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From a 'bad start' to mentor

Kate Emery November 29, 2015, 1:16 pm

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Leader: Preston Colbung took out the top honours for his work with young offenders. Picture: Ian Munro

A 22-year-old Noongar man who overcame an at-times tough childhood to become a mentor to young offenders has been named WA's Young Person of the Year.

Preston Colbung took out the top award and the community leadership award at Friday night's Youth Awards for work that includes mentoring recidivist offenders in Armadale and consulting to the WA Law Society on a program about engaging with Aboriginal communities.

Mr Colbung told *The Weekend West* it was "inevitable" he would get into community work because he grew up in a family where it was



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the norm.

"I've heard stories since I was a little kid of my pop going to Sydney for this protest or my nan starting up this organisation or my mum winning this award, so it was something that was inevitable," he said.

"I was going to end up in this, it was just how it looked and what my passions were. I was brought up with the understanding that if you have the ability to make change and help your people, then you're expected to do it."

Through his mentoring with Save the Children, Mr Colbung, who is also studying indigenous community development and management at Curtin University, works with offenders as young as nine who have been "in and out of trouble with our justice system". Sometimes that work involves practical help, sometimes it is teaching them to make smart decisions such as attending school.

"I've always had this mentality that if we can help one kid out of that system, we can help a whole family in the future," he said. "You're embedding a sense of empowerment into these young people."

"My whole aim with my job is I want it to work so well that I don't have a job."

Youth Minister Tony Simpson said Mr Colbung had overcome homelessness, mental health issues and family problems.

"Preston has proved a bad start doesn't need to continue into adulthood," Mr Simpson said. "He is now a young leader and a fantastic role model for all young people in WA."

"I commend Preston for his tremendous hard work and passion for helping others. He is a young man making a real difference in his community."

Other winners included **Zal Kanga-Parabia**, 20, who started a youth music program in Mandurah, and **Emily Hardbottle**, 16, who founded a wheelchair basketball program in Melville.

Jay McClean, 19, received the active participation award for his work as a young leader, including starting an Aboriginal dance group to educate audiences about Noongar culture.

Rise Network youth worker **Lorraine Drew**, 29, was recognised for her work with young female victims of violence.

The organisational achievement award went to **Dismantle Inc**, which runs a program that gives young people skills to restore old bicycles.

Mr Simpson said the finalists and winners gave "great confidence in our future".

"The WA Youth Awards showcase many great young West Australians," he said. "They show many young people in our community have maturity beyond their years and are making a significant and positive contribution to the lives of others."

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