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The Inaugural Kookaburra Awards

Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 31 May 2010

Hosted by

Brett de Hoedt

Mayor, Hootville Communications

Awards presented by:

Vanessa Nolan-Woods

Westpac Social Sector Banking

Awardees:

Project: 'Nukkan.Kungun.Yunnan' ('See, Listen, Speak') – Change Media

Individual: Andrew Heslop (Founder, Neighbour Day)

Community Group: Asylum Seeker Resource Centre

Denis Moriarty:

We've got a very exciting session and something that's new for the conference and a little bit different. It's probably given I would say a highlight for today, given all the other stuff that's gone on has been fantastic. We believe in speaking out against injustice, even when that's hard and it makes life uncomfortable. Almost nothing that is worthwhile is comfortable.

As you all know there are people and groups right across this country who are having uncomfortable conversations and really pushing the boundaries of the status quo. We wanted to make sure that they didn't go unrewarded for their efforts and so the Kookaburra Awards were born, celebrating loudmouthed troublemakers everywhere.

We also thought Community Idol was slightly passé given that *Idol* was axed last year.

We weren't entirely sure how these new awards would be received so we were floored when the nominations started trickling in and in the final days pouring and cascading in, over 700 applications.

The nominations came from every corner of the country and the breadth of importance of the work that was highlighted was truly staggering. It's a great indication of how even when we might think that there are a lot of hard work to improve our society has already been done, how much there is still left to do – and how many people are actually prepared to roll up their sleeves and do that work.

And speaking of rolling up their sleeves and people who do that work and get down to it, we're joined in this initiative by the incredible Social Sector Banking team at Westpac. If I can ask Vanessa to come up to the stage.

I know banks aren't always our favourite institutions. In fact I hate a lot of banks. But they are a sponsor and Westpac is a particularly good one. I noticed ANZ this morning got a plug which was great and I think NAB as well got a plug. But I say Westpac's the best.

What you don't always hear, though, is the other side of the story and I can tell you as someone who has been working very closely with Westpac over seven years, that when Vanessa came along she changed the world from our perspective.

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Under the inspirational leadership of Vanessa, the best banker in Australia, the Social Sector Banking team at Westpac is doing things no-one would have ever dreamed just a decade ago. We argued to Westpac that it's great to sponsor one or two or 50 things, but to improve banking for every one of the 600,000 community groups in Australia, that would be a better role for a bank rather than just one or two corporate social responsibility sponsorships.

They've taken up that challenge and they've introduced new bank accounts, they've introduced new resources, free products, memberships online and there's a whole range of things that are coming. And I'd like to particularly pay credit to Vanessa and the team there that are changing the world and are creating a revolution for banking for community groups.

They also launched last week Social Sector Financial Literacy Week, during which they gave away \$100,000 of free training in financial workshops. They know that every penny saved is a penny earned and that for a community group there are a few more important things.

That's just a small snapshot of what they're doing. They're probably the hardest working, busiest team of bankers in Australia and I can attest to that fact because they give me hell about getting things done and chasing us up.

So it's my great pleasure to introduce the women behind that incredible team, the head of Social Sector Banking at Westpac, Vanessa Nolan-Woods.

Vanessa Nolan-Woods:

Denis, thank you again for your support.

It is a real privilege for us to work in this area, I just want to say. Today I'm here to say how deeply proud we are to be supporting the Kookaburra Awards.

These awards seek to recognise and reward the efforts of those who have really made a difference in the world and in their local communities. These awards are a little bit different to the past, as Denis said, so we've moved on a little bit from Community Idol and now we can encompass three different categories which I think is fantastic – the individuals, those who do extraordinary things, projects which are groundbreaking and also community groups who are changing the face of the game.

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As Denis said we received 708 nominations, which is just fantastic and the calibre of entries and the stories told were equally amazing. This is going to make it very hard for the judges but in a few moments you will see the three winners.

Coincidentally, you may have noticed a name change for us this year as well. Denis said 'Social Sector Banking', and you probably thought, "What does that mean?" It means our commitment to transforming and improving your service, the service we provide to community and social sector customers, has never been stronger. So, please, consider yourself empowered to tell us what we do right but also where we need to improve as well. That's really important for us because we can't do that without your feedback and your help.

So in closing I thought we'd pull together a short illustration to tell our story. And we'd like to share that with you for a couple of minutes.

Thank you.

[Social Sector Banking video runs]

Denis Moriarty:

Joe and I are now going to hand over to our Master of Ceremonies for the final session of the day, Brett de Hoedt. Brett is the founder and self-declared Mayor of Hootville Communications, a PR company that specialises in not for profit clients.

