

Bairnsdale Clontarf Academy

The first Clontarf Academy started in Perth in the Year 2000 at an old indigenous boarding school which was not great environment at that time, with students struggling to attend and violence a big part of the day.

Gerard Neesham was the first coach of the Fremantle Dockers and had just been given the sack, when a childhood friend of his reached out and offered him two weeks work teaching at the school. He arrived at the school and was offered to coach the school football team of which there were only 6 students on the team. The students quickly come up with a fix, saying for example, "I have my cousin who wants to play but doesn't attend school", Gerard quickly realized he had a carrot to dangle and said yep you can come and train and before he knew it he had 25 kids running around having fun. When training was finished the boys said "can we train again?" Gerard said "You most certainly can, I would love you to come back tomorrow but to come and train you need to attend school." and that's how Clontarf began, it started as a football program, they had 3 boys drafted into the AFL and the rest is history. The program has evolved over the last 20 years and now football is just a small part of the program, and the program is designed to cater for all students.

There are over 96 Academies Australia wide and over 8500 boys in the program, with the aim to cater for 15,000 boys in the future, covering all states except Tasmania and the ACT.

The Bairnsdale Clontarf Academy was introduced at the Bairnsdale Secondary College in 2010, and in that time has grown from 25 students to now having over 50 boys involved in the program. The program was introduced to help support Indigenous boys through their secondary education, and then into employment. The Academy has 2 staff who work in the Academy room full time to ensure all the values and expectations on the boys are carried out. The Clontarf Staff teach us many life skills over our school journey and concentrate on the pillars in the room.

The pillars are EDUCATION, SPORT, HEALTH AND WELL-BEING and EMPLOYMENT and respect and other values are always the push by staff in the room.

When I was attending Lakes Entrance School I was really struggling, and had heard a lot about Clontarf through my footy mates and other family members and thought I need to be part of it. Since moving to Bairnsdale Secondary College and joining the Academy I have embraced every opportunity put in front of me. Turk and Gus tell me I am a good role model for the younger fellas in the program which I am proud of. Clontarf is fun and you are supported, but you also understand that you have to complete your work and there are expectations on you to try your best.

This year has had many challenges for me but with the support from Clontarf I know that I will get through if I continue to focus on the completion of tasks. Earlier in the term things really started to get on top of me I wasn't sleeping well and would find myself breaking down and feeling really bad a fair bit, with Covid taking away sport and other things I rely on to socially stay connected. I am lucky to have had the Clontarf staff helping me through with the study hub which I have been attending 2 days a week. We have been part of the Elders Wood Run, Clontarf Virtual Chefs and Teachers Pancake Drop which has been rewarding to be a part of.

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In Clontarf we are big on Leadership and every activity we attend has some sort of personal development included in the activity. My favorite activity of the year to date and the thing I would look back on as a brilliant experience would be the year 12 Leadership Camp when Justin Finn, Albert Wright and I all went to Melbourne, spending time with the other Clontarf Academies from around Victoria.

Over those couple of days we did several leadership activities and we went to St Kilda Football Club and were lucky enough to meet Paddy Ryder and Bradly Hill who are Indigenous players from the club. We went and watched Melbourne United play, but my highlight was when we worked alongside the Big Umbrella staff and helped feed the homeless people in Melbourne. It was an incredible experience seeing all those people and sitting down talking to them about their life and what happened for them and how they become homeless. One of the boards in Clontarf says “NEVER JUDGE A MAN UNTIL YOU’VE WALKED A MILE IN HIS SHOES” in society we often form an opinion that may not always be correct, as I presumed that 95% of people would be there because of drugs and alcohol. Well it’s not true, honestly don’t judge a book by its cover because most of them just had a really hard life growing up, or many other reasons that have put them in the situation they are in. A lot of them are really amazing people who can sit and have a laugh with you, and lot of them see each other as family and they stick together, so I would say that is my best experience with Clontarf this year to date. It just shows how a lot of things and challenges happen in your life, and it really opened my eyes up about how lucky some of us are and how much we would have in common with people.

By Ethan Hubbard, Senior VCAL