

A Voice We Need to Hear

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When I was asked to speak to you today on the topic of “a voice we need to hear” a story came to mind. It is taken from the American anthropologist Loren Eiseley. An old man was walking on the beach at dawn when he noticed a young man picking up star fish stranded by the retreating tide, and throwing them back into the sea one by one. He went up to him and asked him why he was doing this. The young man replied that the starfish would die if left exposed to the morning sun. “But the beach goes on for miles and there are thousands of starfish. You will not be able to save them all. How can your efforts make a difference?” The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it safely to the waves. “to this one, he said, it makes a difference”.

Six years ago, I was at a reconciliation function organized by the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies. At the time I was President of the Shalom Institute which operates Shalom College at the University of NSW. Shalom College is a Jewish residential college and it is the home to 140 students studying at UNSW. About 10% of our students are Jewish and we have about half Australian born students. The rest come from all over the world – China, Singapore, India, USA, Indonesia, Hong Kong, UK and the Middle East. The reason students choose to come to Shalom is because we run a small college with a family atmosphere. When we interview students about their expectations of university life we tell them “if you want to come to university to rage and have a good time, you’ve chosen the wrong college. If you come to us, you will have a wonderful experience but we expect you to study hard, pass your course and participate in college life.

So, I was at this meeting and a woman came over to chat. When I identified myself, she said, “I am so pleased to meet you. My name is Lisa Jackson Pulver and I run the Indigenous program at the medical school at UNSW and I have been wanting to ask someone at Shalom if you would have a place for an Indigenous student. I answered immediately. Lisa, we have students from all over the world. Of course we would take in an Indigenous student. “I am not sure you understood me correctly” she said. “I mean a scholarship place”. We have a medical student who is about to drop out because she lives in a refuge at Liverpool and travels two hours each way every day to come to university. She has a part time job to cover her costs and she is just not coping.

She explained to me that many Indigenous students find it difficult to succeed at university because they:

- commonly come from deprived educational and socio-economic backgrounds
- often live far from campus and spend many hours each day travelling on public transport
- generally have to find part-time work to help support themselves

- are seldom part of a “learning community” as their family members and friends are unlikely to have had opportunities to participate in higher education.

She told me that “according to the Australian Medical Association, Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islanders suffer from worse health than people in a number of Third World Countries”.

They die younger, their children are sicker, and too many of their babies die at birth or are born with low bodyweight and chronic health conditions. Doctors working in some communities say that the state of Indigenous health is worse than it has been for 20 years. It is Australia’s national shame.

At that time, a former President of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Bill Glasson said an increase in the number of Aboriginal doctors could make the single biggest difference to improving Indigenous health and enabling us to get out of the mess we are in.

And, Ian Anderson, Professor for Indigenous Health at the University of Melbourne agreed. He said that Indigenous doctors and health workers are essential if the gap between Indigenous and non-indigenous life expectancy is to be closed.

Well that threw me for a moment because we didn’t have a scholarship program at Shalom so I told her that, whilst I would support it, it would cost the college money so I would have to take it back to my board.

At the next board meeting I put forward the proposal and one board member who was the managing director of a large company was so enthralled by the idea that he offered to put up the money for the first year’s fees for this student and to try to organise an Aboriginal Art Exhibition in the hope of recouping his outlay. He said that, if the art show did not make sufficient money, he would cover the cost for the year. The cost in 2005 was \$12,000 per year.

So having an agreement for a scholarship place, our first student Hayley moved in to College and the Shalom Gamarada Ngiyani Yana scholarship program was born. Gamarada ngiyani yana is in the Eora language and it translates literally to “We walk together as friends.” The word Shalom is a Hebrew word, meaning peace and is taken from the name of Shalom College.

But then the dilemmas commenced.

How do you organise an art exhibition?

Who will do the work?

Who will come to the exhibition?

Will anyone buy any of the paintings?

How do we support this student?

If she passes, how do we continue to finance her because it did not seem ethical to take in a student for one year only.

