

Ron's vision scores AM

• by Gail Knox

A FATHER figure to more than 27,000 young Australians in need, Hawkesbury resident Ron Barr OAM was honoured on Australia Day as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM).

When The Gazette spoke to Mr Barr on Thursday, he said he felt "really good" and "a depth of gratitude" about receiving one of the nation's highest awards for his service to young people through his Youth Insearch program.

"But the biggest thing is recognition of what other people do to support the work I do," he said.

"I could never have got where I am without all the support I receive from my volunteers, from my family and from my wife Judith. She's right there with me all the time."

Mr Barr is the founder and chief executive officer of Youth Insearch, a non-church-based program for young people experiencing problems arising from drug, alcohol, emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

Through residential camps and mentoring programs, Youth Insearch aims to help participants find stability, recognise their potential and establish a positive direction in life.

Very much a product of the Hawkesbury, Youth Insearch was founded by Mr Barr 22 years ago while he was working as a youth counsellor at Riverstone Neighbourhood Centre.

"I was working with some naughty children from Riverstone High School and I asked them what they'd like to do.

"They said, 'Let's have a camp', so we did and we wrote the whole

program with help from the kids. They set the rules and the code of ethics to be used."

The camps are now running regularly across the eastern states, including every second weekend at Youth Insearch's Kurrajong Heights Retreat.

Drawing on his own childhood experiences, Mr Barr said the keys to the Youth Insearch program were children learning from each other, and turning disadvantages in their lives into advantages.

"Disadvantages can become a driving force to make you want to go forward rather than stay a victim," he said.

Although he had "very protective" parents, Mr Barr said he was "a bit of a loner" at school and was teased a bit.

"I believe everybody deserves a fair go, but a lot of young people don't get a fair go in life, and this seems to be getting more obvious.

"Eighty per cent of Youth Insearch kids come from broken or fractured homes, and this has consequences.

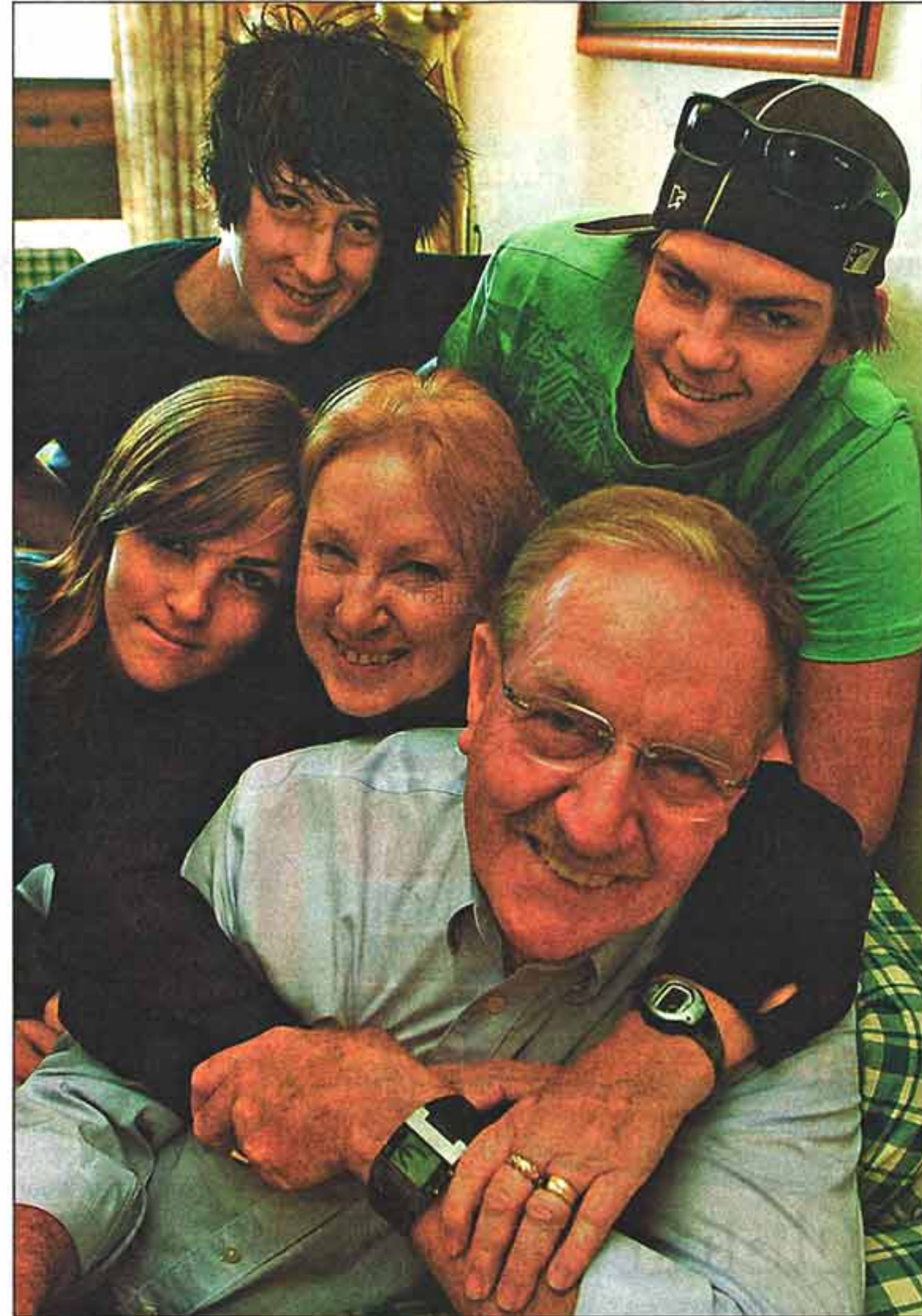
"I'm not condemning the parents, but when it happens, they don't realise the impact it can have on a young person.

"Then there's the drug problem. Of the 27,000 young people through Youth Insearch, less than 400 have not used drugs.

"I believe by what we're doing, we can create a ripple effect and a wave of love and hope may spread across the whole of society."

Mr Barr will receive his AM in March from Governor Marie Bashir.

Youth Insearch details are at www.youthinsearch.org



• Ron Barr OAM AM, with his wife Judith and grandchildren Tyler Noble, 15, Luke Barr, 17 and Naomi Barr, 15.