Brett and his staff spend their days creating media coverage, editing magazines, developing websites and e-newsletters and designing campaigns for a range of clients, including Seeing Eye Dogs Australia, Mental Illness Fellowship Australia, Yooralla and the Australian Conservation Foundation so he knows all about people and groups that are speaking out in favour of tough causes.

Please make him welcome.

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Brett de Hoedt:

Thank you Denis, thank you Vanessa. You are now being declared Australian's best banker. That will be something to go back to the office and tell all your colleagues won't it? That will win you lots of friends and influence people.

Joe Caddy, always a pleasure to see you. Are you well? Centacare travelling well? Wife and kids well? Good. I knew I'd catch him out. Catholic priests are very thinly spread these days. There are so few of them, they have to do communication, last rites, confirmations, weddings and so on. They barely have time for dating.

Now, Mary O'Hagan are you still in the room? Mary thanks for nothing. You've just destroyed the placebo effect for the people in this room. Apparently it's 80% psychological. I had no idea. I'm on four placebo effects a day for my ulcer but I will have to up my dose now. Thank you very much.

Now, welcome to the Westpac Kookaburra Awards. There are three categories, as you know: Project, Individual and Group. And as you've heard, these awards have been a remarkable hit, 708 nominations, a ludicrous number, which just goes to show what a show boating, self-promoting group you are. Which is why of course they've picked me to be the MC.

Mind you of those 708, 618 were from one K Rudd of Canberra. In the Project category the free insulation for every Australian household category, the nominations came one after another and then just stopped as if they just went up in smoke.

We have found a multiple of worthy winners and I know there was a big tussle and much argumentation as to who will win in each category. It's very corny to say that we could have easily have had another three winners entirely. We could have had another 10 winners in each category so rich were the pickings.

And I love the name of course, the Kookaburra Award, it is evocative. Do you like that name? The kookaburra is iconic and laconic and larrikin by nature. He's an opportunist. Ask any small lizard in his midst.

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I think, actually, the larrikin streak has to be apparent in anyone who wants to make a contribution in the community sector because in a society that is so consumerist and corporate and banal and aspirational it takes a larrikin to say, “Do you know what, I’m going to step outside of that. It doesn’t mean I have to wear hessian underwear for the rest of my life but I actually believe in the community sector enough to form a group, to make a stand, to risk – heaven forbid – egg on face if it all goes horribly, horribly wrong.”

We’re going to meet three people for whom it has gone horribly, horribly right.

And of course Kookaburra evokes in my memory, and I’m sure yours, the famous song, “Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree. Merry, merry king of the bush is he. Laugh kookaburra, laugh kookaburra. Gay your life must be.” You all sang that in primary school, did you not? Does that bring back warm memories? Was that the first song you sang in the round? Is anyone here not cognisant of where I’m going to with this? Folks, that’s right. A little bit of group singing. Sorry Joe, not Kumbaya.

We’re going to divide the room into two. And I thought we’d give *Kookaburra Sits in the Old Gum Tree* a go. Shall we sing it together just to get the hang of it before we break into the rounds because that’s always tricky.

[Audience sings song]

Time to meet our three category winners – Project, Individual and Group – and we’re meeting them in no particular order.

There is some \$10,000 worth of prizes for each – including, I should warn you ladies and gentlemen, giant oversized novelty cheques. At last year’s conference I managed to shout out, “Zombie-led apocalypse,” as part of the debate. But this time I’m shouting out, “Giant oversized novelty cheques.” Why? Because it pleases me to do so.

So we will chat with each other category winners but we’ve got microphones on the floor so if you have a burning question, comment, or observation for the group be very, very quick and get the question in.

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Usually when announcing winners I like to get the audience to do a bit of a drum roll on their laps. I think we can go further. What else is the kookaburra famous for? [Kookaburra laugh] If everyone does it at the same time only people outside the room think we're dickheads.

So I will build tension and then instead of asking for a drum roll I'll ask for a kookaburra call. Let us start off the Westpac Kookaburra Awards 2010, and the winner in the Project category is [audience does kookaburra laugh] **Change Media**.

As Change Media is working its way to the stage we have some media of Change Media's work in action.

[Video runs]

[Male voice] My name's Tom Travara, manager of Camp Coorong. You could say I'm a teacher here, Camp Coorong Ngadjuri Cultural Education Camp.

I was interviewed here earlier in this room and the other camera team asked me about the young people that were doing film work here at Camp Coorong. I said we have to come to terms with that. The problem with us as Ngadjuri people is that our lives are caught up with surviving in this modern day and age. We've got to come to terms with electronics, the media, the camera.

