

ATTACHMENT



• Time to dance to the music of The Void. Band Members are from left: Peter Jarvis (guitar), Shane Mack (bass, guitar, vocals), Bill Branigan (drums) and Bruce Stephens (rhythm guitar).

# The night that ROCKED Winlaton

Report: ROBERT WHITE

On stage, the band was pounding out a long list of popular rock hits. Colored spotlights lit the hall and the revolving mirror ball threw spots of pink light to all corners.

On the floor, the teenagers danced to the music and at times took a break to sample the hot dogs, popcorn and soft drinks that were available.

It looked like any other disco at a suburban hall. But this was different.

The only dancers were girls and the hall was in the centre of Winlaton, Victoria's only Remand and Youth Training Centre for young women aged between 12 and 20.

About 45 girls packed the hall, which was barely large enough for a volleyball court, to hear *The Void*, a newly formed band that had given its services free for the night.

The function was organised by the Winlaton Community Support Group as part of its efforts to help rehabilitate girls at the centre.

"The girls really appreciated the chance to have a break from normal routine," one of the support group members said.

"It's so important that they know they have not been cut off from the rest of the community."

According to the Superintendent of Winlaton, Dr Eileen Slack, the disco night was invaluable.

"Winlaton resources are limited and we rely heavily on the community to organise functions such as the disco," she said.

Winlaton is located in Springvale Rd, Nunawading. It was established 27 years ago and today ranks as one of the most progressive centres of its type in Australia.

But despite its work in preparing young girls to return to a society in which they have had trouble fitting, Winlaton is still fighting to overcome a misinformed community attitude that girls who spend time at the centre are generally a lost cause.

In most cases, girls who attend Winlaton have committed no crime. They many have been made Wards of the State either through a Protection Application or Uncontrolled Behavior Application.

Their "crime" has been a lack of love and attention. In some cases, mother has sent her daughter to Winlaton because she claims she can't be controlled. The hidden reason may well be that Mum's new boyfriend doesn't want the daughter around and Mum decides that Winlaton provides the best answer.

There are the girls who have run away from home because of an intolerable family situation caused through violence, sexual attacks or a complete breakdown in the family unit.

The girls may as young as 12 and 13, are forced out on the street and are caught up with drugs and prostitution.

Winlaton takes the girls in and at any one time, there may be up to 80 resident in the centre. The average age of the girls is 15 years and their stay is around six weeks.

Many return home, hopeful that their absence has made the family heart grow fonder. Most times they are disappointed.

It is here that the Winlaton Community Support Group plays such an important role. Formed in June 1977, it provides the vital link between the girls and the outside community.

In a special pamphlet produced by the group outlining its services, it claims to "extend friendship and care to the young women of Winlaton so they do not feel isolated from the community to which they belong and must return."

There are more than 50 members in the group from all different backgrounds. But more are always sought.

"We can never have enough members," according to the chairman of the group, Mr Raleigh Armstrong.

The group's program includes weekly visiting, taking girls on outings on day or weekend leave, escorting them to doctors, dentists or hospitals, helping with crafts, makeup, cooking and a variety of related interests.

Through these contacts, the girls can talk and relate to people other than their peers or Winlaton staff and this helps to boost their own self image.

Group members also remember birthdays and Christmas time as in many cases, families either forget or can't be bothered at such important times.

The support group is completely voluntary and members pay a \$10 annual fee to cover administration costs.

"The girls appreciate that we are interested in them as people and this is possibly what they miss most of all — to have someone interested in them," Mr Armstrong said.

"Too often people read in the newspapers about young people

• Left: Winlaton Superintendent, Dr Eileen Slack and support group chairman, Mr Raleigh Armstrong enjoy a break during the disco.

• Right: Support group member, Mrs Shirley Gorries and daughter Danielle, 10. Mrs Gorrie has been visiting Winlaton for three years and her three daughters regularly join her.

being in trouble and then turn the page without bothering to think about how it all came to happen.

"When you are 13 and unwanted, you are too young for the dole and too young to get a job. These girls are immediately at risk and often their only resort for survival is prostitution or crime.

"Yet all they need is love and direction," he said.

Dr Slack said the presence of the support group gave Winlaton a new dimension.

"In a lot of cases, the community is not aware of the efforts of the Community Service Department and its dealings with teenagers. This group not only helps within the centre but members talk to people in the community and help spread a more realistic understanding of what is being done," she said.

Dr Slack said the group helped the girls overcome the negative experiences they had with adults and the interest and affection shown by members spoke louder than anything else.

"The girls appreciate what is being done for them and they are aware that these people give freely of their time.

"The support group is not a fad — year after year members persist in providing the experiences so badly needed by the girls," Dr Slack said.

For Winlaton, the disco was an extension of the community support as the band gave its time feely and the refreshments

were provided out of funds raised through various support group functions.

The leader of *The Void*, Shane Mack said his group had been pleased to be asked to perform.

"We certainly see the value of such a night and there were no second thoughts when we were asked.

For many of the girls, the disco provided an outlet for their emotions and they danced and sang to the music. For others, they sat quietly in the dimmed corners. The blank looks told of the inability to share emotions while others, their confidence sapped, sat and stared, wishing they could be part of the dancing.

One girl, aged no more than 14, broke down and cried when she won a \$15 record voucher as first prize in a dress-up competition. She said as she wiped tears from her eyes, that she had never won anything before and then became worried because she had never had so much to spend on a record.

The inhibitions didn't surprise the staff or support group members. The reluctance to break from the security of a darkened seat reflected the anxiety that had been part of the girls' lives.

The motto of the Winlaton Community Support Group is "Friendship to Spare" — it is a motto that as a community should all consider.

People wanting to discover more about the support group can contact Mr Armstrong on 874 2396.



• Left: Winlaton Superintendent, Dr Eileen Slack and support group chairman, Mr Raleigh Armstrong enjoy a break during the disco.

• Right: Support group member, Mrs Shirley Gorries and daughter Danielle, 10. Mrs Gorrie has been visiting Winlaton for three years and her three daughters regularly join her.

