

# WEST WEEKEND

JUNE 17-18 2017

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BY THE SEASIDE



## *My generation*

Think you know millennials? Think again.



feature





PICTURES IAIN GILLESPIE

# Model citizens

Generation Y gets a bad rap but the number of young West Australians stepping up to help others at a new centre has taken everyone by surprise. **Carrie Cox** meets some of them.

**T**hey're lazy. Self-involved. Entitled. Shallow. Slaves of consumerism, empowered by hardworking, hapless parents who are reluctant to boot them out.

They're online, never offline. Zero life skills. They're pulling duck faces at everything their forebears have achieved. They're in it for themselves, this lot.

And lazy. Did we mention lazy?

If you're a "millennial" reading this (aka "Gen-Y", born between 1982 and 2004), then you've heard it all before. Feel free to roll your eyes right about now if you haven't already.

If you're the parent, grandparent or employer of a millennial, you've probably nodded wryly through those first few paragraphs, forgetting of course that similar things were said about your own generation in its uncharted infancy.

Every new generation is ritually vilified, if only to make the previous one feel better about itself, but perhaps none so vociferously as this one. The first generation to have lived most of its young life online, Gen-Y is far more exposed and ripe for judgment than any before it. The modern millennial is a much-maligned species.

Which makes a new WA social experiment – the McCusker Centre for Citizenship at UWA – a quite remarkable initiative. The first of its kind in Australia, the centre provides opportunities for university students to spend three months working with not-for-profit organisations to engage them in community work and social change. They feed homeless people, work in remote indigenous communities, design resources for people who can't afford legal representation, help connect elderly people isolated in their neighbourhoods, give support to refugees negotiating new lives and much more.

There is no tangible pay-off. Students work for free not because there might be a job at the end of it but rather to become more active citizens. To get a taste of making a difference. Some will receive university credit points for their efforts but there are far easier ways to do so.

And they've signed up in droves. In its first

semester of operation just one year ago, the centre signed up 20 students to complete internships. By the second semester, another 180 had applied. Now there is a waiting list of more than 300 students wanting to do internships in 2017 and more than 200 not-for-profit organisations keen to accommodate them.

Lazy? Self-involved? Entitled? Not so much.

"My worst fear was students wouldn't be interested and maybe the community organisations mightn't be either," says centre chief executive Michelle Scott. "But the response has been overwhelming. There's a great appetite here for this. I've just been so impressed by young people wanting to step forward. They don't just want a great education. They're not solely motivated by money or their future careers. They're looking for something else – how to be a good citizen, an active citizen in the contemporary world.

"And one of the best things about that is the fresh eyes they're bringing to big issues that have been around for a long time. They're saying 'How can we meet these challenges in a different way?'"

The McCusker Centre for Citizenship is an initiative based on the Haas Centre for Public Service at Stanford University in the US, which aims to embed community service within tertiary education. It was established through a philanthropic fund set up in 1952 by businessman Walter Haas and his wife Elise to create opportunities for young people to give more of themselves to the city's social and cultural fabric.

Perth's Walter Haas is Malcolm McCusker QC, former governor of Western Australia, esteemed barrister and philanthropist. Now 78 and still practising law at the top of his game, Malcolm is a big believer in the current generation of young adults and suspects they may hold the key to turning around established ideas about charity and community.

"There's a fairly jaundiced view within society about young people at university age but my experience is that many of them are quite idealistic and want to do things that make a difference but aren't always sure how to do it, where to start," Malcolm says. "Through (the McCusker Charitable Foundation), we've been keen to advance a genuine improvement in the charitable attitude of people in the community – there's some suggestion that our charitable approach is not as strong as it might be – and we wanted to do something at student level that is a cause for enhancement.

"I wasn't at all sure this centre would work but students have flocked to it and I'm really delighted with the response. It's inspiring to see young people taking on these roles, helping to advance the welfare of others and feeling good about themselves in the process. What they quickly learn is that those who give get a greater gift in return." »

Doing their bit  
Michelle Scott (far  
left) and Malcolm  
McCusker with  
students Joseph  
Sabbagh, Jenny  
Vo and Sarah  
Maiden at UWA.



## feature

### Jenny Vo, 23

The daughter of blue-collar Vietnamese immigrants, Jenny Vo is acutely aware of the value of her university education – “something not many people aspired to where I grew up”. But she also believes her degree in public health won't deliver her all the answers to life's big questions, hence signing up for an internship with the Red Cross through the McCusker Centre for Citizenship.

“It's easy to have lots of textbook knowledge but when you're out there doing community work and seeing what's happening in the real world, it's really invaluable; it gives you an edge,” Jenny says. “I think a lot of young people are labelled as keyboard warriors these days, just clicking on things and taking the easy way out, but I think there are a lot of people like me who really want to do volunteering but aren't sure how to put themselves out there. The McCusker centre is great because it gives you a pathway and a project.”

Jenny worked with Red Cross' community development team to identify new ways to bridge gaps between immigrants and the wider community.

“I half expected to be working in an office most of the time but I was very much out in the community, working with groups and working one-on-one with new immigrants,” she says. “I worked with an Afghan refugee, who wanted to go to university but didn't have the means, and I helped him apply for a bridging course and showed him the scholarships he could apply for.”