Us older ones have got to sit and look at that camera and we've got to tell our stories. That's the way of maintaining our culture of who we are as Ngadjuri people is we're not losing it, we're still teaching it. But we've got a different way of teaching it.

[Female voice] My cultural activity is very important to me with the feather flower making. It feels so natural to me because I learnt it off my elders. That was so important to me. I may have wandered away from it for a few years but you never, ever forget your culture. You always come back to it, to teach the younger generation. That is my message out to the public, that us Ngadjuri need to keep the culture going.

[Male voice] It's with the children today. We can't take them out on our country now and show them what we grew up with because it's not there, it's disappearing, our lands and our waters are dying.

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[Male voice] Years ago they created all the open cut drains in the south east of our country which took away the water system. Here, in one of the driest states in one of the driest continents in the world, they have all this massive water flow going out to the Southern Ocean which should be coming back into the southern lagoons of the Coorong and pushing out through the Murray mouth.

The whole allocation of water out through the whole Murray system has just taken away any flush that we had from there.

[Male voice] I can remember swimming at the end of the jetty and we couldn't touch the bottom. Now it won't even go up to my ankles. These people who are holding back water so it can't flow, what about the human spirit, your fellow man? Money has got to come second place somewhere along the line.

[Male voice] We're trying to push the message to the powers that be, so people in the State Government and in the Commonwealth know just how important it is to have access to water and they know that it's a basic human right, access to good quality water. And we're being denied that to some degree but we're also having this cultural effect because our lake has never been like this in history.

[Male voice] Ngadjuri believe, we say that the lands and waters is a living body and that we are a part of its existence. And if our lands and waters die then we will die. And that's because we're connected to country and we're connected to each other and we're connected to all living things. It's time for a change.

We've all been taught a lesson here with this drought. Everybody must come to terms with what's happened here and learn how you should live with the country and not against the country. We can't do that. It's not our right to set our children up to live in a failed country for the future. That's been unfair.

[Female voice] My grandmother, she swam in the waters all her life, Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert in the Ngadjuri, as did her mother and as did my father. The memories that stick out the most were the ones swimming in the lake, swimming in the Coorong, fishing.

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Me and my grandmother and my brothers and sisters going down to the lake just yarning and talking that's Ngadjuri culture. That's what we do.

I just think will it be there when I have children? I'm only 22. Will my children, will their children's children do the same thing as I did with my grandmother? It's very important because that's Ngadjuri culture.

We have the ocean water, we have the Coorong water, we have the lake water and we have the river. And we've always lived by the waters. We are water people. We are water spirits. I only have one country and this is this country. And if that goes I've got no other home. This is my home. Just to see that go...it's just really hurtful and our land is sick and something needs to be done and it needs to be done now.

Brett de Hoedt:

Ladies and gentlemen, from Change Media please make welcome Carl Kudell and Jennifer Lyons-Reid.

Can I ask a broad question? What do you hope to achieve through that video that we just saw?

Carl Kudell:

We are yet to see. We can't obviously make it rain, we can't allocate more water down the Murray Darling system. But what we did achieve straight away, was that Peter Garrett watched the film. He called the community personally and thanked them he was so moved.

The State Government in South Australia watched the film. The film won them two awards in Los Angeles at the My Hero Festival. It got invited into the International Human Rights Film Festival in New York in mid-June. They invited two members of the community to attend.

It is now hopefully about to empower a whole nation of South East South Australia and I hope with that an example for other indigenous communities and marginalised groups to take control of their own message, to tell their own stories in their own way.

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Brett:

That's interesting, the taking control of your own message, because it did take you to help facilitate the getting out of the message. You talk in the details about your project, which I should say is called See, Listen, Speak, you talk about collaboration. Who here has heard the word collaboration a lot lately? What does that mean for you, collaboration?

Jennifer Lyons-Reid:

For us collaboration is about sharing. Our experience was, eight years ago, when we first met, we decided that we would make a documentary. I'd never used a camera, didn't even know what software was. But we did make a documentary that travelled the world and has been translated into eight different languages.

Through that process we discovered that we could change the world through messaging. And so for us as a team collaboration means joining with a community and discussing their needs. So we don't come in, it's not help from above. It's very much about us saying we have a set of skills but we know every community we go into, they have an equal set of skills. And it's matching those skills and working out how best that community can get their message out.

We've found media and films are really modern day storytelling. If you understand the structure of storytelling and messaging, as we heard with the advertising, then you hold power. That is, you hold control over your story. You decide how and what your story is, how you're going to present it, where you want it to go. And that's a big difference to being a media team that just flies in. We don't say we are the experts, but we know a whole lot of things about storytelling and that is the collaboration.

