



Being Australian is not a race, it's an attitude, urges speaker

By SARAH ALLELY

IT'S a big call to be described as one of Australia's top speakers on human rights and cultural diversity, especially at the age of 24.

But after listening to Prashanth Shanmugan's passionate oratory, the accolade seems to fit.

Mr Shanmugan regularly speaks at groups ranging from schools and Rotary clubs to Country Women's Associations.

The recent University of NSW graduate will give a free public talk on Monday in Wollongong on international humanitarian law and the role of the Red Cross, for which he volunteers.

When Mr Shanmugan finished high school in western Sydney he formed Vision: 20/20, an organisation to combat what he thought was apathy among Australian youth.

"But now, after travelling around, I don't think it's apathy, it's more a lack of engagement," he said. "People are keen but don't know how to be involved.



MR SHANMUGAN

"It's social disengagement. What I'm trying to foster is engagement with local communities.

"Rather than reinventing the wheel, let's look at existing services and let's see how they can engage the new generation of society to become better citizens and better global practitioners."

Mr Shanmugan travelled ac-

ross NSW last year speaking to youth about empowerment and international humanitarian law.

He won the Human Rights Commission's Youth Medal in 1999 for his promotion of unity in diversity. The Sri Lankan-born activist's favourite mantra is, "Being Australian is not a race, it's an attitude".

"Politicians are very good at saying something is un-Australian, but fail to describe what is Australian," he said.

"We have to separate the us and them. In the US you never hear about people's particular extractions, they're just Americans."

He praised Wollongong for its openness, compared with Sydney where different ethnic groups settled in separate villages.

"In the regional centres of Australia you find people are more integrated and engage with each other," he said.

Bookings are necessary at the Red Cross presentation in Gwynneville.