COMMUNITY 100

Canoeing on the Macalister River is one of the many activities on offer at Licola Wilderness Village in Victoria’s East Gippsland high country.

FACING PAGE Members of the Briagolong & District Lions Club — Jessie Walker, George Heywood and Marg Armitage — with some happy abseilers.

set a new course

A LIONS-FUNDED WILDERNESS VILLAGE IN VICTORIA IS IMPROVING THE LIVES OF DISADVANTAGED KIDS.

WORDS VIRGINIA IMHOFF PHOTOGRAPHY MARK ROPER
SINCE 1973, LIONS Clubs have enabled more than 50,000 children to attend camps at their Licola Wilderness Village, on the doorstep of Victoria’s Alpine National Park, 254 kilometres east of Melbourne. The five-day camps for disadvantaged children and those with special needs provide social interaction, and the opportunity to learn new skills, engage in teamwork and overcome challenges. According to Adam Wake, Licola’s CEO and operations manager, the kids not only make new friends, but they come away with improved confidence and self-esteem, and a more positive outlook.

Adam has many stories of children who have benefited from attending the camps and recalls one boy in particular. “His mother came to me and said the boy’s father had committed suicide some time before. He had stopped socialising and interacting, and had gone backwards at school and was at least a year behind. So he came on the camp and a few months later his mother told me that the transformation was phenomenal. He had not only enjoyed the experience, but he’d caught up at school and was planning to give a presentation about Licola. I put that down to sharing his experience with other kids on the camp, and realising he was not alone.

“And we have many people who return to Licola as adults and say they have never forgotten the experience because they were surrounded by supportive, positive adults,” Adam says.

Licola is just a dot on the map, a former logging camp on the Macalister River perched high up in a mountain valley. It was thanks to Lions’ former international director and visionary Ian Stockdale that the organisation bought the abandoned settlement in 1969 and converted the old mill cottages into accommodation. Today it’s known as Licola Wilderness Village — 13.7 hectares of riverside parkland and facilities owned and operated by Lions Clubs of Victoria and southern NSW for the benefit of disadvantaged children.

Although it has been completely modernised over the years, there is still no mains power at Licola, only diesel generators, and mobile phones don’t work here.

“The remoteness is part of the beauty of the place,” says Adam, who has worked here since 2008. Adam was previously at Outward Bound Australia, where he met his wife, Cherry, who now trains the volunteers who help staff the camps and is chief disciplinarian.

Licola is a two-and-a-half hour drive from Melbourne and when we arrive the place is buzzing with activity — one of the five camps that Lions Clubs fund each year for disadvantaged children aged eight to 11 is in full swing. In addition, there are four Lions-sponsored special-needs camps for children with disabilities. A new camp for at-risk teenagers, called Wild4, was launched in December 2015. At other times, Licola opens its doors to school, sporting and recreation groups, and is also a popular holiday spot for families.

Squeals of excitement come from the direction of the riverbank as a bunch of kids clad in helmets and flotation vests attempt to launch canoes on the Macalister River. “The kids are getting wet,” says Adam, smiling. Others line up for a turn at the abseiling tower — converted from the mill’s old woodchip hopper — or take turns on the flying fox. There’s also archery, a ropes course, raft building, trampolines, a day and a night bushwalk, the giant swing... and the list goes on.

“The majority of children attending the camps are selected by Lions Clubs,” Adam says. “Lions work with schools to identify children who may benefit from a break. Our first camp in January has a lot of kids from refugee backgrounds — it’s one of the most challenging, as they have often seen and experienced dreadful things, but generally they cope extremely well.”

There might be tears for some on the first day, but by the time we visit on day three, there’s just a bunch of happy campers. Ten-year-old Marcus admits that he was nervous initially. “My dad has been here three times and I was eager to meet new friends,” he says. “And my mum said it would get me away from the house, as my little brother has disabilities.”

Others express similar sentiments. “I was a bit scared, but I wanted to come and meet new friends. They have good food, too,” says 11-year-old Sophie. And Irene, also 11, has “loved everything”.

For the volunteers — some of whom are Lions members — who give up their time to work with children in a 1:6 ratio, they get back as much as they give. “We tell volunteers that it’s tiring but rewarding,” says Adam. “One volunteer has done 60 camps, another has been volunteering for 33 years.”

Volunteer Brad Underhill is a member of Vermont Lions Club in suburban Melbourne. “I am passionate about child welfare, and this camp is about socialising with purpose,” Brad says. “The kids are being challenged and gaining confidence. If nothing else, just meeting and interacting with other kids helps to develop kinship.”

Supporting the community is what Lions Clubs is all about, and Licola Wilderness Village wouldn’t exist without their ongoing work, fundraising and volunteering. On the day we visit, members of Briagolong & District Lions Club arrive to donate the proceeds of a recent fundraising event. “We had an old-time dance in the Briagolong Hall and raised $400 for Licola,” says club president Jessie Walker. “There are so many things Lions do. It’s service to the community.”

For more information aboutLicola Wilderness Village, telephone (03) 5148 8791 or visit licola.org.au. For details about Lions Australia, telephone (02) 4940 8033 or visit lionsclubs.org.au. For the chance to win $1000 to help your community, join the Lions Club Community Project, details on page 122.
“THE KIDS ARE BEING CHALLENGED AND GAINING CONFIDENCE.”

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT
Adam Wake, CEO and operations manager at Licola Wilderness Village, and his charges pose with the lion statue; Shabby, the border collie pup, belongs to programs manager Rob Strachan; Jessie Walker, president of Briagolong & District Lions Club, with Adam; a young abseiler climbs down the old hopper; poplars make a leafy setting for the cabins; Adam and Cherry’s son, six-year-old Casey, enjoys visiting the camp.
What could you do to improve your community?

To celebrate 100 years of the Lions Clubs International, they’re giving away $100,000 to more than 100 local projects.

Helping local farmers through tough times is just one way of giving back to your home town; a public garden, kids’ playground or senior citizens’ centre could be your project of choice. “If you can think of a community need, chances are there’s a Lions Club doing something about it,” says Rob Oerlemans, Lions’ executive officer.

There are more than 100 Lions Clubs participating in this grant program. Visit homelife.com.au/community100 for full terms and conditions and to find out if your project is eligible. You have until June 30, 2016, to apply for a $1000 grant to help you develop a project in your community. We need a short submission from you that includes:

1. An outline of the project for which funding is being sought, the community that will benefit from it and details of how the community will benefit.
2. Proposed timing of the project.
3. Total cost of the project.

Visit homelife.com.au/community100 or mail your application to Lions Community 100, Country Style, Locked Bag 5030, Alexandria, NSW 2015.

Applications open at 00:01 AEDT on 25.02.2016 and close at 23:59 AEST on 30.06.2016. Grant recipients will be determined at 10:00 AEST on 19.08.2016 at Level 1, 2 Holt Street, Surry Hills, NSW 2010. Grant recipients will be announced and their names published on homelife.com.au on 26.08.2016. Full terms and conditions and eligibility restrictions apply, visit homelife.com.au/terms.