



Future-proofing our Region for generations to come

HUNTER RESEARCH FOUNDATION 2015 LECTURE SERIES

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2015 NSW Young Australian of the Year

Enacting positive social change

Thank you, what a privilege it is to be here. I am a Novocastrian at heart. Although currently a Sydney-sider, I do love Newcastle – it has a piece of my heart because my Mum and Grandmum live here, and I love them.

I loved hearing from you both [Paul Broad and Marcus Westbury], thank you so much, that was really inspiring. What I'm going to speak on this evening is enacting social change but at a very grassroots level. I'm going to come from a very humanitarian perspective, because that's the way I work. I'm going to give you my view on what creating social change looks like and also show you a short video at the end of my talk because I can talk about what I do but you've really got to see it. You've got to see it to understand it and experience it.

When you think about social change, what do you think about? It's a pretty big concept and I think a lot of people think about visionaries. A lot of people think about leaders, who lead 100 or 1,000, who at one point in history have made an incredible impact and changed the lives of millions. I don't think social change has to look like that. I think social change can come down to what we, as individuals, can do in our own sphere of influence, impacting one person at a time.

I have a little saying: changing the world doesn't look like one person changing the lives of thousands, it looks like thousands of us changing one life at a time. Because not all of us are visionaries, we're not Ghandi, we're not Mother Teresa, we're in our sphere of influence doing what we can today in our community. We cannot discount the change we can make within our own sphere of influence and the impact and ripple effect that that can have.

For me creating positive social change can be as simple as being inclusive. What does being inclusive look like? It means opening up your life to people. It means allowing people into your world, who might be disadvantaged, who might not have had the same experiences or opportunities as you have. That is how I have enacted social change in my own world.

For me, creating social change has been about including people and helping them to realise their potential. I'm going to tell you my story to help you to understand that. When I was a film school student, I had the opportunity to get a paid job in the film industry! Oh my goodness, that's amazing, that never happens! What was that paid job? It was a documentary for Downs Syndrome NSW.

I had not had much to do with people with an intellectual disability before. I attended Hillsborough Public School, which had the Glendon School, which was my first introduction to people with a disability. I loved the buddy program. I remember I had a buddy who was blind and I also had a buddy who had Downs Syndrome. So when the opportunity came up, I thought that would be a wonderful opportunity to engage with people with an intellectual disability since I was in primary school. I felt confident that I could go and do this and make a documentary.

I went in and I got the job, which was spending 18 months with six families and their sons and daughters with Downs Syndrome, as they went on to achieve their goals. I became aware of many of the issues that people with an intellectual disability face. Barriers to inclusion are the biggest ones, barriers to getting jobs of choice, to having social experiences. It was an incredible eye-opener for me to see that it takes the support of people in their community to help them achieve their goals. In fact, every single person who was achieving their goals was doing it with what's called a 'circle of support' around them.

One of the participants I met was Gerard O'Dwyer, who came into the documentary late. I was asked to go and interview him to see if he would be a potential documentary participant. So I went along and I did think he'd be a good doco participant because when he first greeted me, it wasn't with 'hello, how are you going'. He greeted me with 'but soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east and Juliet is the sun. Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon' and the rest. He knew the entire balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet, and I was flabbergasted.

It was his goal to be an actor. At the time, he was working at McDonalds and he was really unhappy, and I was unhappy for him. After I left his house, I wondered 'who's going

to give Gerard an opportunity to be in a film'? It's hard enough for actors without a disability to get work, let alone if you are an actor with a disability. I came away thinking about the injustice of it all and wondering who was going to get to see Gerard doing Shakespeare? Then the bright idea dawned on me, why don't I make a film starring Gerard?

At the time I had my final university film that I had to make. I'd already sorted that out and knew what I wanted to do and this was kind of like, 'what about this'. I thought about it a bit more and thought, I could do this, use what I've learned spending time with all these families and seeing what they face. Maybe I could make a short narrative film starring Gerard that helps to awaken people to the importance of inclusion.

So I wrote a script and got Gerard to star in it but I wanted to go a step further. Seeing the barriers to inclusion really made me want to help people with a disability get involved in making the film as well, working behind the scenes. It's a hard industry to crack, the film industry. It's very difficult to get involved. What about other people with a disability who might have some desire to be involved in the film industry but due to the barriers and prejudices that they face are not able to engage? I wondered what I could do. I decided that I could hold a workshop with a handful of people with a disability in my friend's lounge room, tell them what roles they are going to fulfil, teach them the basics of film-set protocol and get them on board.

That's what happened. I got my friend's lounge room, I got a group of people who were interested but had never been on a film set before and taught them a little bit. They came on board the film set and we all made a film together. That film won Tropfest in 2009. The film was *Be My Brother* and it starred Gerard O'Dwyer, made by our team, who were people with a disability.

