

Queensland teenagers leave to walk Kokoda Track with Kokoda Spirit

Written by Nicole Arrowsmith

The twelve month Kokoda Challenge Youth Program will culminate this weekend when the 42 young people, hailing from Brisbane, the Gold Coast and Tweed, depart Brisbane Airport on-route to Papua New Guinea.

30 of the teenagers will be making the historic pilgrimage along the 96km Kokoda Track through the Papua New Guinea Jungle with Kokoda Spirit. The remaining 12 young people, supported by a building team, will be experiencing the Kokoda Village and doing much needed repairs on Kokoda Primary School.

The Kokoda Kids as they are aptly known are part of the Kokoda Challenge Youth Program. Program graduate Chelsea Kokshorn found the whole experience to be life-changing.

"Since completing the program, I feel as though I have achieved something incredible," said Chelsea. "It's definitely one of the greatest things I have ever done – it was life changing really. "Walking the Kokoda Track and completing the youth program, has made me a stronger person, and has given me a lot more knowledge about what happened at Kokoda."

About

The Kokoda Challenge Association is a not for profit organisation that was formed by founder and Chairman, Doug Henderson in January 2005. In July 2004, Doug was at an RSL conference when a guest speaker spoke of Australia's military history, in particular the battle of the Kokoda Track and the Pacific Campaign.

Doug, who has been at the forefront of Veterans issues for the past decade, was profoundly affected by what he heard and overcome by shame about the fact that so few Australians knew the real story of how significant the Kokoda military campaign was to Australia's history.

Doug was compelled to be involved in promoting awareness of the Kokoda Track and believed that incorporating young Australians was the key to raising the profile of the history of Kokoda.

The Kokoda Challenge Association was established in January 2005 with two main aims;

1. To educate youth and raise general public awareness of the gallant victory by Australian soldiers in 1942 on the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea – a victory which undoubtedly saved Australia from Japanese occupation.
2. To identify young Australians who are at a crossroad and support them through a 12 month community counsel – The Kokoda Challenge Youth Program. This requires the participants selected to undertake a 12 month commitment to a community program, designed and supported by the Kokoda Challenge Association, which encourages participants to develop self-awareness within the wider community and prepare them for the challenges of life. The Kokoda Challenge Youth Program culminates in the participants using the skills and training to undertake the challenge of walking the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea.

To enable the Kokoda Challenge Association to achieve these main aims it was decided that funds would be raised by conducting a yearly Queensland Kokoda Challenge Event – to be held in the Gold Coast Hinterland.

Funds raised from this event finance the cost of the Kokoda Challenge Youth Program, which includes training and bush camps and the associated costs of travel to Papua New Guinea to walk the Kokoda Track.

Working in collaboration with

The Kokoda Challenge Association developed early ties with the Gold Coast Bushwalking Club to design the route for the Kokoda Challenge Event and gather volunteer support. The Kokoda Challenge Association support and endorse the Bushwalkers Code of Conduct and the protection of the environment for the enjoyment of future generations.

The Gold Coast State Emergency Services work closely with the Kokoda Challenge Association and indeed provide upwards of 100 volunteers on the weekend of the Kokoda Challenge. The Gold Coast City Council, the Department of Main Roads and the State Parks and Wildlife Services all provide the vital support necessary for the success of to the Kokoda Challenge.

The RSL's, Police Citizen Youth Centres and High Schools and a number of youth support organizations contribute to identifying young people to be participants of the Kokoda Challenge Youth Program.

Wesley Mission Brisbane has also provided vital support to the Kokoda Challenge Youth Program and have assisted the Kokoda Challenge Association to develop best practices for managing the youth program.

Whilst the Kokoda Challenge is currently managed entirely by volunteers and accordingly the operational cost are able to be kept to a minimum, however this will not always be the case. As the Challenge grows and demand is placed for access to the Kokoda Challenge Youth Program the administrative and management needs will of course grow. Like any professional organisation professional staff will need to be engaged.

The Kokoda Challenge Association however is working towards establishing strong corporate partnerships including Kokoda Spirit which will eventually cover the operational and management costs of the Kokoda Challenge and the Kokoda Challenge Youth Program.

Once these goals have been achieved the Kokoda Challenge Association will be able to allocate all of the funds raised through the Kokoda Challenge directly to youth orientated programs.

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