It's a huge privilege for us to go into hundreds of communities that we've worked with and help them share their stories. They go really deeply into what matters for them, and we're very lucky to be part of the building of a message that then gets out there and many, many other communities have had their films win awards and travel across the world.

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Carl Kudell:

'Glorious failures' – we developed this term recently because filmmaking and media production, I think any artwork, any meaningful creation, is about being allowed to make mistakes. If we're able to embarrass ourselves, if we're able to admit that we're learning from mistakes then we're breaking down the fear barrier.

If we're coming in as white privileged people into marginalised communities, the fear barriers and the respect or the disrespect is huge so we need to break that down, we need to be able to meet them on eye level and create wisdom. That only works if they're actually learning the skills themselves, if we're leaving something substantial behind, not just making a funky piece of media that everyone then looks at and it makes them feel good. It has to stay with the community. They have to be in charge of it. They have to control the intellectual property and they need to know how to do it again afterwards.

In the end we need to be out of a job after we've done our job, otherwise we haven't done it properly.

Brett:

Do you feel, on the floor, that you could replicate something like this for your particular cause, for your particular community? Do you see that as being possible?

They seem hesitant. Tell them they can do it. Give them something to go on with.

Jennifer Lyons-Reid:

It was a four-day project. We're now continuing working with this community.

Brett:

You got all of that in four days! Does that feel like a very short period of time? You must really know how to work with those people.

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Jennifer:

Day one we met each other. We hadn't met the team. We discussed whiteness, so what do we bring in terms of our privilege so that we're not just sitting there going, "We've got the answers and we're the experts".

We discussed what stories were important to them and then we got in and just handed over the equipment and said, "This is how you use this equipment. You will learn more as you go but the best thing to break down that fear is to grab the equipment and start using it." So on that first day we started filming.

Then on the next day we continued with the storyboarding. There were quite a few elders who were sick of talking to media people. Their message never gets out properly. It's misconstrued. So we passed over the equipment and the team went off and filmed their elders in the evening.

So they were just out there collecting stories and they saw immediately what they could do, their skills. And we had discussed afterwards about what works, what doesn't work but that's always very subjective. So again we have the collaboration.

On day three we continued the filming and then some of the team started to do the editing. On day three, in the evening, we screened a rough cut (and it was very rough) to some elders, who said, "Yes, this is looking fantastic." More people came on board to be interviewed.

On day four we screened a 22-minute film, a rough cut, and everyone in the room said, "Yes, we're happy with that." And the elders said, "We want that to get out," because the young people were going, "Well, make this is an in-house community story that we'll share amongst us."

And we as a team took that 22-minute piece and we did a clean-up – sound sweetening, putting in the music that some of them had made, and finishing off the titles. And so we did that in four days.

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Brett:

Today is Monday so you could have that done by Friday couldn't you? If that's the case I'm ready for my close up.

Carl:

Actually, last week we helped produce an educational documentary made with the community in the south-east of South Australia in Millicent about canoe-making, traditional bark canoe making.

In the documentary, some elders and some younger people make the first canoe in about 120 years. We worked with upper primary and high school students together to make this film in four days again. We massed about some 20 hours of footage. There was no way that we could cut that back to this funky feel to give you the real deal there.

This six-minute version that you saw, it took us another extra week to cut it down from the 22-minute documentary. But the 22-minute documentary that you could see on a DVD actually got screened nearly as is on National Indigenous Television within a 10-month timeframe after they finished it.

So yes, it's real, you can do it and it's possible. To gloss it up, to get something that professional looking, no you need to maybe spend another four days. But that's not too bad either I think.

Brett:

Nukkan. Kingun. Yukkan – See. Listen. Speak. Where to from here with this particular project?

Carl:

With this particular project we are hoping right now, it's quite funny, we heard the pun before about the insulation and so on and would love to give Mr Garrett a break because I'm hoping he's assessing right now our funding application for a three-year continuation of the project because what we'd like to do is we would like to work with hundreds of young people across

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Ngadjuri country, that is all of south-east South Australia, and ideally from there and other communities across Australia to train them in digital media production.

We're producing a series of how-to toolkits that are relevant for the communities because they're made with them and by them in collaboration with us. And we would like to see many more of these films, that's really our pitch so far.

We've been doing this a while. Since 2004 we've done about 300 workshops with roughly about 3500 participants across the country. The other last thing is we would like to evolve from the Hero project because there was a bit of a branding confusion there so I'm told by my branding consultants.

