



THE OUTDOOR EXPERIENCE

They went fishing, mucking about in the speedboat and they all had a try at water skiing.

IT WAS February 1977 and it was the first weekend trip for the residents of Four Flats. The first of many. Kevington was a favourite destination. They camped and went canoeing on the Goulburn River.

Many of these young people had never been on a holiday of any kind. Never had a chance to enjoy the novelty of camping, lighting a fire and cooking in the open. In these short breaks from the city, everyone could be closely connected. A little community under canvas on the edge of a river or a beach.

In 1990 the Brosnan Centre took a group of young people camel trekking in the outback. The trek leaders, supported by a Brosnan Centre youth worker, Ron Johnson, took small groups of young people on month long treks between Port Augusta in South Australia to Burketown on the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Camels are not easy going. The skills of handling these cranky creatures need to be learnt. Adjusting to the extremes of weather and learning how to survive the desert environment provided many 'firsts'. A few young people stayed in the outback, found work and did not return to Melbourne. Most came back and tried to make a new start. They hoped that this would become an ongoing project. But this was a time when governments were not so interested in funding projects like this. It was not to be.

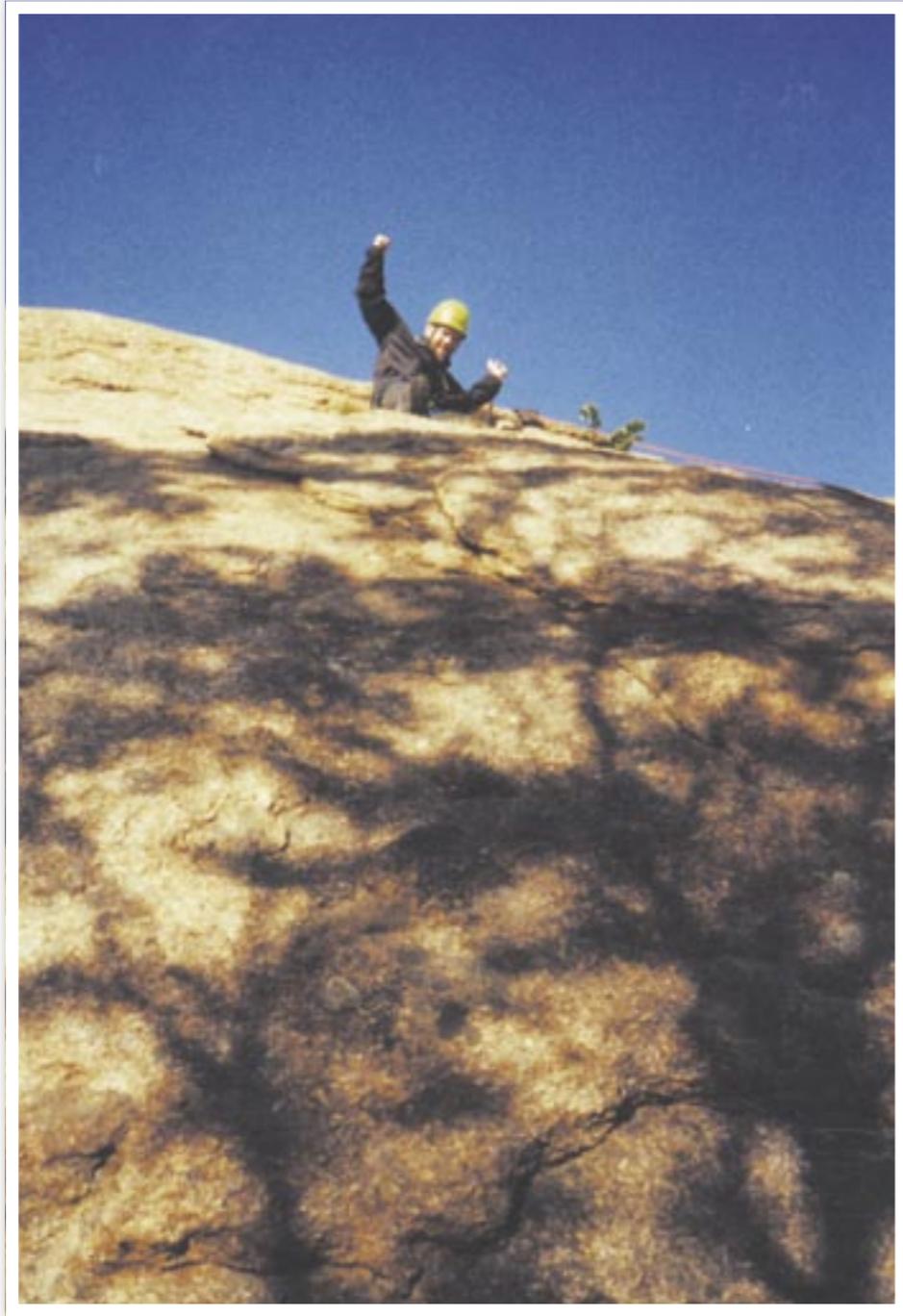
Carrying everything you need in a pack on your back is a challenge for all but the very experienced bushwalker. The highest peaks in Victoria are found on the Bogong High Plains. Mt. Bogong and the majestic Mt. Feathertop are terrifyingly beautiful. But the weather can be warm and balmy one minute and turn to an ice-cold blizzard within half an hour. This is not a place for the fainthearted. But for those who go there and walk the tracks, it is a place of great reward.

In 1992 the Brosnan Centre engaged an outside contractor, The Outdoor Experience (TOE), to take young people on several ten-day walks to this part of Victoria. There is something in the rhythm of walking in a group with a difficult destination as your goal. Wills become united as the less fit struggle, while the more fleet of foot surge ahead and then wait. The group has to keep together. Those leading these trips need to read the group and understand just how far everyone is capable of going. Knowing when to push on and when to call a rest.

When Jesuit Social Services was formed in 1996, it seemed logical to broaden the range of activities on offer. TOE operated a wilderness therapy program for young people with substance misuse problems. They had the experience of working with young people facing many challenges and introducing them to the therapy of activity, clean air, beautiful places and new ways of forming relationships.

Now part of Jesuit Social Services, TOE has prepared and taken groups of young people on all sorts of adventures. Kayaking, skiing, fishing and mountain climbing. Finding other parts of themselves that were buried in the mess of their troubled lives. Finding skills they never imagined they might have.

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