



Discovery: Inspirational Opportunities for Youth and Young Adults

Kate vanderVoort Discovery CEO

Imagine if you knew, what you know now, when you were a teenager. I wonder what you would have achieved or created in your life had you had the opportunity to really discover yourself and your innate abilities early on in life. What if there had of been a team of qualified, skilled and passionate educators knowledgeable about life, people you could trust, who could quickly build rapport and give you priceless skills and knowledge which could serve you a lifetime?

Today, this opportunity is available to our youth in the form of Discovery Australia. Discovery Australia is a non profit, non religious organisation providing life skills, leadership and learning programs for young people aged 13 to 30. The Discovery Youth Leadership Program for teenagers has been running in Australia for the past 15 years and there have been over 10,000 graduates. Discovery is an intensive, fun filled, 7 day residential program designed to assist Australian teenagers to grow and achieve their full potential in their personal, academic and professional life. Its success lies in the fact that it is an accelerated learning program.

Based on solid principles of NLP, accelerated learning and cognitive behavioural psychology, it provides positive foundations for the establishment and nourishment of a positive self concept with which teenagers can achieve their full potential in all areas of life. Through the effective use of games, simulations, role plays, indoor and outdoor activities, teenagers practice and experiment with different strategies and tools for success.

While the Discovery Youth Leadership program has been operating in Australia for 15 years, 2003 has seen the beginning of an exciting new chapter in the organisation's development. The new CEO of Discovery Australia is Kate vanderVoort, herself a graduate of the Discovery program. Today Kate is 27 years old, committed and passionate about the ongoing growth of Discovery programs and opportunities for young people.

Kate shares with us her vivid memories of being woken early one morning when she was 15 years old to attend the Discovery program....

I was woken up at 6am on the first day of my school holidays. I was not impressed. Mum had packed my bags and was sending me to a 'program' for 7 days which she assured me was for 'normal' teenagers. I was sure that she was sending me to an institution for troubled teens.....It was 7 days that changed my life.

Having grown up in a single parent house hold, where mum worked from home and was in high demand, I had many issues around being a teenager, especially around getting attention and having a 'normal' family. I often felt out of control with my emotions and had very little skill in expressing them in a useful way. As a naturopath and founder of a large charity for people living with life threatening illness and loss, grief and trauma, mum worked very hard to meet the high demand of people searching for some meaning in their life. There were some weeks where over 200 people came through our house, for appointments or support groups. I found these people to be far more interesting than friends my own age as they were dealing with major life issues and I felt like I was too! Finding some meaning for it all seemed far more important to me than being out socialising with friends. Listening to these people tell their stories and being a part of their journey was something I am only now realising the importance of in my life. Many of them passed away and that too has given me a very different outlook on life.

I had plenty of attention from other people who were so grateful to mum for all that she was doing for them. And yet all I wanted was the attention from my mum. As a result I found every way possible to push the boundaries and challenge the situation that I found myself in. I was very unhappy at school, not relating well to the girls my own age and was desperate for a close relationship with my family. A common phrase screamed from one end of the house to the other was "You have to be dying around here to get any attention!". This needless to say, did not bring me closer to happy and healthy relationships in our home.

As I sat on the bus to "Discovery" I looked like a black storm about to break. No-one sat next to me and when my team leader worked up the courage to approach me I quickly told him I would be on the next bus home. I must admit that all the other teenagers on the bus did look 'normal' and again I wondered what on earth I was doing here with them. I felt far from 'normal'. We arrived at the program venue and there were many staff jumping around, full of enthusiasm to welcome us to Discovery. I was still not impressed!

After some ice breakers and meeting my team the group began to settle in to the program of life skills, leadership and accelerated learning. I, on the other hand, was hell bent on not participating and being as disruptive as I could be. To start with I had my little group of supporters at the back of the room, who were also more than a little upset at having to spend their school holidays with a bunch of over enthusiastic staff and teenagers. Each day I tried to talk the staff into letting me leave, and each day they found some convincer to keep me there for just one more day. As the days passed one by one my group of accomplices diminished as they started to participate in the activities and processes of the program. There were many activities in the smaller teams and some that involved the whole group. There were activities aimed at exploring teamwork and roles with friends, family and teachers. There were many activities aimed at discovering personal leadership qualities and when you discovered a part of your life that worked well, they looked at how you could map that over into other areas.

By Day 4 it was inevitable. I was the only one left in the room refusing to be a part of the program. There is nothing like reverse peer pressure to motivate a teenager! I looked stupid not participating, so I just joined in.

