

Where Challenge Meets Change

Andy Hamilton, the founder of the youth mental health charity Human Nature Adventure Therapy, talks about the mental health crisis, the intensive work needed to connect with young people and the power of the natural world to heal.

Words by Sonia Caeiro Alvarez

When Andy Hamilton was hit by a truck while riding his bike in Melbourne's urban grid, he knew it was the last straw.

The human rights activist with a double major in psychology and political science had been working in social impact and conflict resolution in East Timor, and after bouts of dengue fever, salmonella, and ongoing chronic immune and fatigue problems, the bale was already heavy. Providence often presents us with an unexpected opportunity, but Hamilton never expected it to be in the form of being sideswiped by a heavy vehicle on a city street. That life-changing sliding door and recovery period prompted his move to the Byron Shire in 2005, and as a result of that pivotal move, his passion for mental health and engaging young people to support them through vulnerable times has become his purpose. Hamilton is the driving force behind Human Nature, the Ballina-based adventure therapy organisation supporting at-risk young people across the Northern Rivers region.

In the past seven years young people in the area have experienced major floods, drought, bushfires, the pandemic, and more major floods. On the precipice of adulthood, living through lockdowns, natural disasters, trauma, loss, school staff shortages, and economic pressures has exacerbated the national youth mental health crisis. This cohort carries a heavy burden.

Hamilton believes that while Australians know the crisis is there, they don't understand how bad it is and how much worse it's likely to become.

"Where the rubber hits the road, or where the crisis hits disaster, is where young people are heading for a metaphorical cliff's edge. Once they are off that cliff, things are a real mess. Government and the ambulance are the bottom of the cliff services," says Hamilton.

The 48-year-old Myocum resident is the father of two-year-old Juniper and step-father to Lae-Ella (21) and Eve (17). His partner Ranees has a background in early childhood education and both of them are aware of how much nurturing their family requires as Hamilton meets the broader crisis head-on.

"These young people are not getting through the door of Headspace or in front of a psychologist, and they're the ones who need it most," he says. "How do we get in front of them? How do we find our way to them? And where do we meet them? We talk about disengaged youth, but the truth is that it's less about youth being disengaged and more that our services need to be designed to engage them where they're at. That's the foundation of Human Nature. That's our mission and our modus operandi."

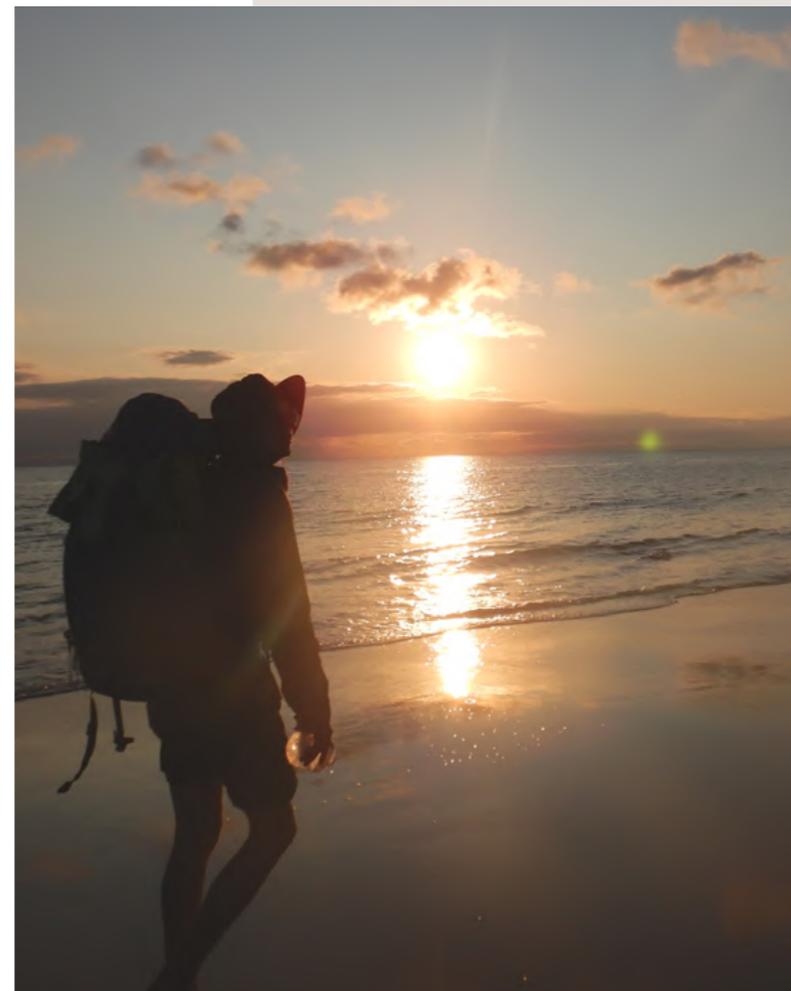
Human Nature works with kids with complex trauma, attachment wounding and severe emotional distress, and, says Hamilton, they work relationally for the longer term. "Ten Medicare sessions a year is never going to cut it," he says. "For most teenagers, you won't get far if you try to sit down for a serious talk. You've got a better chance when you're driving, going for a walk, or where you can have side-by-side conversations. It's also about choosing an environment that is less pressured, where you can have the time to form trust, and to build what we call the 'therapeutic alliance'."

