

Courier & Mail

JANUARY 23-24, 2010

# Qweekend.

LOOK  
AT THAT  
BEAUTIFUL  
BOY. CAN  
YOU IMAGINE  
HIM BEING  
INSIDE A  
PADDED CELL?  
HE DOESN'T  
BELONG IN  
A PADDED  
CELL.

The school that's giving kids  
like Corey one last chance

By Trent Dalton

stage fright  
*The Gruffalo* at large

union blues  
Testing the strength of a marriage



In with the love, out with the abuse and violence, the bad grades, the padded cell and the things your dad never should have said. Out with ADHD, autism, learning difficulties and the time you punched your mother in the face. Out with fist fights, calling everybody a c..t, stabbing teachers in the thigh with a compass. Out with chroming, smoking dope, stealing, wagging school and blaming. Out with the self-harm. Out with the hate.

“... and breathe.” It’s quiet time in the Quiet Room. Birds outside, the highway far away. Ten boys aged 11 to 14 sit in a circle in complete peace. Backs straight, eyes closed, meditating. They are the lost boys of Queensland education, deemed unsuitable for mainstream schooling and mostly referred by principals who see no other option for their education. Some are wards of the state. One passed through 38 foster homes by the time he was 12. There are gang members; victims of shocking abuse. All were expelled or bullied out of schools. This is their crossroad. A school called Toogoolawa, in a heritage-listed Queenslander on a horse paddock at Ormeau, south of Brisbane.

School principal Gerry Moloney guides the “mindfulness circle” with a series of gentle prompts: “You’re doing very well, return your thoughts to the word ‘Toogoolawa’. Repeat it in your mind.” The Aboriginal word means “a place in the heart”.

A teacher and deputy principal in Queensland state schools for almost three decades, Moloney, 55, took a \$25,000 pay cut in 2006 to work at

**They go in hard and come out proud. But at the Toogoolawa school for “lost boys”, the greatest lesson learned is that someone cares.**

Toogoolawa. He believes in this model for at-risk youth. Smaller classes, greater care. A maximum of 20 in the school, about one teacher for every three students. Here there are the usual maths, English and science classes but also sessions on character development and periods of candlelit “mindfulness meditation” in which the boys clear out the noise of their lives: mobile phones, disputes with parents, iPods, computer games, violence, aggression, fear. Most will stay about two years before returning to the mainstream as improved students and young men emotionally better equipped to manage in the workforce.

Three seats along the circle from Moloney, Gold Coast property investor John Fitzgerald is deep in thought, his eyes closed. He is the state’s 29th-richest man, his company’s wealth recently estimated at \$290 million, and his dream is to fund 50 Toogoolawa schools across Australia. So far there are three – in Ormeau, Newcastle and Hastings, Victoria – but Fitzgerald has to knock back hundreds of referred students each year because there isn’t space for them. It’s estimated that more than 100,000 Australians aged under 15 do not attend

school on a regular basis; Fitzgerald says that between 8000 and 15,000 of them have been expelled or had multiple suspensions, or stay away due to parental neglect or because they’ve been bullied or victimised.

Fitzgerald spends up to \$800,000 each year on the Toogoolawa schools: on wages, equipment, land for future schools and infrastructure (the schools also attract charitable donations). He’s 46 and has been throwing his money at the project since he was 26. His accountants have long been advising him to scale back but each time that suggestion is made he doubles his giving; triples it; multiplies it by 10. He vows to die flat broke. To die wealthy, he says, is a social disgrace.

The boys recite the school’s affirmation in unison: “We start the day with love, we fill the day with love, we end the day with love. This is the way we live.” Fitzgerald, father of two teens, opens his eyes and smiles. He looks like a surfer: blond, tanned and muscular, with the bright, white-tooth glint of a game-show host. By day, he buys and sells properties, at night he gives seminars selling his property investment model. He’s dazzling on stage: part motivational speaker, part movie star. But in this circle he’s just John, the guy who sits in on quiet time every Monday morning.

Five hundred troubled youths have passed through this school since it opened in 1998. And almost all at first rejected the love affirmation as lame, touchy-feely crap. Some new boys last five minutes. They will disrupt the circle, laugh when a boy rises from his seat and kneels at ►

Story Trent Dalton  
Photography Russell Shakespeare

# lost & found





a simple wooden altar in the corner, like a knight of Arthurian legend. Threatened, the new boy will rally support for his scepticism but it won't come. The other boys – supposed lost causes, chronically hyperactive, impossible to teach – will sit silent. The new kid will explode. And he will be sent home, whatever home might be.

