

EXAMPLE STORY

Youth Leadership
Kokoda Youth Leadership Challenge
RSL & Services Clubs Association



WINNER 2017

Outline your unique story/project/program

Kokoda Youth Leadership Challenge (KYLC) is a peer group leadership program promoted by the RSL & Services Clubs Association and overseen by the KYLC Benevolent Fund. The challenge is an annual program administered by the RSL and Services Clubs Association and proudly supported by many RSL Clubs, Sub-Branched and other sponsors each year.

The Kokoda Youth Leadership Challenge is now in its 13th year. In 2016, 47 young people participated in the KYLC over two treks and this year is our biggest year to date with 67 trekkers heading off in August and September.

With more than 425 young men and women now having made the trek since the project commenced in 2005, this represents an investment of more than \$3 million by clubs and the Association in our country's youth.

The Challenge is aimed at young people at school or disadvantaged or unemployed young people in the community who are having difficulty in finding their way in society. It is also used to encourage young achievers with natural leadership skills.

KYLC is also designed for young community leaders, young people with strong family military connections and management staff with leadership potential in the NSW club industry or suppliers to that industry, with the view to strengthen their skills and attitudes to the challenges of management.

The KYLC engages and challenges young people who have been selected by RSL & Services Clubs and Sub-Branched who are students nominated by their schools. The successful trekkers undertake months of physical training, relationship building and learning, culminating in trekking the very difficult Kokoda Track.

The leadership program aims to create a greater awareness of the sacrifices of the Diggers on the Kokoda campaign among our young people to ensure the traditions live on. At the same time, it instils in participants a commitment to community service and enhances their personal development by providing an opportunity for them to experience the same conditions under which our diggers fought. It is a transformational experience encouraging future leadership roles back in the community.

The program involves an arduous 10 day trek across the original Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea, presentations at significant battle sites and discussions on sacrifice, courage, mateship, endurance and leadership. It provides participants with a practical leadership experience based on the achievements and sacrifice of our diggers during the Kokoda campaign.

For Clubs, the program has the potential to build stronger ties with the community and local business while increasing their relevance with young people who will be their future members and become the 'custodians' of the Anzac and Kokoda traditions. Any club can join the program regardless of whether they are a member of the RSL & Services Clubs Association.

The KYLC program has proven to be paradigm-changing in young people's lives making an extraordinary difference to those involved and, through them, strengthening our community.

Why was this story/project/program addressed as a priority?

The program was developed by Charlie Lynn of 'Adventure Kokoda' and RSL & Services Clubs Association in 2004, after both parties had identified a need for a program that aimed to create a greater awareness of the sacrifices of the diggers on the Kokoda campaign among our young people to ensure the traditions live on.

At the same time it instils in participants a commitment to community service, enhances their personal development by providing an opportunity for them to experience the same conditions under which our diggers fought and hopefully transform them for future leadership roles back in the community.

Being selected for the trek is a privileged opportunity to develop personal leadership skills based on the values our Kokoda veterans held dearly. These include personal discipline, mutual respect, trust, mateship, courage and self-sacrifice. Successful candidates should be prepared to act as a community volunteer in some way after they return.

Benefits for Participants:

Participants in the Kokoda Youth Leadership Challenge gain:

- A positive feeling of self-worth and self-confidence
- An appreciation of our military history
- A respect for the sacrifice made by young Australians of a previous generation
- An appreciation of a culture whose values are not based on materialism
- A sense of responsibility for the outcomes of the choices they make
- An appreciation of the qualities necessary for effective teamwork i.e. loyalty, trust, honesty, courage, leadership, respect, discipline and sacrifice
- An understanding of the characteristics of Australian leadership
- An appreciation of the 7 essential understandings of effective leadership (self, others, culture, environment, history, present and future)
- An understanding of the purpose and value of community service
- Traversing the Kokoda Track is still an awesome challenge. Successful completion of the trek restores self-confidence and provides participants with a strong sense of accomplishment.
- They learn basic navigation skills and bushcraft.

Tell us what resources contributed toward this story/project/program?

The Kokoda Youth Leadership Challenge has been running for 13 years. The KYLC wouldn't be where it is today without the help and support from many clubs across the State. RSL Clubs, Sub-Branches and sponsors like Gosford RSL, Merrylands RSL, Dee Why RSL, Wagga RSL, Blacktown RSL Sub-Branch and many more to name have contributed to over \$3 million dollars in changing the lives of our youth today.

The KYLC hopes to continue to work with Sponsors, Sub-Branches and RSL Clubs across NSW to give young people aged 17 to 25 the opportunity to walk the Kokoda Trail. The program has now been adopted by over 50 different clubs in its 13 years, with many of these clubs still supporting the KYLC program every year by

identifying young potential leaders who have the ability to inspire and educate other youths in their local communities.

Adventure Kokoda is the specialist Kokoda Trek Operator engaged by the RSL & Services Clubs Association to operate the Treks under the Kokoda Youth Leadership Challenge (KYLC) Program. The Directors and Team Leaders have over 25 years' experience on the Kokoda Trail.