We would like to move away from the Hero concept, that we are needing heroes. I love that '80s song *We Don't Need Another Hero*. I think we need a lot of heroes, we need change, we need social change, we need media for social change. That's why we changed it into Change Media because it's not so much about the talent of the individual heroic movement, it's about the fact that nearly everybody with a bit of time of their hands and with some good mentoring could do this kind of work.

Malcolm Gladwell nailed it: 10,000 hours, it's all it takes. If we only read this book, unfortunately we read it too late because otherwise we might have never have started. But it took us, nearly to the day, 10,000 hours, five years roughly to grow this project and become really, really good at it. Now, thank you very much, we are apparently one of the best in the country.

Brett:

And speaking of thank yous just to close, are there some people you want to thank that got you to this point?

Carl:

Yes, I would like to thank Our Community, first and foremost the Ngadjuri communities, Edie Carter. I hope we can keep working with them.

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I would love to thank our funders, the Australian Council for the Arts, Community Partnership Initiatives, Arts SA, the Indigenous Cultural Support and many other community partners, small organisations and Apple Australia. And I would like to thank Jennifer my partner for all the incredible hard work that we're putting in here.

And everybody in the room and to everyone who made this happen for us. It is an enormous honour, thank you very much.

Brett:

Nukkan. Kingun. Yukkan – See. Listen. Speak. – the project for which they won the award.

That's actually a lot like my award that I nominated myself for, Denis, which didn't get the gong, which was the Listen, Listen, Listen to Me project.

We've heard that you don't need an individual, a hero, a champion necessarily, but boy, it doesn't hurt. And some people do go about their work themselves to drive whole projects to create some community change and create some positive influence on our society, which I have declared consumerist and banal. So be it.

Actually, I first met this man when he applied a job at my company Hootville Communications. Since then he has gone on to further establish a national movement, to speak at the UN, to gain recognition across the country from VIPs and win the Westpac Kookaburra 2010 award.

Ladies and Gentlemen, for his work on Neighbour Day, please welcome Neighbour Day founder Andrew Heslop.

Congratulations. You have no video, you are just speaking for yourself. You're deliberately lo-fi and I appreciate that.

Folks, shall I randomly test Neighbour Day, who's familiar with it?

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Andrew Heslop:

Neighbour Day, singular, individual, it touched on one of the presentations from this morning when we were talking about how it's an individual who can make all of those changes in the community.

It's one of the reasons why Neighbour Day is called *Neighbour* Day because it's all about you as an individual making that choice. The positioning statement for Neighbour Day is 'the community you want starts at your front door' and it's about precisely empowering you.

And it came about principally from the first couple of years of Neighbour Day doing lots of talkback radio, listening to communities all around the country where callers would ring in and say, "The people in my street don't really get along. The lady across the road is a pain in the neck. The kids behind keep throwing their ball into the garden. I wish my community was like that but it's not."

And I just found myself constantly saying, "What are you doing to change that? What are you doing to make the people in your street get along better?" And that's literally how it evolved.

Brett:

You had a very specific inspiration though didn't you?

Andrew:

I did. In Melbourne, you might remember, in 2003, the body of an elderly woman was found in her home in McKinnon. Elsie Brown had been dead for two years before one of her neighbours remembered that they hadn't seen Elsie for a while. And so they called the Police. The Victoria Police broke into her home. She lived in an apartment above a shop in McKinnon. They found Elsie Brown's remains still wrapped in a blanket on a sofa upstairs where she had settled down sometime in January 2001 to watch TV and passed away.

She had been disconnected from her family. She was disconnected from her friends. She was disconnected from her neighbours and she just fell through the cracks.

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It wasn't until the story broke on Seven News that it got me to think, how can we prevent this from happening again? And not only was there outrage in Melbourne, there was outrage all around the country that an elderly woman could die and be forgotten.

So in a letter to the editor of *The Age* I proposed a national day to go and check on the neighbours, to check on the elderly and vulnerable who live in our community.

Jon Faine from 774 ABC Melbourne and said, "We've got to talk about this. This is just a fantastic idea." So through *The Age* and through the ABC, Neighbour Day was born.

And on the last Sunday in March every day it's the day to go and knock on the door of the person next door or across the street, or if you're in the bush on the next farm, and say, "G'day. Here's my mobile phone number. Here's how to contact me. If there's ever a problem or issue please get in contact."

We saw how important that was during the Black Saturday bushfires here in Victoria, where so many people who would otherwise have not connected suddenly had to rely on each other, not only to protect their homes and to protect their property but to save lives and save their communities. And sadly for many that didn't happen.

But it just goes to show that in an emergency or a disaster, if that happened today in your street at home, if there was a major gas explosion or a plane crashed or something terrible happened, would you know how to get in contact with your neighbours? Would you know who to call on to come and provide help? The answer is probably no.