Hamilton began working for The Buttery with its youth drug and alcohol outreach program and began to realise that, almost without fail, every young adult he worked with on addiction, criminal behaviours, or mental illness, had histories of trauma and disadvantage that had never been addressed.

"That turning point in adolescence became increasingly obvious to me," he says. "I wanted to work with young people at the real fulcrum of change. It's a point where the balance shifts from



Human Nature's founder Andy Hamilton



A participant of the Human Nature program enjoying a beach walk. Image supplied

where their life trajectory is determined by what has been done to them to the choices they make. Those choices can perpetuate the cycles or put them on a different course. It's a defining time when intervention can be of real value and have a far bigger impact than when someone is 30."

Hamilton believes more innovation is needed to engage young people, but that it doesn't have to be rocket science. "Youth workers have been doing it forever, but they don't necessarily have the trauma-informed clinical training," he says. "Sometimes keeping it simple and just grabbing a milkshake, kicking a ball, shooting hoops, or walking along the river is what's needed. It's always about engagement - meeting young people where they're at - aside from the robust evidence on the benefits of nature, physical activity, and being outdoors. There are remarkable positive side effects to all of that, but beneath it, what we're doing is engaging those who would not otherwise engage in the conventional system.

"A central theme we face is intergenerational trauma and generational disadvantage," says Hamilton, "and we have to stop the cycle for that to stop perpetuating. We know most perpetrators have been victims themselves. This also relates to the short-term political process. As a society, we need to invest in generations, not just announcements for the period of political rhetoric during elections."

The Human Nature flagship program, *Recre8*, had modest beginnings. Whilst still at The Buttery, initial federal government funding under the National Illicit Drug Strategy supported innovative ways to engage disengaged young people with a youth drug and alcohol outreach counsellor. Hamilton's role was to devise ways to engage young people in therapeutic interventions. Not yet fully registered as a psychologist, Hamilton was frustrated - seeing clearly that a bigger, systemic lens would deal better with the problems. He embarked on building upon his Honours in Psychology and did two years of supervised practice as a provisional psychologist at The Buttery.

"One of the people I discovered while I was looking for new approaches was Graham Pringle," he says. "Graham ran an outdoor education program in schools in Uki and

was seeing highly positive outcomes.” Pringle and his wife also fostered children in out-of-home care and believing in the value of their programs, dreamed of therapeutic applications. Meanwhile, Hamilton was seeking a nature-based scaffold from which to apply his therapeutic engagement. “We partnered with some out-of-home care providers in the region, cobbled together money, and piloted Recre8,” he says. “This evolved into a deep immersion three-month intervention with intake, assessment, a preparation camp, a 10-day expedition, and follow-up support with a celebration camp.” After years of running programs on minimal funds, Hamilton admits he was close to giving up. But providence emerged again in the form of Kirsten Flannery of the Flannery Foundation, who offered some seed money for the fledgling organisation. “Kirsten had a real interest in the programs, and she kept asking me more about it,” he says. “One day, we were canoeing down at the Brunswick River, and I was talking about how powerful the therapy could be in my double kayak – to have a young person in a kayak sitting in the front looking at nature, and talking from behind