The environment was friendly, fun and supportive, yet challenging. I came to learn that I am truly responsible for how I experience my life and the results that I get. I found it to be an environment where I couldn't fail, and received constructive feedback on how I could improve my communication and relating strategies.

The ropes day was amazing and for the first time I felt a part of a group where I truly belonged. Where my input was as important as those around me and where we all supported each other through some very challenging activities. It was a day where we had to commit to working together, being self responsible, and negotiating win/win solutions. We had to explore new possibilities, take intelligent risks and support each other unconditionally. By the end of the day we had realised that it was possible to create these outcomes in other areas of life. That what we were experiencing was not just about an isolated experience or event. Such a world was not only possible, but within reach. Now!

The rest of the week flew by and each day my confidence in my self and my belief that I actually had something worthwhile to contribute, grew stronger. By the end of the week I found myself sad that I had wasted the opportunities at the beginning of the week and sad that I was to go back home to an environment which was vastly different to where I had been. I had learned a lot about living as my word and integrity with the adults in my life, and felt nervous about how my new attitude would be received by my family. I was also unsure as to how my school would cope with my new study methods of using bright colours and mind maps to learn more effectively. I did however know that I had an immense support group now of other teenagers who actually had been facing exactly the same challenges and fears in their life.

We had ample opportunity to explore our own personal values in activities of reflection, listening and exploration with others about their values. The constant ability to look at your self, then others and then the group as a whole gave different points of reference and experience.

Once I started to share with others I found that the feelings I frequently felt and the way in which I expressed those, was not unique to me. Spending a week with a wide variety of teens at different ages and stages had shown me that there is no 'normal'. That we were all just doing the best we could do with the often limited skills that we had. I now felt armed with a bag full of skills and strategies to go home and have things be different. I knew that these perceived problems would be new opportunities to learn and grow, and with my new found confidence I could choose how I wanted it to be when I got home.

Being reunited with mum on the parent day was one of the best days we had ever had together. For the first time we truly listened to each other and

shared our difficulties and also how much we loved each other. Having this happen in a room full of other teenagers and their parents made for a very empowering experience, one that I will always treasure.

After the completion of the program, the Director, Don Meissner, made a suggestion of me being a staff person. I laughed, as I had never had someone ask me to do something that felt so far removed from where I was. In that moment, he saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. It stirred something deep within me that started to awaken over the next few weeks.

I then went on to become the youngest program manager on Discovery. I was immensely supported and guided through this and for the first time in my life I had an unshakeable belief that I could do and achieve anything. I had discovered a strength that I had never imagine possible. It was great to go back and create the space for other teenagers to have the same experience. I loved watching them get off the bus, less than impressed and then see the changes in the seven days. A constant reminder for me on how far I had come. It wasn't always easy, and being a teenager still had immense challenges, but now I was far more equipped to deal with them. And Don Meissner gave me a gift that I believe all young people deserve. To borrow Robert Dilts' vision, I believe that Discovery creates a world in which young people want to belong.

Once I had completed school I searched for something I could do at university that would give me the skills to work in a way that reflected the Discovery program. Social work was the closest I could find, and I was very disappointed to find that social work did not give people the skills to help themselves, or empower people to be all that they can be. Whilst I was at university the Discovery program ceased to exist. After completing my degree I knew that a program like Discovery was the only way I was going to be able to work with people in that way. I went on to do training in NLP and Coaching as that gave me many resources to empower others, however I still yearned for an environment in which teenagers could experience the magic of seeing themselves reflected in the eyes of non-judgemental adults and peers (A beautiful statement from Susan Kroening, the head facilitator).

We have created a non profit organisation called Discovery Australia. Discovery Australia runs not only the Discovery Youth Leadership program (13 – 17 year olds) but also a Leadership Development Program for over 18's. There are also parent programs, seminar series', coaching and mentoring programs and staffing opportunities. I am so excited to be able to contribute to such an exciting vision.

.....and we have just created our Vision:

Inspiring opportunities for youth and young adults to discover and achieve their uniqueness, belonging and purpose.

The next Discovery program is in January 2004. We have already been flooded with well wishes from past graduates of the program. It is amazing to hear from people who attended the program 15 years ago and still acknowledge the profound impact it has had on their life. For more information on Discovery Australia go to www.discoveryaustralia.org.au or phone 02 9557 1224

Author: Kate vanderVoort is a social worker, NLP Practitioner and Meta-Coach. Her background and experience includes working in the field of loss grief and trauma and empowering youth and young adults to step up to their true potential. Kate has a vision for creating a world in which young people thrive and want to contribute.