and chat with them, none of them use this as an excuse or a crutch. It's clear they are grabbing the opportunity to "break the welfare cycle" and get their lives and their employment prospects back on track.

Swettenham was quick to point out that all the repairs carried out by Synergy carry a lifetime guarantee and meet Suncorp's body repair standards. "We believe we are as good as anyone else out there," he stated.

Crellin was keen to highlight that Victoria Police had recently partnered with Synergy as they too see the benefits of breaking the crime cycle. "The young offenders who are all too familiar with the inside of a police car can now work on repairing these vehicles and see the police officers in quite a different light. Of course, not everyone who comes into the program is able to make the transition, but with a success rate now over 70 percent, we are really making a difference," Crellin concluded.

Editor: The National Collision Repairer of course does not condone youth crime. However, it is great to see the young people in the program taking control of their own destiny and making a real change for the better. Mission Australia, the NMVTRC and the Kangan Institute of TAFE are all to be congratulated on this initiative.



The Panel Beating Team: Paul, Declan and Corey.



Bodie Swettenham and Gianni Soteriou.