Our Board member then found Jenny Hillman and Susie Spira who are curators and work under the name of Waterhole Art and they agreed to put the exhibition together. We formed a committee to do the work and started to set out guidelines

both for a scholarship program and for an art exhibition. One of the first decisions we made was that the exhibition was only to take works from Aboriginal communities which would ensure the communities would be paid fairly for their work. There is so much fraud in the Aboriginal art world and we wanted to ensure that we didn't help one group of people by ripping off another group. Our big coup came when the Governor Professor Marie Bashir agreed to open the exhibition and we then sent out invitations.

The response was astonishing. On opening night we had 300 people and every day crowds came to see the art works and support the project; the result was a profit which would cover six years of college and we received gifts of two additional scholarships donated by large corporations.

That solved the dilemma of what to do after the first year and we decided that all students who came to us on scholarships would be guaranteed ongoing funding if they passed their courses.

Since then, our program has flourished. Each year we hold an art exhibition and each year an eminent person opens it. We have had James Spigelman, Chief Justice of NSW, David Gonski, Chancellor of the UNSW, Mark Liebler, Chair of Reconciliation Australia and three times the Governor herself has opened the exhibition. This year Malcolm Turnbull will be performing the honours. At each opening our students perform the opening ceremony and traditional acknowledgement of country taught to them by an Indigenous cultural expert Clarence Slockee. The students love to be involved in the exhibition and they seek out the works that come from their own particular communities.

From that first student, our numbers have grown each year. We went from 1 to 3, then 5, then 10, then 12 and this year we have 22 Indigenous students living at Shalom. We have graduated our first doctor, our first optometrist and our next doctor will finish at the end of this year. Our students are carefully selected through a competitive process, they receive tutoring and support, they live in comfortable surroundings where all their meals are supplied, they are surrounded by friends with similar ambitions and they are in an environment that promotes co-operation, goodwill, family values and a study ethos. And now, not only do we have medical students but we have 2 social work students, 5 law students, 2 commerce students, a fine arts and an arts student. This came about through another magical meeting.

Two years ago I was Chair of the Board of Oz Harvest and I went to a function to announce the winner of the NSW Australian of the Year. Some of you may remember that Ronni Kahn from Oz Harvest was voted as the NSW Local Hero for 2010. Another nominee for Australian of the Year was Andrew Penfold who was CEO of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation and, after the awards announcement, I went over and introduced myself to him. His organisation had been given \$20,000,000 by the federal government for Aboriginal scholarships and, up to that time, they had been funding students in boarding schools. He had wanted to offer tertiary scholarships but could not find an organisation to work with. We agreed to meet and as a result of that meeting, AIEF agreed to fund one scholarship for every scholarship we offered. So that is how, this year we have jumped from 12 to 22 students.

Let me tell you about two of our students – the first will graduate in medicine this year. He comes from Newcastle and, he says himself, that his background was one of drinking and violence. When he came to Shalom he thought that everyone behaved as his group of friends behaved – getting drunk and into fights every weekend. His first year at college was hard and he was nearly asked to leave a few times. But both he and we persevered and now he says, “Some of my friends at home have abused alcohol and they won’t stop unless someone helps them. When I came to Shalom and people weren’t behaving like that, it was very different for me and a difficult transition from home to here. If I hadn’t arrived at Shalom College with a scholarship I think I would still be living the life everyone does back home.”

The second student, Jenna Owen from Dubbo is now an optometrist and she is featured in this month’s Women’s Weekly in an article on High Achievers. She says that “No one in my family has ever graduated with a bachelor degree or been to uni before”. She told the magazine that sending her to school was difficult enough for her family so financially supporting her move to Sydney for university seemed impossible. So she researched scholarships and discovered one for Aboriginal students at a Jewish college. Not only did Jenna spend 5 years with us studying optometry, she actually topped the year in her second last year.