“Other days I'd be making craft with Sri Lankan women new to Australia or chatting with their children about making friends at their new schools – basically making people feel welcome and showing them what support is available to them. It was great to be able to do so much.”

Since finishing her internship, Jenny has continued weekly volunteering with the Red Cross.

### Lawrence Page, 21

When it comes to challenging stereotypes, Duncraig law student Lawrence Page lets his actions do the talking. Last year he completed a McCusker internship with WA's Consumer Credit Legal Service, helping to provide free and confidential advice to people at the pointy end of financial hardship. The experience put him at the coalface of myriad social issues and also put paid to some of the generalisations he often hears not only about young people but also about the law as a profession.

“I was 3½ years into my degree, surrounded by stereotypes about the legal profession – that it's self-centred and self-absorbed – so it was appealing to follow an opportunity that might put the legal profession in a different light; actually giving back to the community in a meaningful way,” Lawrence says. “I wanted to see legal professionals in the real world who weren't just in it for themselves; to see that intersection between law and society that is productive and helpful to the community.”

For three months, Lawrence swapped the bookish comfort of the UWA law library for a seat manning the service's phone advice line. “It was a great way to get a feel for the organisation and for the issues affecting

**Giving nature**  
Lawrence Page with some of the Consumer Credit Legal Service team he worked with; Sarah Maiden fosters a neighbourly attitude.



people,” he says. “You hear everything on that line and you hear it every day – every kind of personal struggle imaginable, from someone having the bank on their doorstep to repossess their house to all sorts of personal tragedies. Some of the people who would call up were at the worst points in their life, so to know that you're in some way helping them or contributing to them being able to bounce back – that's very rewarding and a huge privilege.”

After getting a feel for the issues, Lawrence used most of his time at Consumer Credit Legal Service to help design a new communications plan for the organisation, condensing key messages and complicated issues into simple infographics, social media posts and animated videos. So significant was Lawrence's impact that the organisation has retained his volunteer services well after the internship.

“I'm still there every week and I look forward to it every week,” he says. “It's almost been a year now. It's just a fantastic environment full of hardworking people whose small acts make a difference to the lives of lots and lots of people every day. Through this experience I've seen firsthand that great change happens at the most basic level.”

### Sarah Maiden, 22

Sorrento resident Sarah Maiden never pictured herself throwing a sausage sizzle in a community centre to help elderly and isolated neighbours connect with each other. But that's exactly what the UWA psychology student did several times over in Perth's northern suburbs as part of a three-month internship with the WA branch of Street by Street, a national project that aims to turn neighbourhoods into communities.

“My psychology studies are mostly theory based and I was keen to do something practical that might also make a difference,” Sarah says. “The McCusker centre matched me with Street by Street, which I'd never heard of before, and initially I wasn't too sure what sort of an impact this kind of organisation can make. In fact, I completely underestimated its impact until I started to get involved. You don't realise how isolating life can be for some people – particularly retirees and young mums – within their own neighbourhoods.”

“There are a lot of extra barriers these days that stop people from connecting. I spoke with people

who said they'd been living in the same place for more than 20 years and had always wanted to do something like this but didn't know how.”

Sarah set up five Street by Street groups in Perth's northern suburbs and is continuing to work with the organisation beyond her internship to help the groups cement themselves. “This experience has reinforced to me the benefits of working with community organisations and to opening yourself up to things you wouldn't normally do,” she says.

“I think young people often think that to make a difference in the world, you have to go overseas, but you can also make a big difference at a local level. It's easy to get caught up in our own lives these days but small impacts can make a big difference and it's worth making the effort. It's good for your soul.”

### Joseph Sabbagh, 21

Joseph Sabbagh heard about the McCusker centre through its founder himself, a man he'd heard a great deal about during his studies in political science and now law at UWA. “I was doing an internship at Andrew Forrest's Minderoo Foundation when Malcolm came in one day to talk to Andrew about something,” Joseph recalls. “He saw me and told me he was thinking about starting up a centre that promotes citizenship among students and, for me, the seed was planted then. As soon as I saw an ad about the centre being in operation, I applied.”

Joseph interned at the Office of Multicultural Interests, completing a project that looked at electoral engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse communities.


“Australia has one of the more difficult systems of voting in the world and many don't understand it and may even come from backgrounds where they have a latent fear of government,” he explains. “But voting is compulsory here and people need the requisite knowledge to do it, so my job was looking at what some of the key issues and barriers are to ensuring sufficient understanding.”

Describing the experience as transformative in many ways, Joseph says it cemented for him a belief in the value of individual contributions done at a community level. “Everything has changed in recent decades,” he says. “Fifty years ago if you wanted to effect change, you joined a political party. Now people realise that if you want to actually effect





change, you join the Red Cross or Youth for Justice or Anglicare or something like that. You go out and you do things directly.

"We're at a really polarised point in political history but what the McCusker centre promotes through community work is just objectively human. It's not about politics or ideology; it's about helping others and giving people the agency to help themselves. Regardless of whether you're right-wing or left-wing, these are just human values. There's no need to accept polarisation at a community level." 



**Pleasant surprise**  
Malcolm McCusker and Michelle Scott are thrilled with the response.