But he will be welcomed back. He might last ten minutes next time. Maybe get through half a day, then a full day, a full month. He will eventually participate in class. Maybe not especially because he wants to learn – that will come later – but because listening to his teachers and opening his exercise book is the decent thing to do. Because, for the first time in his life, he feels that someone cares. Because every time he lashes out in anger his teachers treat him with compassion. *I hate you.* We care. *I'm going to kill you.* We care. *I'm scared.* We care. Somewhere along the way he develops a sense of right and wrong. And one day he is the boy kneeling at the altar. He realises he was wrong about himself. He's not bad and weak and stupid and unloved. He is kneeling before the king, and the king is himself.

Corey Hanson is 12 years old and living with an autism spectrum disorder. Picked on at his previous school, he struggled to communicate his frustrations, swallowing the taunts until exploding in fits of violence. To see him now – beautiful smile, a deep softness, instantly endearing – it's difficult to imagine him punching a hole in the wall of the house at Oxenford, south of Brisbane, where he lives with his grandparents and his mother, Kathleen, 37. It's difficult to imagine him punching his mother in the face. "He would attack me the most often," she says. "We hurt the ones we love the most."

Almost two years ago, Corey was suspended from his Gold Coast state school for 20 days. He had lashed out at a teacher who, Kathleen says, "unfortunately wasn't aware that you can't approach Corey from behind. He can't handle that. The principal thought it was best for the students and teaching staff that we look for alternative education."

A student can be banned from Queensland state schools when the Director-General of the Department of Education and Training decides his or her presence poses an "unacceptable risk to the safety or wellbeing of other students or staff". The department's regional offices are charged with helping to find an alternative, be it another school or access to the training sector. Corey was considered not suited to regular state schools, but not in need of high-care special schooling. "There were two other schools he could have gone to," says Kathleen. "One, at Currumbin, would not take him because of his diagnosis. You mention the word 'autism' and



schools don't want to know you. There was one school that specialised in kids like Corey run by Family Services Australia, but at \$265 a day it was out of the equation."

A year ago, after a referral by Corey's former deputy principal, Kathleen found a place for her son at Toogoolawa, where students contribute \$30 a week for their study materials and lunches. She remembers his first day: her beloved boy, a victim of bullies, walking into a school for bullies. On his first day, he witnessed a violent brawl. The school went into lockdown. Welcome to Toogoolawa. They all have rage inside them, violence simmering. Hardness is a by-product of dislocation. Punches are thrown daily. "They're like little bantams in a chook pen," says principal Moloney. Quiet time is about introducing other emotions.

"Brent, do you want to blow the candles out?" Moloney asks.

Brent Buckland, 13, kneels at the altar and respectfully snuffs out the candles. Intelligent and well-read, he loves writing stories and caring for animals. He's going to be an RSPCA worker or a novelist. Brent excelled academically but his temper saw him struggle in mainstream schooling. His teachers referred him here because they thought he would flourish in a smaller school. And he has. "When I first came here I thought everyone was loopy," he says. "I was, like, what the hell is it with all this quiet time? But once I got into it, you know, it wasn't too bad. It's just sitting quietly. And, the thing is, I haven't had many blow-ups since I've been coming here."

Moloney turns to Fitzgerald: "We have

another student leader, John." The boys' eyes light up. They are rewarded with medals if they can maintain consistent levels of good behaviour. Teacher Angus Bailey addresses the circle. "Perhaps a month ago, we weren't sure how long Corey would still be here," he says. The boy raises his head, eyes bright. "Over the past few weeks Corey has scored beyond top points every week. He's focused. He's got the strength to ignore anybody who teases him and move on."

Corey's dumbstruck. A kid can go so long being singled out for poor behaviour that he forgets what it feels like to be singled out for his achievements. Fitzgerald rises with a gold medal in his hands. "I've been watching you, Corey," he says. "You have such a strong mind, mate. You got there. Congratulations." He places the prize in the boy's open palm. Corey clasps it so tightly inside his fist that nothing could prise it out. Tears well.