Canoeing down the Brunswick River



“We preference being in nature because we know that there are obvious benefits”

them, in the backseat – connecting, but in a relaxed non-confrontational way. Kirsten was inspired to see if it might be possible to grow a sustainable youth mental health service to not only support the Recre8 program, but also other innovative youth mental health approaches that Hamilton was hoping to develop. Around this time, Jenny Gundersen, a head school counsellor in the region, recommended Hamilton to donor Belinda Seaton, resulting in a further three years of seed funding. Human Nature Adventure Therapy, the organisation, was officially born in 2015 with the additional funding support of Peggy and Brian Flannery. Hamilton believes that the COVID pandemic was an opportunity to grow as the lockdown prevented the running of Recre8 programs, but provided the ideal proving ground for the new Activ8 Program which offers one-on-one outreach support with qualified therapists, trauma-informed youth workers, and therapeutic mentors. The model enabled the team

“ *Our services need to be designed to engage them where they’re at. That’s the foundation of Human Nature.* ”

to continue to support young people throughout the pandemic with therapists and mentors meeting young people socially distanced in the outdoors. “Our work is very individualised, and not having a one-size-fits-all model is important because every young person is different, their circumstances are different, and usually they’ve tried everything,” he says. “The first thing we do is match them to someone in our team who is a good fit, and do as much as possible to understand their interests and strengths, and what’s most likely to engage them at a very nuanced level.” The adventurous activities are a drawcard. “Some of our therapists are surfing instructors, or it might be an e-bike or mountain bike ride, a stand-up paddleboard, a kayak, or a walk in the forest,” says Hamilton. “Sometimes the least adventurous activity can be the most effective. Whilst adventure in itself may help them feel better; really it’s about the engagement capacity towards good professional mental health care that nature and the activities support.

We preference being in nature because we know that there are obvious benefits, and a lot of evidence around that. It makes people feel good, but if a young person is not leaving their room and the only thing that interests them is playing chess, we’ll play chess in their room with them if that’s what it takes. We could get them out on the back veranda, maybe to the backyard or under a tree, then next time in a park. It’s all about engaging and assessing degrees of comfort and trust.” At the time of writing, Human Nature has 106 active clients, and 48 are in the Activ8 program. Elev8 is the third program which, Hamilton explains, began with a large group of alumni with much to contribute wanting to stay in the program and become mentors. This program has evolved to provide a lower intensity ‘step-down’ support service to young people exiting the concentrated therapeutic support of the Activ8 Program. They are able to remain connected to the organisation and their peers for as long as they need, and also have the opportunity to be supported with the challenges faced transitioning to adulthood and independence. They also develop leadership capabilities and participate in the growth and evolution of Human Nature through its Youth Leadership Committee. With 14 staff and a program team of 10, Human Nature’s multidisciplinary team of psychologists, social workers, counsellors, and therapeutic mentors is led by Hamilton and program manager Jennifer Parks, with CEO Sharon White at the organisational helm. While there is an evolution in public awareness and more capacity for intervention is being developed, Hamilton believes there is a sweet spot. “We’ve generally kept our heads down because when we receive attention, we get so many client referrals that we can’t cope. It means hours on the phone with distressed parents. To meet our goals, it is important to raise funds and the profile of our programs simultaneously. We can only do one with the other. The hardest part of the job is turning people away, and sadly we have to do that. Without major ongoing funding, we could never meet the demand,” he says. Meanwhile, passionate and purpose-driven, the Human Nature team continues to reach out and engage, using ancient practice with contemporary theory. It’s been a long journey from that serendipitous accident with a truck, but Hamilton is more energised than ever. Our region’s children will benefit from such passion and the dedication of a team focused on engaging young people who would otherwise fall through the gap – where challenge meets change. ■