

Interview with Shanelle Bennett Director of NET Ministries Australia

How did you become involved in NET ministries?

After hearing about NET through a member of our Catholic Community, Shayne (my husband) and I took our family to Minnesota in the USA, where NET Ministries originated. We lived in with the Teams to observe their training, daily routines and other workings of the ministry. We then returned to Australia to implement the ministry here. I was at home with little children at the time; however, I worked in a part time capacity for NET during those years. I supervised teams, provided pastoral care and worked in different areas of the NET teams training and debriefing periods throughout the year. I am now in my tenth full time year with the Ministry.

What makes NET a unique type of ministry?

The attractive quality that sets NET apart is our PEER to PEER approach to youth evangelisation. This enables us to help make the gospel relevant in the ordinary lives of teenagers and young adults. So often faith and religion appears so distant. The witness of young adults helps to make it more concrete in the lives of people close to the age of those to whom the teams minister. Add to this the travelling dimension of the ministry and it takes on a fairly unique character. This means we can be available to anyone who needs us, even in remote parts of the country. However, we also provide teams for specific parishes or dioceses who request our services. This is called our "local ministry" whereby a team is employed by a parish or diocese for them to use the team wherever they choose. The team is able to take their enthusiasm, love of Christ and his Church and the benefit of all of their skills and training to help build up a lively community of young people and leaders for that particular area.

How do you gauge the effectiveness of ministry teams?

I guess lives changed, hearts given to Christ, young people who receive new vision and hope for the Church of today. Many of the young people who are affected by the teams significantly contribute in their local situation or become NET team members themselves. They have the confidence that they can give some of what they have experienced back to the life of the Church. Many have also gone on to become youth workers, pastoral associates and campus ministers all over Australia and New Zealand. I think the greatest gauge is in experiencing the faith of young people - and not just in the short term. We've been round long enough not only to have seen it in their personal lives but also in their marriages and in the lives of their children. That's when the fruit of NET is most evident. It is such a gift to know that in some small way you are part of the faith development of so many individuals who go on to affect the lives of so many others.

What would a day in the life of a Netter be?

It really depends a little on whether they are part of local or a travelling team. The travelling teams rise quite early for personal prayer, breakfast and usually a 9am to 3pm retreat at a local Catholic High School. They often will have had team prayer before they leave or at some time in the afternoon after the retreat. The team arrives about an hour before the students to receive instructions from the Retreat Leader for the day about who is doing what eg: skits, dramas, songs, etc that will be used during the course of the retreat. The day flows with an opening session filled with fun skits, introductions, announcements of group leaders for the day and fun games. There are personal testimonies of faith, a talk on a particular topic such as peer pressure, leadership, forgiveness or the search for God and His purpose in your life. There is time for fun games, more serious dramas conveying the gospel message and a specific time at the end of the day for prayer with each student. The team then cleans up, does a retreat evaluation and a prayer before heading back to host families to have dinner and usually once again be available to relate to, minister to the families who have so graciously allowed them to be part of their households for a few days.

Its more difficult to say for local teams because their ministry is quite diverse. At the heart of every team though is the personal and corporate prayer, the practical dimensions of a community life together as well as the particular aspects of ministry which include retreats, youth groups, different ministry events connected with the life of the parish or diocese, the formation of young leaders etc.

What is your personal experience of Jesus working in your life?

For as long as I can remember I have had awareness of God in my life. However, as teenagers do, I began asking serious questions about life in early high school years. I had experienced a few shall we say (very dark events in my life growing up) and looking back now I was probably quite depressed and affected by those events. Being the life of the party sort of personality helped me to hide it well. Underneath, I questioned life itself and found many areas of my life quite difficult to cope with. As many teenagers do I turned to drugs, alcohol and extreme behaviour to fill the gaps but somewhere deep inside knew there had to be more than this. An unlikely combination of events led me to a local prayer meeting where there were many adults and young people totally on fire for Christ, and the Church. I had never witnessed such a thing. I was immediately affected by the love, enthusiasm and life of these people. It was almost "in cognito" that I continued sneaking along to these meetings - I mean it just wasn't "cool" to be seen at a prayer meeting - but I couldn't help myself. After receiving prayer to experience more of the reality of Jesus through His Holy Spirit in my life, I just came alive, I caught on fire. It was the most amazing thing I had ever experienced. I knew God was real and he loved me and was interested in me. It was unbelievable. It bubbled out of me, it was very hard to go back to school and be the "cool, hard, rebellious leader" I had been. I tried, but I couldn't. I was transformed into a disciple of Christ and it was so wonderful. However, I had some really hard times during this time as I fell into my old habits and considered myself unworthy of the love of Christ. Thank God, he held on to me and

through the love and support of so many Catholic youth and adults I made it through and have never looked back. I am not perfect and I have been through some really dark holes of faith but Jesus has seen me through each one, but that's another story.

What changes do you see in people who take part in these teams and give up a year or two of their lives?

Massive changes. Many of them come to us with budding faith and it grows into heroic, radical faith whereby they are able to completely lay down their lives into the hands of Jesus. They learn so many truths about the gospel and the freedom it brings. Through their encounters with others, they often receive much healing from past hurts and have new confidence to deal with issues in their lives. On a very human level, a number of them are growing into adulthood. During the year, they develop in their ability to make decisions and follow them through, to pursue good relationships, to work at reconciliation and to respect themselves and others.

In having to continually be selfless, serve and care for others, they grow in their capacity to love not only their friends but those they often find it hard to love. It is an amazing journey for them, one that can be a special part of their faith development for the rest of their lives.

How does NET look after its people – for example, what are members of the team entitled to?

The team receive a monthly stipend and receive full training, food, shelter, personal pastoral care by experienced supervisors who have all themselves either served on NET or have been involved in Youth ministry for many years. They receive full health cover and are well cared for and loved immensely.

Do you have any retreat stories that you would like to share with our readers? (We love anecdotes)

I do have one very beautiful story from last year. One of our Netters, along with her team, was sharing their faith quite simply with people on a university campus. A young man confronted her and was quite irate. He began yelling abusively at her and became quite aggressive. She was frightened but then became a little angry herself at his response to her. She had not even approached him and was only sharing with those who were interested. However, she thought of Christ in the situation and felt that she should simply try to listen to the person and not retaliate. By listening, she discovered that this father young man's father had been abused by someone in the Church and he hated anything to do with Church. She let him vent his anger and simply listened. He left but was to return some hours later to apologise for what he had put her through.

He had come to realise that he himself had become abusive in the situation and didn't want to treat her in that way. He told her that because she had simply listened to him and not rejected him, he had experienced the love of Christ for the first time in his life. These are the stories that make it all worthwhile.