



Class act

Alison Stone's out-of-school program is helping boost the health and self-esteem of kids in disadvantaged areas while also giving them a better shot at success in life

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Alison Stone listens as much as she speaks, and when she does offer her view she often comes in from a surprising angle. It's the perfect skill for her work with children and families in some of Tasmania's most disadvantaged and stigmatised communities - where so often kids and their parents are "talked at" and "told to", in what some well-meaning experts think is their best interest.

Stone is the driving force behind an initiative called the All Stars Club. It engages children between six and 12 in the Glenorchy municipality, mainly from Moonah, Glenorchy, Goodwood and Springfield Gardens primary schools. The All Stars Club aims to build social development, self-esteem and overall health and wellbeing in the children who participate - building social capital within their families and the broader local community, who are encouraged to "own" the project and assume responsible roles in its delivery.

The program started in 2015, strongly influenced by research from Tasmanian-based Professor Bill Mulford, which showed that children with higher levels of social development also have improved life chances, including higher retention and better academic results at school, and more employment and higher income levels afterwards.

The program has delivered a range of out-of-school activities - including karate, Zen Do Kai, football, hockey, drama, circus skills, drumming, swimming and boxing - and about 370 children have participated. Parents are asked to provide a gold-coin donation for each lesson. Beyond that, All Stars receives direct support from Uniting Care to pay for its summer swimming classes and administrative costs, and has relied on substantial in-kind support from a range of local businesses and community organisations, including the ExitLeft Performance Academy, YMCA, Rogue Nation, Glenorchy District Football Club, Action Fitness Centre and Digital Ink Hobart.

Ian Williams, of ExitLeft Performance Academy, contributes because "this is values-based work ... we use performing arts in this program to help young people be more confident and creative communicators, and that affects all areas of life".

Another strong supporter is Commonwealth Games boxing bronze medallist Luke Jackson, who I watch running the kids' class at his gym at the industrial edge of Moonah. It's not boxing as I've ever seen or imagined. A big group of girls and boys of all shapes and sizes line up and wait for his instruction to run, stop, start, do burpees, push-ups, box up, box down. Make eye contact, he says, look after your boxing gear. The tasks are methodical but complex as Sia's *The Greatest* pumps through the PA - "don't give up, I won't give up, don't give up - no, no, no".

That might be Jackson's personal anthem. Covered in sweat and tattoos, including the Olympic rings and a small crucifix, 32-year-old Jackson speaks frankly about his motivation to make this program work. "I grew up in Clarendon Vale, and dropped out of school in grade seven," he says. "I hated school. I was into drugs, I was getting into trouble. I didn't have anyone like Alison to give me a hand and be a role model." Boxing turned that around for Jackson and he wants to pass that on. This team session closes with some golden rules - go to school; don't be a bully; if someone bullies you, tell a parent or teacher; and if that doesn't work, "tell me and I'll sort it out".

At the end of the workout I ask one of the dads why he brings his son. They've had a tough time in their family, and "this has really helped settle him in his new school, and also with discipline". Another parent, Sonia, who I meet at an All Stars Club swimming lesson at Barossa Park YMCA Wellness Centre at Glenorchy, says the program has broadened her son Scott's horizons and sense of possibilities. "He's tried things he didn't even think he'd enjoy - like drama - as well as martial arts, swimming and boxing," she says. "He loves to have a go, and it's an opportunity to interact with kids from other schools. Alison is awesome, she's offering opportunities to kids who

otherwise wouldn't have that chance, and she keeps doing more and more." Scott, 8, says, "I just love getting in the pool and swimming". His friend Josh, also 8, says, "I wanted to do karate all my life, because people at my old school used to bash me. Now I can defend myself."

So what motivates Stone to spend so much of her time doing, well, more and more? It's not just the All Stars Club she's set up - Stone also collaborated to establish the kani rrala literacy program for Aboriginal teenage boys (a pilot she's keen to repeat elsewhere) and the tunapri booklet project for parents and educators of Aboriginal and other children under 12.

Born at New Norfolk, she spent her early childhood at Bridgewater and moved around a lot. "I've seen a lot of injustice in my life, particularly as a young person, and I felt I had an obligation to address that," she says. Stone started work in childcare as a trainee child carer at the Aboriginal Children's Centre at West Moonah at just 15, then became the first member of her family to gain a university degree, in education, and now she's working on a PhD. Stone's been a teacher at schools in Tasmania and London, has been a researcher at the Australian Council for Education and Research in Melbourne, and has worked in Tasmania's departments of Education and of Health and Human Services. A member of Tasmania's Aboriginal community, questions of equity and opportunity are central to her justice agenda. She says the All Stars Club resulted from "years of thinking" about how to make a practical difference in the lives of vulnerable young people, and how to level the playing field. "From a teaching point of view, you should be able to walk into any Tasmanian school and see every child receiving the same quality of education," she says.

It's hard to take issue with that. But I also don't know many people who would spend most of their 41st birthday working hard on a hot summer day for zero payment, which is what she was doing that Monday. She pauses for a second when I point that out. "Why wouldn't I?," is her typically straight and generous response. "I get as much joy out of it as the kids do."



Clockwise from opposite page, Amelia Cantrell trains at boxer Luke Jackson's gym as part of the All Stars Club; founder and co-ordinator Alison Stone with Ta'Kira Kamaric, 10, and her brother Kodie, 8, who have been involved since Stone's program started; and Jackson, an Olympic bronze medalist, with some of the kids in his boxing class.