As you can imagine every student has a story and every story is of challenges, difficulties and struggling. Of all our students, none have had a family member who has completed university. In a recent article in the Australian Medical Journal, Lisa, who I met that first night and who is now - Professor Jackson Pulver AM, Chair of Indigenous Health at UNSW wrote:

“The Shalom Gamarada Scholarship Program helps to alleviate problems by providing financial support, eliminating travelling time and creating an environment conducive to learning through tutoring and counselling support.

We have not had one single student drop out because of having to work to support themselves or because of the lack of accommodation since this program began. Today, we have one of the best retention rates of Aboriginal students in the country. Shalom Gamarada has allowed us to provide appropriate on-campus accommodation and meals to students in a city which is arguably the most expensive in the country.”

Because of the success of Shalom Gamarada I have been able to be involved in a number of other Indigenous programs. I was part of a group that set up a dental health program for Indigenous people living in a community near Cairns called Wu Chopperin where volunteer dentists go to work with the community about 50% of the year and a program that began from Shalom College where Jewish students go twice a year in their vacations to run holiday programs for Indigenous children in Toomelah and Boggabilla. Because of my interest in Indigenous affairs, I was a member of a Steering Committee that produced a book setting out projects in NSW where Jewish and Indigenous communities have worked together. The book, Hand in Hand encompasses 79 interviews on projects in the areas of social justice, leadership, education, health, arts and culture, and history was published by the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies in 2010 and it makes me very proud that my community has been able to give back to this wonderful country we live in through its first inhabitants.

When the interviews were being conducted for the book, one of the questions asked was ‘Why are you involved in social justice issues and, in fact, why are so many Jewish people involved?’

Let me tell you something about my community.

Today, the Australian Jewish community is around 120,000 and makes up 0.5% of the Australian population. The community is split between Sydney (approximately 44,000 Jewish people) Melbourne, (approximately 50,000) Perth (approximately 10,000) and other cities in Australia including Adelaide, Brisbane, Hobart and the Gold Coast. Jewish people have been in Australia since 16 Jewish convicts arrived with the First Fleet in 1788; more Jews arrived as British free settlers and later as adventurers during the gold rushes. The community was greatly transformed by immigration after World War II, mostly by Holocaust survivors. Most recently, the Australian Jewish community has grown and been enhanced by South African immigration as well as from Hungary, Russia, South America and the UK.

Jews have featured prominently in Australian history and the tradition of Jewish involvement at every level of Australian public life has been very evident in the last few decades. In the State of New South Wales the previous Governor, Gordon Samuels, and the former Chief Justice, Jim Spigelman, are Jewish. Spigelman, the son of Holocaust survivors has been at the forefront of major human rights campaigns, and speaks openly about his Jewish heritage. There have been Jewish ministers in federal and state cabinets, and Jewish councilors have held mayoral positions. Sir Asher Joel organised public events as diverse as the visit of the Pope and the opening of the Sydney Opera House. There are Jewish judges, academics and leaders of many professions. Many Jews have received royal honours for community service.

So when we ask “why” a number of reasons are put forth. Some say it is because of the Holocaust when Jewish people were so vilified, murdered and ignored. We know what it means so we seek to make sure it doesn’t happen to others. But I think it goes back further than that.

There is a beautiful concept in Judaism - Tikkun olam – mending the world.

It says that we do not have to redeem the world in one go. We do it one day at a time, one person at a time, one act at a time. A single life, said the sages, is like a universe. Save a life and you save the world. Change a life and you begin to change the world.

The Jewish vision is that all human beings are created in G’d’s image and that Jews must work with others to alleviate suffering, hunger, inequality and poverty so as to help make this dream a reality.

There is a well known sentence in the Jewish burial service. It is taken from Deuteronomy 3 when Moses is shown the Promised Land but told that, whilst he has to lead the people there, he will never enter.

The sentence is: “It is not your duty to complete the work but nor are you free to desist from it.”

So, when we hear a voice, a voice we need to hear, we are obligated to act on it. One of my actions is the Shalom Gamarada Scholarship Program.