I came away from that experience and decided it was too good to just leave there. It had to continue, so my producer and I co-founded Bus Stop Films, a not-for-profit organisation that aims to involve people from marginalised communities, specifically people with an intellectual disability, in having a film-school experience. What that means is that I teach them exactly what you would expect to learn in a tertiary film studies degree but I do it in an accessible and innovative way. I do it in a way that enables them to attain the knowledge.

What are your expectations of people with an intellectual disability? I have extremely high expectations of my students. I set the bar high and I help them to get there because I don't settle. If you fail, you can get up again and you can get up again. If you believe in

someone, they will end up believing in themselves. If you encourage someone, that means you are putting courage in a person. If you put courage in them, they will rise to the occasion, if you give them the opportunity to succeed they can.

I don't know what your expectations of people with a disability are but we have been doing this film studies course in Sydney for about five years now and when we surveyed my past students, 100 per cent of them found that the challenges they encountered in my film course – that includes theoretical challenges, reading and writing tasks, and group challenges of working in a team to make a film with mentors – were good, they enjoyed them and they helped them to grow and develop. One hundred per cent of my students enjoyed practising reading and writing skills, they enjoyed it and wanted more. One hundred per cent of my students found our high expectations helpful with work-ready skills like time management and workplace culture.

When you believe in a person you don't give up on them so that they don't give up on themselves. That's what having a film-school experience to me means. When I did my film school degree, the expectations were high. Why should I not have high expectations of my students?

This is how I've been creating change. I've seen many students grow. In fact, tonight, one of my alumni, who currently participates in my Film Club, is up for the 2016 Young Australian of the Year award. He may very well tonight follow in my footsteps. I wanted to be with Nathan tonight but I said, 'sorry, I'm going to Newcastle!' I wouldn't be anywhere else. I've wished him well and I hope with all my heart that he takes it out tonight.

It is amazing what you can do by sharing your passions with other people. The study of film is an amazing topic because it is theoretical and practical and everybody loves film. Everybody loves stories and I would find it surprising if anyone here didn't have a favourite film. Do we all have a favourite film? My students do too and film studies interest them.

When I set comprehensive reading and writing tasks, tasks where my students have to get up and present their work, speak and communicate, they want to, but more than that, I believe in them. They might say at the start, when they first come, 'no, I don't want to go up and speak' and I say, 'come on, you can do it'. I keep saying 'come on, you can do it' until they get up and find out, 'oh, I can do it, it's not that hard, I can'. When someone's late, I say 'hey, that's not cool, you're late. I don't expect anyone else to be late when they're coming to work, so why should you be late?' Every time they're late, I tell them 'don't be late' and eventually they start coming on time. It's just having the same expectations of my students as I would of anybody else.

The biggest thing I've discovered about my students is their love of learning. They love it and they love sharing their knowledge. What I've found is that education really provides empowerment. When you feel informed on a subject, when you feel intellectually stimulated and can walk away with information and share that in an authoritative way, you get power, you get personal confidence. I've had so many parents and carers coming and saying, 'they do not stop talking about film' and 'they're saying things I don't understand – what is film noire, what is mise-en-scène, what do these words mean'? I say, 'they'll explain it to you' and they do. All my students learn about these theoretical film studies topics. It's a great joy as a teacher to see them go out and use them in their own world and to be empowered by that knowledge.

The take-away is that you can actually change the course of someone's life by believing in them, by opening up your life and sharing your life, and by being inclusive. If you are a business person, who can you be mentoring? Have you ever considered employing a person with a disability? Is your business currently accessible? If someone who uses a wheelchair wanted to engage in your business, could they enter? Thinking about these things, opening up your minds and your hearts to others and being aware of the people in our community who may not have a voice, is really important. It's a cultural thing. Everybody needs to get on board.

Encouragement, as I said before, is really important. It means putting courage into people, being aware of others, opening up your life. If you do these things, I believe you actually can change the world, even when it is the world of only one person. That is all you need to do.

I'd like to play a video now that shows you a bit more insight into what we do at Bus Stop Films. I'm going to show you [Heartbreak and Beauty Premiere](#) which is a film about the premiere of a short film that we made last year. Our films have won multiple awards around the world – over 50 now including in Asia and America – and, I did the maths, our films have been seen collectively by over 1.5 million people worldwide. The film, Heartbreak and Beauty, which we premiered in February this year, was an experimental film that has appeared at an Oscar-qualifying event already this year and just yesterday won an award in Brussels. The premiere in February had the Governor of NSW, His Excellency David Hurley, make a keynote speech. I love to give my students the whole experience of what it is to make a film and premiere it. You get a bit of insight into how they made it and of the premiere in this video, and a glimpse of the culture of Bus Stop Films.

Thank you very much.