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ISSUE 3

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RECENTLY IN BYRON BAY, in north-eastern NSW, a bunch of excited children met with film director Rick Stevenson for the third time. There was Hunter, who is into extreme sports; Melek, an academic and netballer; Niyardu, who boxes when he feels angry; Asher, a voracious reader; Jett and Joey, friends who surf and practice martial arts; and Callum, who plays chess and football with Zen-like concentration.

Rick wasn't looking for a breakthrough child star. He was returning to the beach town to film the experiences, dreams and anxieties of school children that he first met three years ago for his ongoing film, *The School of Life* project.

Since beginning *The School of Life* in 2001, inspired by the classic documentary series *Seven Up!*, Rick has interviewed over 3000 children in the US, Australia, Chile, Cambodia, South Africa, Canada, Thailand, Germany and Mexico, and a film was released in 2011. More documentaries are planned, with footage from 25 children who are now adults and have consented for films to be released.

Rick first started interviewing school kids aged between 10 and 18 in Seattle in the US. He began the process by asking Seattle schools about the project's viability (then known as *5000 Days*). The response was so enthusiastic that 800 children were recommended to participate and 60 were eventually filmed.

"I wanted to do three things differently to *Seven Up!*," Rick says from his houseboat in Canada. "I chose that age period because I don't think there's a greater stretch of life than that to capture change. I wanted yearly versus seven years, because as much as I'm inspired by *Seven Up!*, I didn't understand why they changed over that time. I wanted to do something more akin to time-lapse photography. And I wanted to ask deep questions.

"I wanted them to be challenged, and to think but to feel safe."

THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

Film director RICK STEVENSON'S documentary series, The School of Life Project, is giving TEENS the opportunity to EXPRESS themselves HONESTLY, without fear of judgment. The RESULTS provide a fascinating INSIGHT into YOUNG MINDS during periods of GREAT PERSONAL CHANGE.

WORDS: KERRIE DAVIES

In choosing his first group, Rick says he looked for honesty and the ability to articulate – kids who had a view of their world that they wanted to express.

The project has now split into the private face, in which interviews are given to each child when they are age 18 as a personal time capsule; and the public face that began with the 2011 film, *Two Brothers*, featuring Rick's nephews, who were part of the initial 60 Seattle participants. The film centered on their conflict as brothers growing up and their Church of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) faith, which Rick married into but does not himself practice.

"I promise not all these kids are my nephews," Rick jokes of *The School of Life*. He brings his wife, Julie, and two children with him when he interviews around the world.

"We make an adventure of it and they get to know the other kids," Rick continues.

"This is so positive for them."

As it is for the children he interviews. Reflecting Rick's belief in Socrates' "know thyself, know thy world" maxim, educators have shown so much interest in the project that they are keen to install confidential video kiosks in libraries where high-school children can answer 30 pre-recorded

questions (posed by the film director), with the footage then uploaded to secure data storage for those kids to enjoy when they are 18. Byron Bay High School has already expressed interest in using the technology.

"It's like a time capsule for them of when they were 13 or 14. What adult wouldn't want that to unwrap some mysteries?" Rick asks. "I'm convinced people have trouble remembering that age or block it out because they didn't understand it. It's a painful time. Not for everybody, but for most people. And then you go into therapy years later."

The School of Life has been enriching for young Byron Bay interviewees like 11-year-old Jett. Rick first chatted to him and the other Byron participants after he chose the town for his Australian location, having attended a film festival there.

"We had checked out Rick and what he did, and loved his approach to his life's work in documentary filmmaking," parent Donna Aboody explains. "It offered what we felt was an exciting opportunity in which Jett's life could be documented, in a way that we could not offer him.

"The project has enabled Jett to feel special and motivated towards a number of things in his life, particularly through the questions that Rick asks. I'm sure he answers and contemplates these in a way very differently than if we had asked them. To be honest, though, we don't even know what the questions are. However, as each

year unfolds I think they are tailored and age appropriate."

The ethics do swirl around this project and Rick is acutely aware of the delicate nature of filming personal questions at tender ages. Because of the

confidentiality caveat, Rick did not seek private investment for the project, rather crowd sources via The Seattle Foundation.

"In *Seven Up!*, those children became stars. I decided I wouldn't do that. We could spend AU\$15,000 filming one child's story and they may not want to release it in eight years. No investor wouldn't have a contract where a participant has to fulfil their obligations. Parents must give permission, but I have an agreement with the parents that everything stays between me and the child," Rick says.

"The kids who are attracted to the project have progressive parents who see the value in it," he adds.

All film crew have police checks, and should a child divulge something that requires the police, Rick is obligated to act upon it.

"99 per cent of what is shared is not alarming," Rick says. "I film from as soon as they walk in, partly to ensure there is always a record of the meeting, and also it

We could spend AU\$15,000 filming ONE child's story and they may not WANT to RELEASE it in eight years. No INVESTOR won't have a CONTRACT where a PARTICIPANT has to fulfil their obligations.

is what they don't say – it's the way they look and shift around." The project now has become its own force of nature, and Rick sees it as his life's work.

"After they saw some cuts, educators said to me, 'You have something much bigger than a documentary. You are building emotional awareness of the children at the age they are the least self-analytical'. They grow and become empowered," he says.

"It's a series of documentaries that help other kids know they have been through this before, and it gets better. At 12, or 14 years old, everyone feels alone. They are too old to talk to their parents and too young to talk to each other, and they think they are the only ones who feel weird. They don't find out they are part of this misery club until later. It's the real *Breakfast Club*" Rick says in reference to the classic 1985 movie. ■

Follow *The School of Life* journeys at SCHOOLOFLIFEPROJECT.ORG