Brett:

I grew up on the mean streets of McKinnon and I'm here to tell you they're not very mean at all. They're extremely middle class, pleasant, gentle, excellent state school, nicely tended houses, my parents still live there, exactly the neighbours who we wouldn't expect that to happen. So demographically that was surprising, I remember, and very shocking.

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Andrew:

And sadly it was the beginning of a couple of years all around Australia where people had been discovered dead in their homes for a considerable period of time, three, four, five, six months. A terrible situation.

And it reinforced to me the value of encouraging communities to have better relationships with each other, to try and stop that from happening again. You'll never stop people from dying alone in their homes. That's just impossible. But what Neighbour Day hopefully can lead to is that sense of connectedness that encourages people to say, "The mail's not being collected, the newspaper's still on the lawn, I haven't seen the blinds go up for a couple of days. Is there the need for an intervention here?"

Brett:

Andrew, beyond giving a certain date, though, you're not particularly prescriptive. You don't ask people to wear a certain colour bandanna on a certain day or go casual and give 50 cents to work that day. You're fairly open. What's the philosophy behind that?

Andrew:

Well, the idea is that no matter where you live, no matter what your circumstances, you decide how you and your community want to celebrate Neighbour Day. That might be a street party, and thankfully many councils around the country are getting involved with Neighbour Day and making kits.

The City of Melbourne, for example, makes available free barbecues and cricket kits and closes off the streets for free within the smaller residential zones around the CBD so people can do that. It can be as simple as putting the barbecue on the front lawn and getting the people across the street and next door to come in for a sausage sizzle.

In one of the councils in Sydney, Leichardt, they launched a mobile coffee cart where you can book it and have barista quality coffee for you and your neighbours. They supplied the machine, the cups and the coffee beans. You take care of the milk and off you go.

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But it's really about you and your neighbours, it's about how you want to celebrate. And it can be a cup of tea and a slice of cake or it can be something more substantial. But rather than saying, "Buy this product, wear this bracelet, put on a coloured T-shirt or a funny hat or something", there is no fundraising component for Neighbour Day.

Brett:

Yes, explain that. You must have been tempted many times to bring out the merch., get the retailer on board and say, "Go to BP and buy the coloured bandanna cap, badge, however." How have you managed to resist that? Are you independently wealthy?

Andrew:

No, not really. Prior to being in charge of Neighbour Day, I'd been the National Communications Manager for Australian Red Cross and sat on the board of the Victorian Relief Committee and so I knew very well how hard it is to raise income. And I also knew that there's something out there which you're probably all familiar with and it's called donor fatigue. Trying to get the community to make a financial contribution to a product or a service is very difficult.

Not only do you get hit on at the office, you get hit on at home. So the kids bring home the chocolate bars or the books or whatever it is because the school's having a fundraiser to build a new gym or buy some more basketball equipment.

And then they go to sport on Saturday morning and the sports club is having something else as well. And there are just too many pressure points for you to give up your hard earned cash. That percentage of the dollar that is taken by the not-for-profit sector, very important as it is, could never have been the model for Neighbour Day.

So it's something that I have personally funded out of my own pocket, out of my own income.

Brett:

This has not made your wealthy.

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Andrew:

It is not made me wealthy. But like any inventor I've backed myself in and not given in to the temptation. As Kate talked about in her presentation about cause-related marketing, aligning with a product or a service, I want to be clear that there have been opportunities for me to take a significant six figure sum from national hardware companies or multi-national ice cream chains or mobile phone retailers in return for branding Neighbour Day as the Ansett Australia Neighbour Day.

One of the things that I learned from working at Australian Red Cross is that the moment you put a corporate name in front of your own it devalues whatever it is you're trying to achieve. And particularly in an activity like this it's very cynical but true to say those multi-national companies just wanted to sell more ice creams or hammers or mobile phones. They weren't really interested in supporting Neighbour Day. They just wanted to use Neighbour Day as a conduit to get to more consumers.

And so the response was, "Thank you, that's very generous, but no thank you. I'll just continue on my merry way funding it myself, bringing in my own resources to make it happen until I find the partner that shares my vision and that is willing to help me along this road."

There's been no federal or state government funding. There have certainly been requests for it. I get knocked back.

So rather than say, "Woe is me," I just realign my resources and make it happen. So I'm 40 years old and I don't own a house yet but I get enormous satisfaction that there are communities all around the country who are better connected because I've chosen to fund my own idea until I find someone who's happy to do that for me.