"See that!" whispers a tall, softly spoken man in his seventies. Dr Ron Farmer is a clinical psychologist and pioneer in behavioural therapy in Australia, working principally on the notion that behaviours are learned and can be unlearned. With his wife Su he devised the "educare" system that drives Toogoolawa – developing character through "the five human values of love, truth, peace, right conduct and non-violence". This is the education revolution, he says. Character, conduct and community before academic curricula. Build a troubled student's character and his thirst for knowledge will grow with it. "Corey has a glimpse of who he is," says Farmer. "He senses that he's not the Corey he

"We start the day with love, we fill the day with love, we end the day with love. This is the way we live."



Class act ... School founder John Fitzgerald; (above left) teacher Angus Bailey and boys in the Quiet Room; (previous page) Kepa, Corey, Brodie and Isaiah.

thought he was. He's something far greater. This moment will stay with him forever."

Corey shakes his head in disbelief. "This means so much to me," he says. "I've never reached this kind of achievement. The last time I got this close I was one day away until I lost it. I just let rip when a boy said something really mean to me. Now I want to get my act together, be more pleasant to other people."

Rise, Sir Corey. It wasn't that long ago that he was sitting in the padded cell of Robina Hospital's child mental health unit, having been sent there by his psychiatrist because he had become uncontrollable. "They called it the 'reflection room'," Kathleen says. "You look at that beautiful boy, can you imagine him being inside a padded cell? He doesn't belong in a padded cell." She cries, remembering.

Kathleen carries the moral lessons her son learns at school over into her home. "I honestly

don't know what would have happened to Corey without Toogoolawa. I can see a future for him. If he gets a job at a supermarket and holds it down, then that's good enough for me; a truck driver, that's good enough for me. That's why this is so important – for a job like that he doesn't have to be getting the best grades at school. He just needs to be able to get along with people. He can lead a normal life." She pauses. "I can't possibly say enough about John Fitzgerald. He could be doing anything with his money. But he's spending his money on my son. Can you imagine what I think of that man?"

**THE INDIAN MAN IN THE BACK OF THE MARRIOTT** Hotel Brisbane seminar room has all the answers. He's clearly studied the fifth edition of John Fitzgerald's *Seven Steps to Wealth*. "What's the most important part of the home?" asks Fitzgerald, pacing the stage in a sharp black suit with an open white shirt.

"The foundations!" calls the Indian man. "That's right, the foundations. Where's the best place to start?" asks Fitzgerald.

"Where you want to finish!" There must be 300 people here, heads nodding, scribbling notes. "Write these words down, put a circle around them," calls Fitzgerald. "Growth on growth!"

Fitzgerald wanted to be a millionaire by 25. For three minutes a day he closed his eyes and saw himself launching from a water-skiing pontoon attached to the riverfront home he would buy with his first million. He realised that exact vision at 23 – and still has the photo. He tells his audience how he hitchhiked from Melbourne after high school, arriving on the Gold Coast with \$200 in his pocket, bang in the middle of a property boom. At 17, he sold his first waterfront property for \$100,000. He soon developed what he calls "the Wealth Triangle", as outlined in his book *We Can Be Heroes*: "The idea: buy land on a deposit, increase its value through rezoning and subdivision, and on-sell at a huge profit – prior to settlement of the original purchase. The capital: borrow the deposit!"

I wait for the seminar's inevitable climax, the poignant story about Toogoolawa and how this ordinary man is singlehandedly transforming the lives of troubled children. But it doesn't come. It's Fitzgerald's greatest selling point, and he doesn't bring it up. That would cheapen Toogoolawa, reduce it to a mere marketing exercise. Yet Toogoolawa is the only reason he is up on that stage. The only reason he didn't stop working two decades ago. All he offers the audience about his life outside property is this: "My dad was killed in a car accident."

Days later, Fitzgerald sits in the office of his home in Broadbeach. A housekeeper potters

around his sprawling kitchen-lounge area, adorned with art pieces including a Pro Hart sculpture. Outside his office is a door from an abandoned Tibetan monastery; he brought it back from one of many pilgrimages to the region. He regularly visits India for retreats during which he won't speak or look into another human eye for two weeks. Now he sits on the edge of a lounge, elbows on his knees, fists clenched, leaning forward, ready – really ready – to communicate.

