

THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH WORK

It's a real pleasure and a privilege to be invited and to help celebrate the achievements of our young people.

I'd like to speak today from my perspective as an Ambassador for The Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme for young people – an organisation that works closely with Youth Cymru. But also in my role as a broadcaster giving some consideration to how we, in the media portray and promote our young people in Wales.

You might remember a description used in the news last month. Nearly half the population here, who were surveyed by a leading children's charity, said they thought children today were beginning to behave like animals. They were labeled as feral. I found it fairly shocking reading – so I wondered why the negativity?

On Wales Tonight that evening, we spoke to many young people who said how upset they were to be judged unfairly. I interviewed the Children's Commissioner Keith Towler and in one of his answers he suggested that perhaps the media could help in the way they portray young people.

And that got me thinking. And to a degree I can understand why he made that suggestion. Yes, the headlines that we often REMEMBER may be the summer riots and stories of teen binge-drinking and the like - but there are plenty of other stories of heroism, bravery, community action and campaigning which we DO celebrate in the media – stories which are happening all over Wales every day.

Exceptional young people doing exceptional things.

Just yesterday I attended a brilliant awards ceremony for schools and youth groups recognizing the fantastic work that schools and youth clubs are doing with children and teenagers to help them in TV, animation and editing. ITV Wales has supported it for several years and the level of work never fails to astound me not just for its technical quality but because of its content. The finalists were producing films campaigning for recycling, encouraging people not to text whilst driving and warning people against the dangers of smoking to name but a few. The level of pride and passion they applied to the films as they worked to change their communities was staggering.

And all because they decided they wanted to make a difference.

A story we covered only last week on the news of a teenager called Rosalyn in West Wales sticks in my mind as another example of everything that is good about our young generation. She was in the running to be Britain's Kindest Kid. We are all too aware of the tough economic times we are living in - but rather than worrying about herself and her own family situation, 15 year old Rosalyn Wild set up her own charity called Patch with the aim of helping to provide food and clothing for other families who are going through financial crises. Again all because she decided she wanted to make a difference.

Through my work as an Ambassador of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme I have met many young people like Rosalyn all involved in some kind of youth or charity work. The community service they do, the skills they learn and the commitment they put in are just part of the challenge. They also have to drag themselves through wind, rain, mud and anything else that might be thrown their way to complete the expedition section of the award. At times an unfriendly experience to say the least. I remember my Gold expedition a few too many years ago now - and when I could barely put one foot in front of the other - not least navigate my way to a camp in deepest darkest Dartmoor, I remember always being told one thing – come on – it's character building!

I have to admit it became something of a cliché from a teacher or a parent – but schemes like the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and similar challenges offered by Youth Cymru and UK Youth, I really do believe stand you in good stead for achieving anything whatever you want. They offer a chance to gain all those qualities that you can't sum up in the grades on a CV – self-motivation, communication skills, leadership, consideration for others. They are skills that also make you more employable in a tough economic climate where one in four young people are trying to find work.

So for today, I ask you not to dwell on the front page photos of the hoodies and the rioting or the footage of anti-social behavior and binge-drinking. Because those young people are the exception, and NOT the rule.

Thanks to the work being done by brilliant organizations in this country, WE DO HAVE a generation of young people who have been given the incentive to be fantastic. And HERE TODAY that is the headline we should be celebrating.

And if you ever get surveyed about the worth or image of young people, take a minute to think about the examples I've spoken about today before you answer. I know our young people would appreciate it.

Thank you.