So for this Kookaburra Award, and I'm very grateful and extremely honoured to receive it, the \$3000 cash I will use to fund small grants to community groups and residents' organisations so they can have morning teas and afternoon teas or sausage sizzles at a small level, rather than out of my bank account, which is what I've done up until now because it just keeps the day going.

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And you're probably sitting in the audience going, "Wow, this guy's really whacky. Who would do that?" But when you're so passionate about an idea as I am about Neighbour Day, and it's great to have the endorsement of the Prime Minister and the opportunity to speak at the United Nations and to get fantastic media support for Neighbour Day, which has been the essence of its growth, particularly News Community Media, that's Leader Newspapers here in Victoria, to be able to engage organisations with a message and get them to back you in with that message, has been incredibly powerful.

To have a year with the ABC, where across Australia at 66 radio stations they promoted Neighbour Day on air, was fantastic. But it's all about the pitch, which was part of my question when Kate was giving her presentation this afternoon – how do you pitch yourself to an ad agency to get them to buy in, to sign up to whatever it is that you want them to sign up to? And that's hard.

Brett:

Finally, how do you get along with your neighbours?

Andrew:

Very well. I've been living in Sydney and Melbourne. I'd love to come home to Melbourne. I'd love for Neighbour Day to be as intrinsically linked to this city as Myer, as the trams, as the MCG. Melbourne is the heart of philanthropy. I'd like to remind you all it's where Australian Red Cross started in 1914 at the outbreak of the First World War. I'd like Neighbour Day to be as synonymous with this city as all of those institutions.

And I'd like to dedicate this award to two people, to the memory of Elsie Brown, the poor lady who died a lonely death in her home in McKinnon, and Clive Taylor who was my neighbour in Finlay Street at Albert Park when I started Neighbour Day in 2003. Sadly he passed away last year at around 94.

He showed me the importance of having great relationships with your neighbours. He would wander up and down the street in his late 80s, bringing in the wheelie bins and recycling bins on Monday morning, nailing the palings that had fallen off the fences and off the gate, lending me tools when I wanted to do something around the home. The front door was always open.

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It was locked back. Anyone could have walked in but he'd always knock and wait. He and his partner Joan were just the most fantastic people to live next door.

And so I dedicate it to Elsie and Clive, who really showed the importance of strong communities and resilient streets and towns all over the country.

Brett:

Ladies and gentlemen, Andrew Heslop, founder and heart and soul of Neighbour Day.

Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final category of the Westpac Kookaburra 2010 Awards is for a Community Organisation. And the winner is [audience kookaburra laughs] the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. Please congratulate them.

I know we have some video which will set the scene and share the magic that the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre do so well.

[Video runs]

Please make welcome its founder and CEO, Kon Karapanagiotidis. Kon, welcome.

Kon this is all your fault. You started this whole idea. Please explain.

Kon:

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre was born almost nine years ago. It began as a TAFE class project. I was teaching a group of students in the heart of Footscray. They had to do something practical for class.

I had a friend who had a little shop in Footscray he wasn't using. I'd been volunteering, helping out the Red Cross, and I knew there was nowhere where asylum seekers could get food in Melbourne. Most of them were living in the community – no income, no work, absolutely destitute.

I said to my students one day, "What do you think about setting up a food bank for asylum seekers in Footscray? As a class project we can make this happen."

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Eight weeks from the day of that conversation, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre was born. Nine years later it's the largest refugee organisation in the country.

The idea behind it at the time was teaching people that even as students you can change the world. All you need is imagination, vision, a bit of passion and be willing to take a risk. That's how it started.

Brett:

Eight weeks is an exceptionally short time from concept to reality. Congratulations. You were willing to risk not the planning, not the pilot, not the funding application but just the doing. I love that.

Who here has an organisation that depends somewhat some volunteers? Could you do with more? Issues with retaining, training, finding in the first place? Kon, you have 550. Share some secrets on volunteers.

Kon:

Really simple principle. We now have 35 paid staff but for the first three or four years we had two. Now we're close to 700 volunteers, we've got over 200 coming tomorrow night to our next intake. But we're talking about really simple principles. Where a lot of NGOs I think fall down is not letting volunteers actually do the work. Have trust in them, skill them up, mentor them, train them and then let them do the work. Don't micromanage them. Our volunteers are the lifeline of the organisation. We never had the luxury of government money so it was my volunteers that set up the first health service for asylum seekers in Victoria, for example.

You give people a go, you show them how to do it, you let them take some risks and they'll do anything. We work from a very simple idea, which is that everyone has extraordinary potential and ability and all you need to do is create a space for that to happen.

It's really simple. Treat them well and have a culture that reflects what you stand for. Let there be no hypocrisy in your organisation. If you're a human rights social justice organisation, make sure you treat your people on the ground the same way and that you're accessible.