"I was eight years old," he says. "Living at home in Melbourne with Mum and Dad and us five kids. My oldest brother had gone to my uncle's farm in Shepparton, rural Victoria. He was walking around a log fire, caught his jeans on the fire. He went to hospital in Shepparton with third-degree burns. My dad used to drive up on a Tuesday morning and see him and return on a Wednesday night. He'd gone up two or three times. The fourth time he was saying goodbye, I gave him a big hug, told him I loved him and I said, 'Dad, you're not coming home.' He said, 'No, no, I'll be home tomorrow night.' But I knew he wasn't coming home. That Wednesday night on his way home, Dad's car was sandwiched between two semi-trailers and he ran off the road. Broke his neck, died instantly. I never shed a tear over it. I knew, somehow."

His father had run a menswear store. The only way his mum could cope with raising five children was to send her three boys to boarding school in Ballarat. This is one memory Fitzgerald has of his education: "The master of the dormitory, Brother Dowlan, would turn the lights off at 9pm and do a walk-around half an hour later. About three weeks after our arrival, he came and sat on my bed and talked to me about how I was feeling, whether I felt lonely or despondent. He reassured me, with comforting words. And then kissed me on the lips for about ten seconds. In the next three months, this happened maybe half-a-dozen times."

In March 1994, Christian Brother Edward Dowlan was charged in the Melbourne Magistrate's Court with one count of buggery, 22 of indecent assault and four of common law assault. It was alleged the assaults were against eight boys (Fitzgerald wasn't one of them) aged 10 to 13 between 1974 and 1982, when Dowlan was teaching in Ballarat. He was jailed for six years.

"I didn't know then what a paedophile was," Fitzgerald says. "I didn't know then that lonely kids are terribly vulnerable to people who seem to offer friendship and love."

Fitzgerald was a fighter: bad-mannered, angry, a heavy drinker at 15. An average student, he was expelled from boarding school in Year 11 and sent to a co-ed school for the remainder of his education. He was headed for a rocky road,►



but he had one saving grace: his mother. “I never had a conversation with my mum in which she didn’t tell me she loved me. On the phone; in person; every time. That’s the difference I had. That’s what got me through.”

At 26, Fitzgerald had enough money to retire. He was having dinner with old friend Humberto Urriola, a Chilean landscape architect with whom he’d often ponder the meaning of life. He had achieved his dream. Without a dream to pursue he was standing still. If you’re standing still you’re going backwards. “How are you going to leave your legacy?” Urriola asked.

Fitzgerald thought for a moment. He wanted to lead an extraordinary life. And extraordinary people save lives. And the only lives he knew he could save were the lives he knew well, the boys slipping through the cracks; the lost boys. His response sounded glib, but it was honest: “I want to be a hero.” Urriola gave Fitzgerald a phone number. Months later, Fitzgerald left a message on Ron and Su Farmer’s phone: “Hi, you don’t know me. My name is John Fitzgerald and I’ve got some money and I want to help youth at risk.”

**TWO HUNDRED DOLLARS HAS BEEN STOLEN** from the Toogoolawa petty cash tin. Two boys are taken into a small room to talk with Fitzgerald. They emerge having vowed to wash the lunch dishes for a week, a duty normally shared among the boys. One of the kids, Fitzgerald says, steals all the time. “The kids will fail, but the thing is, we can’t expel them because where will they go then? I say, ‘You’ve stolen from me, how can I help you?’ Now I’m saying that to a 13-year-old kid. I realise there’s a part of his brain saying, ‘This guy’s kidding himself.’ But I also know that if I am honestly saying that I care for him and his future, then that’s going somewhere as well. I will get through to that kid eventually.”

In class, Charlie Yardley is talking to the boys. The 21-year-old former Toogoolawa student was physically and emotionally abused at a mainstream school over his sexuality. He began to steal, partly to win friends. He stole so frequently that he developed chronic kleptomania. “My fingers did the walking,” he says. “Everybody else abandoned me. But these teachers stuck by me the whole time.” Yardley now works with youth welfare community group On The Edge. Everything he owns he bought. He’s openly and comfortably gay. “These boys don’t realise how lucky they are,” he says.

