

# Young crusader at war with apathy

By SHARON VERGHIS

He is inspired by 2,000-year-old Tamil scriptures and John F. Kennedy's 1961 inauguration speech, salt tax marches and decades-old social justice crusades.

But 18-year-old Prashanth Shanmugam, winner of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's inaugural Youth Medal, says it's time for his generation to continue the work of the 20th century's great humanitarians.

Joining other winners of the 1999 Human Rights Medals and Awards at a ceremony yesterday to honour contributions to the field of human rights in Australia, the Year 12 Homebush High school captain said apathy, not aggression, was the greatest enemy of peace.

"Freedom in Australia is often taken for granted because it's always been there, but only when it's gone do you realise how valuable it is."

With experience of both peace and war — his family came to Australia 12 years ago after fleeing the civil war in Sri Lanka — he said the community needed to remain "eternally vigilant" against human rights breaches.

The efforts of young people in public life also needed to be recognised, he said.

"That's why the Youth Medal is important. It recognises the contributions that young people do make in this area, as well as addressing the negative view that we're simply a collection of baseball-cap wearing, rave dancing, drug-taking stereotypes."

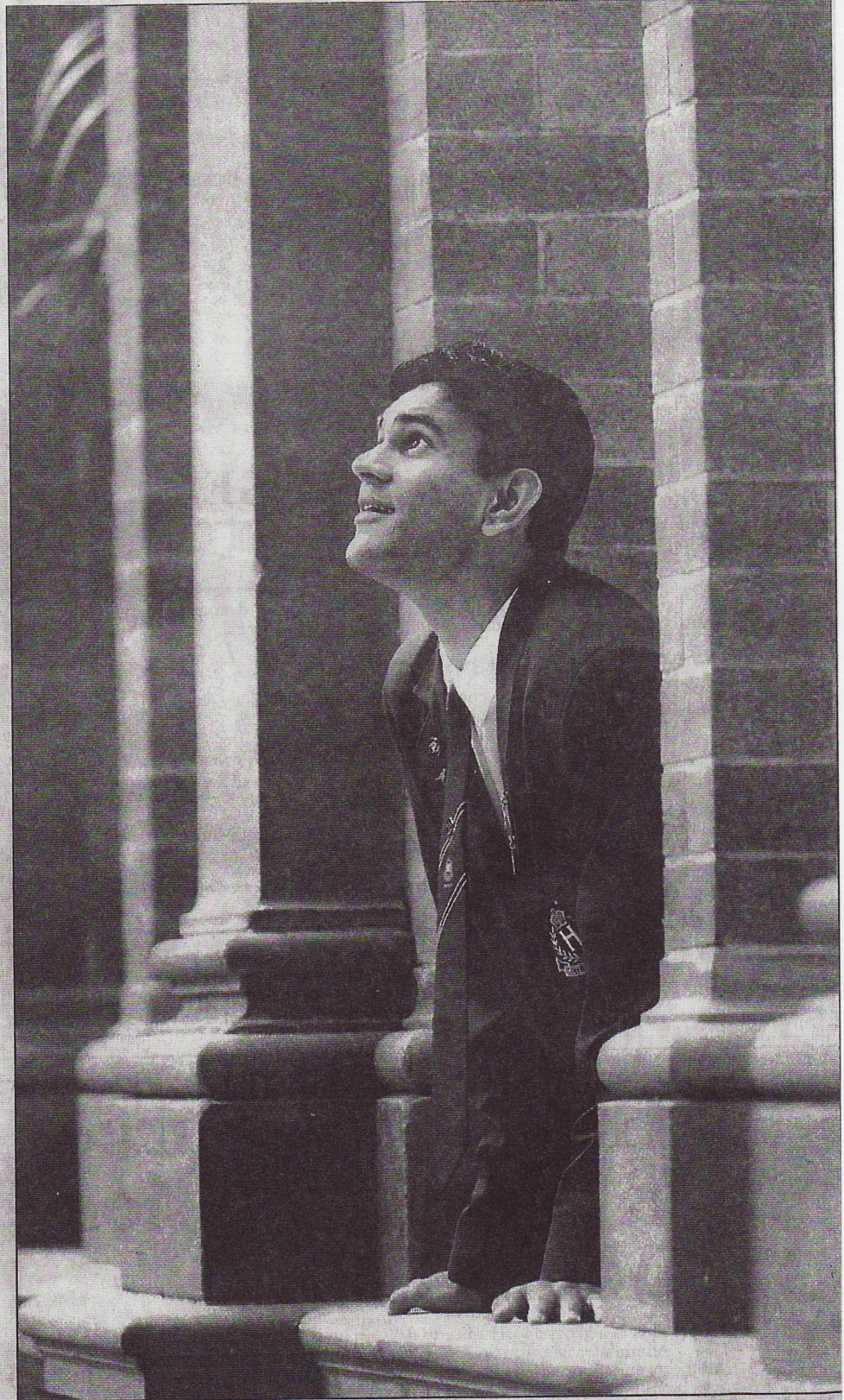
In an anti-racism campaign, The Australian Vision: 2020, which he developed in conjunction with Strathfield Council, in Sydney's inner-west, "unity in diversity" was promoted over multiculturalism, Mr Shanmugam said.

"We're trying to erase the issue of race so that we are all Australians together."

Strong political leadership was lacking in areas such as multiculturalism, inclusiveness and what constitutes Australian identity, he said. Too many young Australians lacked strong role models outside popular culture.

"There's been too much emphasis on diversity rather than unity — who we are as Australians. I see it as divisive, this whole trend towards barricading ourselves in groups according to race and religion and socioeconomic class."

Mr Paul Loxley, principal of Bourke Public School, which won a high commendation for contributions to youth affairs and education, said that "passion, commitment and community involvement" were needed to ensure equity for all members of society.



Vigilance . . . Prashanth Shanmugam, champion of human rights.

Photograph by PETER RAE