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If they're down there emptying the rubbish bins or wiping the floor be willing to do the exact same thing. There's no hierarchy in our organisation. Bar me having to be the CEO we're all on the ground at the coalface together and that's what creates community.

Brett:

Who else here in the room is a founder of a community group? There are a few hands. There would be more but you're too tired to raise them.

Talk to me about how you avoided 'founder syndrome' because I see this a lot. You see people who are passionate, charismatic, have some connections, are willing to work like a dog, and they rise to the level of their own incompetence. You know that old phrase. And then you can't go further. How have you avoided this?

Kon:

It's a real struggle.

One is getting great people around you which is what I have with my staff and volunteers.

Two is get people around you that aren't just going to say yes to you and are actually going to tell it like it is.

And three is to get your shit together and actually be honest about yourself. In the early years I was an absolute control freak, an absolute workaholic. I had to micromanage everything. And then I realised this organisation can't be about me. The organisation that I have is so strong because it's about a community of people coming together. And if I'm getting great volunteers and staff to do certain jobs, let them do it. Whether or not I could do it better or a different way is irrelevant. I'm trying to be part of a movement. It is not about individuals. I'm actually absolutely irrelevant in this entire process. And it's that letting go of ego and letting go of power and going, "What am I here for?"

I'm not here for me. My organisation only exists because we continue to have asylum seekers in absolute destitution and despair under successive governments. And as long as we remember that's the only reason we're here and nothing else, we keep thriving and being strong and surviving. Simple.

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Brett:

Is there going to be a similar operation in Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide? How is that going? How replicable is this?

Kon:

Victoria really leads the way in terms of supporting asylum seekers. It's the best example of it in Australia. You unfortunately have a Federal Government that really doesn't give a shit about asylum seekers and so you don't have much support. Most are like us, non-Federally Government-funded organisations doing it tough.

Around Australia there are pockets of organisations in Sydney or Brisbane who are all doing it hard. We're going hand to mouth half the time as well because how do you keep staying afloat when the demand doesn't get any easier? Most of our people are living in a community. No income still. No right to work. No healthcare. All with no Centrelink.

So the challenge is we need more agencies across Australia. But where's the money going to come from? We do it tough at the moment. We're struggling financially at the moment. But it's a simple thing. You have a human being in front of you in a moment of need. We run off one principle: turn no-one away.

And so you can't just sit there and say, "Too hard, too difficult, too complex." We have to respond to them, otherwise we might as well close our doors. But it's a challenge for us and all the great organisations out there doing this work.

Brett:

Kon, a big question and a broad one. Simply, why are asylum seekers such a political football?

Kon:

Asylum seekers are such a political football because it's easy, it's a group of people that most Australians don't have an experience of connecting to. Even though we're all boat people, unless you're Indigenous in this crowd, most of us have an experience of connecting to. They often look browner than us, a little bit more different than us, different religion, different face.

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And so it's ripe for the racist picking which is what is the easiest thing to do, to tap into people's fear and to tap into racism.

But I also will say this, in moments like now when I'm watching both sides without a moral compass or leadership on this issue, you can also do the opposite. And the success of the ASRC is the other principle which is tap into the best of people. Most Australians are good people and are not racist. And if you inspire the best in people and say, "There can be a different way, we don't have to buy into this hysteria and fear-mongering and bullshit that is being spread," there is a different way.

The ASRC is the embodiment of that, it's about a community that believes in compassion, inclusiveness and a fair go. And that's the best way of challenging it, the best way of challenging people who sit there going, "Turn the boats back, get tougher, lock kids away," is going, "Come and see for yourself. Our organisation is an open door. Come and meet these people and see they are just like you. They've got families just like you, hopes just like you, struggles just like you and they don't choose to be here."

For us it's about telling that story of the sacrifice and extraordinary courage of refugees to make it to our country and their basic fundamental human right to be welcomed and accepted in this country, not treated the way they are now which is just an absolute national disgrace.

[Applause from audience]

Brett:

I'm usually pretty resentful when speakers get spontaneous round of applause but in this case I'll make an exception. Kon, finally, you have some people to thank I'm sure?

Kon:

Very simply, our amazing volunteers, my extraordinary staff, but the number one people are the people who are seeking asylum themselves. I have a couple of members in the audience and they would be happy to answer questions afterwards. They are my inspiration. They are the true heroes, the pioneers of human rights, the people that are willing to risk their lives to

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be free, and that entrust our organisation with that hope of freedom and allow us to fight with them for that day where they can finally have peace just like we do.

Thank you.

Brett:

Please thank Kon Karapanagiotidis from the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre.

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