At lunchtime, the boys lay out packets of ham and cheese and salad. They work like army grunts, quick and disciplined, spreading around an outdoor eating area. Isaiah Fermanian, a 12-year-old Egyptian boy and the newest enrolment, wants to be a rugby league player when he grows



Turnaround ... Corey, 12, with his medal for model behaviour. “Now I want to get my act together.”

up. Benjamin Beard, 11 and the youngest here, wants to join his sister’s boyfriend’s insulation business. Kepa Ilolahia, 13, wants to be a photographer. He was teased at his former school over his weight. “I don’t get that here,” he says. “We’re all friends. It’s not family, but it is, sort of. We all stick up for each other.” Brodie Tindale, 14, was referred here after being expelled for throwing a desk at his principal: “He said I wasn’t going to get anywhere in life. I went to see him because people were paying me out about being fat. And he said, ‘Well, look at you, you are.’ And that’s when I threw the desk.”

“Mainstream teachers don’t have time to deal with boys like this,” says Toogoolawa student welfare officer and former state school teacher Helen Horn. “What’s the point of learning when the person himself isn’t functioning?”

In the afternoon, the boys are excited about a touch footy game. They wrestle each other, mess about. Isaiah unwittingly pushes Benjamin into a school desk. Benjamin’s tailbone is hurt and so is his pride. He pushes Isaiah in the face. Isaiah cowers briefly, then returns fire.

“Yeah, c..t?” says Isaiah.

“Yeah, c..t?” says Benjamin, leaping on Isaiah with a flurry of punches. It’s a shocking eruption, brutally quick. But what is most unsettling is how adept Benjamin is at fighting. An 11-year-old should not know how to fight this well. His knee connects with Isaiah’s head. Isaiah returns with a right hook. Moloney bursts in and hauls Benjamin into the music room. Benjamin screams abuse as he’s dragged away. He’s left alone to cool off. No discussion.

Moloney composes himself. “You just have to get one of them out of the way,” he says. “They have their own little pecking order. Ben didn’t want to be embarrassed by the new kid. Isaiah thought, ‘If I don’t react to this it’s going to keep on happening.’”

He breathes deep. Exhales. Moves on.

“It’s very unpredictable,” says Fitzgerald. “Each day is going to be determined by the kids. How well they’ve slept. How well they’ve eaten. What’s happening at home.” Of Toogoolawa’s hundreds of former students, he can count four who’ve ended up in prison. He knows of one who died. “His name was Tommy,” he says. “Torres Strait boy. A really, really beautiful boy. Always happy. Tommy came to our school having been out of school for a long time. His mother kicked him out of her house when he was eight. When he was 13 she had another baby and Tommy couldn’t work out why she could raise another baby yet he couldn’t live in their home. He started going down a really dark path. He left our school at around 14, in April last year. Then we heard he was out at night cross-dressing, really confused. He died last year of a drug overdose, died sniffing chrome.”

He drops his head, looks out a window. “I went to the funeral. I couldn’t help but think that I let Tommy down somehow. When did he veer off? Maybe we needed to be stronger: ‘Tommy, *don’t leave the school.*’ I should have got him back somehow.” He thinks about Tommy often, although there are more positives to dwell on: the kid who got into law; the boys who became labourers and bought their own homes; the lost boys who have grown into fine young men.

Days close at Toogoolawa with an acknowledgement session, where each boy acknowledges a virtue in another. “I would like to acknowledge Troy for the way he played touch football.” “I would like to acknowledge Kepa for getting so many answers right in class.” “I would like to acknowledge Brent for being kind to me today.” It’s a staggering thing to observe: the hardest breed of teenage boys sharing generous and heartfelt words about each other.

The session ends and three boys approach a wooden shield mounted on the wall, staring up at it with reverence. “Have a look at this,” says Corey. “This is where we get our name if we’ve been master for four weeks. My name’s not up here yet. It’s going to be put up eventually. And, umm, I’ll get one of these black plaques stating my name and what year I was here.”

Brodie is by his left side, resting an elbow on Corey’s shoulder. Benjamin has cooled off, having expended some energy mowing the lawn. He rests an elbow on Corey’s other shoulder. “Tell him what it means to ya,” he says.

“Well, ummm ...” Corey scratches his head. Benjamin whispers in his ear: “It’s everythin’.”

Corey thinks some more. “Yeah, ummm ...”

Brodie whispers something in his ear.

“Whaddaya say?” asks Corey.

“Proud,” whispers Brodie.

“Yeah, proud,” says Corey. “It makes ya feel proud.” ■