The company was established by Charlie Lynn, a former army major and leading advocate for the Kokoda Trail to be proclaimed as a National Memorial Park. Charlie has trekked Kokoda over 87 times and has mapped the original wartime trail over this period. He also re-discovered many of the battle sites that had been reclaimed by the jungle over the years since the war. These include Brigade Hill, the Isurava battle site, the 'golden staircase' on Imita Ridge and the wartime route taken by the 39th Militia Battalion as they marched towards Kokoda to meet the invading Japanese army.

Adventure Kokoda learning outcomes include:

- A practical understanding of the theory of leadership within a team environment.
- A practical understanding of the effectiveness of interdependency within a team environment.
- A detailed strategic and tactical understanding of the Kokoda campaign.
- The limitations of leadership at the political/strategic level. The relationship between Prime Minister Curtin, General Douglas MacArthur and General Thomas Blamey, and the effects of this relationship on the leadership of the battlefield commanders on the Kokoda Trail.
- Case studies of leadership and sacrifice at the battles of Brigade Hill, Eora Creek and Isurava.
- The culture of the Koiari and Orokaiva people who live along the trail.
- An increase in personal fitness, a loss of fat from the body, a hardening of the muscles, a toughening of the attitudes and an improvement in grit and determination!

Adventure Kokoda have a simple approach to personal leadership development. It's based on the reality of a jungle trail over the Owen Stanley Ranges in Papua New Guinea - not a contrived experiential scenario in a controlled environment. Our leaders have been led by great men and have led great men and women. Veterans are their mentors. PNG guides are their guardian angels. Kokoda is their leadership laboratory.

How did the project/program meet the local community needs?

The leadership program provides a major contribution to the community by encouraging these young leaders to motivate their peers to take a positive role in their community and, among other things, reduce youth crime rates; creating a source of young leaders coming back into the local community; and, encouraging participants to work with local community leaders on a range of projects.

Evidence of the program's effectiveness is compelling. Among many wonderful outcomes are significant changes in attitudes, self-esteem and life choices. Students re-engaging in and completing school —tertiary courses pursued, employment gained and some have joined the defence force and have become our soldiers of today.

Moreover, the relationships formed with each other and with their mentors are lasting. To hear students speak about their lives before the program, why they were chosen by the school and club and the change it has made to their lives is truly inspiring and often emotional.

There is little doubt that the Kokoda experience has a major impact on their subsequent lives. Who knows what wonderful things they will go on to do because of this experience. Integral to the program is

upholding the traditions of the Kokoda Track. The group honours those who fought there, the gruesome reality they faced and keeps their efforts and sacrifice alive in hearts and minds.

RSL & Services Clubs, Sub-Branched and the community applauds the young people who take part — for their determination and commitment, their courage and capacity on this most difficult of physical and mental challenges. The saying “If it doesn’t challenge you, it won’t change you” is so relevant for this program.

KYLC places RSL & Services Clubs in a unique position to capture the support of a younger demographic of members who are rekindling their understanding of the Anzac and Kokoda spirit and who are so important to the future of our clubs.

The goal is to provide a point of differentiation for RSL & Services Clubs, while at the same time:

- A vehicle for opening dialogue with youth who are important to the longer term viability of our clubs;
- Brand Building— local RSL & Services Clubs seen as a guiding force in re-directing our youth;
- Gaining a marketing advantage, the program has the potential to encourage young people to join local RSL & Services Clubs and develop the future generation of members;
- Engaging members on an emotional level by further developing members’ support of the Anzac traditions;
- Inspiring current staff to have a greater sense of value in the traditions of the club (and not be just another workplace) and pride in community;
- Establishing stronger community ties – engender greater support from community leaders and politicians;
- A way of developing, strengthening or repairing relationships with government or community;
- Positive public relations with increased media opportunities. Each recruitment and completion of a trek would generate positive media coverage for the club and increase its standing in the eyes of the local community.

Do you have long-term plans/goals for this story/project/program?

The Association believes that by walking the wartime track, young people have an opportunity to gain a greater understanding that is rarely discussed in the classroom.

This program is transformational and has been for the 425 students who have participated since it commenced in 2005. In the past two years alone, the Kokoda Youth Leadership Challenge has doubled with the amount of nominations and successful trekkers participating in the program.

The long term strategy of the Kokoda Youth Leadership Challenge is to grow the program, by identifying young potential leaders who have the ability to inspire and educate other youths in their local communities, in as many High Schools, RSL Clubs and Sub-Branched as we can across NSW and eventually Queensland and Victoria.

In the next two years, the Association is looking into establishing the Kokoda Youth Leadership Challenge as the program that all young people want to participate in to gain a new respect for the sacrifices made by the Diggers of World War II, after walking the length of the Kokoda Trail. Courage, endurance and mateship are just some of the values lived on the track by each of the trekkers

This is far more than a professional activity but a passionate commitment. We hope through our initiatives we are able to encourage others in the community to participate in the KYLC program by walking the Kokoda Trail and understanding the great sacrifices our diggers made for them and Australia.