

guiding light

The largest worldwide voluntary organisation for girls, the Guides celebrated their 100th anniversary this year.

The organisation, established in 1910 by former soldier Lord Baden-Powell and his sister Agnes, has almost 30,000 members in Australia at present. The group belongs to a worldwide organisation which extends to more than 140 countries with a membership of more than 10 million.

Guide Ashleigh Skeels has enjoyed the challenges, skills and friendships gained through the movement – without the influence of boys. Ashleigh, 15, has been a Guide for nine years and the material badges on her sash are a decorative reminder of her enthusiasm and success in the organisation.

Her purple and gold, diamond-shaped Baden-Powell (BP) Award badge is Ashleigh's most recent and one she wears with great pride.

"I've been working on that badge for two years," she said.

"It's one of the big badges that require a lot of effort. It felt really good when I received it because this year only 33 girls in the state of Victoria earned that badge, so it's very hard to get."

Ashleigh had to do a raft of activities before she was presented with the BP Award at Government House including volunteering at a nursing home and running a day of water sports with her Guide unit.

Ashleigh said she valued the personal challenges Guiding offered.

"You can come down, hang out and make new friends. And you've got two hours by yourself with no phones and no worries about Facebook or boyfriends or brothers. You get to learn how to camp, how to survive outdoors. You can learn about nature and making things."

Helen Smith has been a Guide leader for 27 years. While Guides today wear their badges on their sash, like Mrs Smith's seven-year-old granddaughter Phoebe – they used to be sewn directly onto their uniforms.

"When my daughter Shona turned seven she wanted to join Guides and back then you'd just sew the badges right onto the sleeve of their shirts," Mrs Smith said.

She said many things had naturally changed over the past 100 years. "But we still work on the same basic principles that Lord Baden-Powell laid down 100 years ago," she said.

"We do try to keep up to date with computers and things. That's reflected in the badges that the girls can earn, like there's a computer badge. We don't just sit around and sew and knit."

Peggy Campbell has seen many changes to Guides since she joined in 1939 and continued on as a Guide leader.

"I joined when I was eight and it had just gone from being called Rosebud to Brownies," Mrs Campbell said. "It also changed to a brown uniform, a brown and gold material tie and a gold knitted cap. I remember that the war had already started when I joined and the leader we had had to go into the Land Army and the group was disbanded."

Mrs Smith says there are recognisable traditions which bond Guides across the world.

"We still do the three-finger salute which reminds us of the threefold promise we make when we enrol," she said. "The promise includes things like, I promise that I will do my best, to help other people and to keep the Guide law. There's also the left-handed hand shake. It's the left hand because it's closer to the heart."

The traditions help the girls relate to other Guide groups in Australia and overseas and in 2007 Mrs Smith was invited to experience firsthand how universal the Guide movement is.

"Guides actually own four properties around the world – in Mexico, London, Switzerland and India – and we went around to visit all of them over five weeks," she said.

Girl Guides have been strengthening the bond between women for 100 years. Monique Ebrington spoke to women who have made Guides part of their lives – and loved it.

Photographs by Sam Stiglec and Ted Kloszynski

"There were 34 of us from Australia, just leaders, and because we all sort of believe in the same principles, wherever we went we felt at home and welcome in each of the countries"

Mrs Smith said it was also very rewarding to the adults and leaders involved in the movement. She said Guiding becomes "in your blood" and she wasn't ready to stop being involved with Guides even though her daughter chose to.

Guiding has also become a family affair for unit leader Pat Wingrave, who has been involved with the organisation for more than 30 years.

"Even though my daughters stopped Guides, I decided to continue on because I enjoyed it so much and got so much out of it," Mrs Wingrave said. "My granddaughter is also in my Guide group, which is great. She can call me Nanna till the end of the driveway and then she has to call me Tawny, which is my Guide name."

Girl Guides Victoria chairwoman Elizabeth Adnams was a Guide as a child and also continued her involvement after her daughter left the organisation.

This year she was presented with a Medal of the Order of Australia for her contribution to Guiding.

"Even though Kaye had left Guides, I really saw the value of it," Mrs Adnams said. "I'd seen how much they grow, particularly in that 10 to 15 age group because they really go from little girls to young women, and I wanted to keep being involved with it. I also really grew a lot myself through Guides."

She has been involved in Guiding for more than 25 years and, as well as chairwoman, is also a district leader and national trainer of Guide leaders.

Mrs Adnams believed the non-threatening atmosphere to learn was just one of the reasons Guides has appealed to young women for the past century.

"We often introduce the girl to things that they wouldn't have the opportunity to do, or haven't thought to do, before.

"Working in an all-girl environment is often a bonus for many girls. They feel empowered. There are very little all-girl experiences for girls nowadays and only in very recent years that their opinions have been valued. Guides has always valued the opinions of women."

She said despite the many benefits for young girls and women, Guiding sometimes struggled with an "uncool" public image.

Ashleigh said none of her friends from school were in Guides and she had also experienced a misguided image of Guides.

"The main thing we struggle with is the image that our Guides are tomboys, and because of that it's very hard to pick up new members," she said. "I think people just don't know what it's really about. If girls just came down and saw what we did, they'd understand how much fun we have and how great Guides really is."

Local Guide groups

GLEN WAVERLEY
Bogong Avenue, Glen
Waverley
Details: 9543 6510

MULGRAVE
Mulgrave Neighbourhood
House
Details: 9560 7369

OAKLEIGH SOUTH
Details: 9579 0898

SYNDAL NORTH
Details: 9543 4424

**WANTIRNA HEIGHTS
DISTRICT GIRL GUIDES**
Details: 9800 2821



Pat and Maddison Wingrave



Elizabeth Adnams



Peggy Campbell



Ashleigh Skeels