

TOWN AND GOWN
Great Hall, National
Gallery of Victoria on Wednesday 19 July 2006
Mr Michael Traill, Chief Executive
Officer, Social Ventures Australia, proposed the Toast to the Gown.

In four years at this great institution I learnt invaluable lessons about looking at the evidence. It strikes me that if you survey our social and economic landscape today you see a strange counterpoint: we're growing but we're certainly not growing happier.

Delve beneath the surface of our much vaunted top of the table OECD performance and you find significant evidence of what I call the 'other economy'. The stats on this 'other economy' highlight persistent youth unemployment and alienation, geographic pockets of multi-generational disadvantage and an appalling economic and social divide for our indigenous people.

If you are a one of the 'statistics' living in the other economy, it's tough to be happy. And the unfortunate evidence is that despite the long wave of economic growth, there are still many areas of entrenched disadvantage, with traditional welfare solutions failing.

Paradoxically, it seems that those who benefit from being on the right side of that economic wave are not necessarily any happier. It's a theme elegantly caught by social commentator Hugh Mackay. He talks about the "affluent purpose seekers" who are juggling lives, kids, careers, money, 4WD's, upward mobility.... but are often struggling to find day-to-day purpose or meaning in their lives.

We're growing but we're not growing happier. So what does this all mean?

I'm an optimist and in the work we do at SVA there is a real opportunity to crack some of this country's entrenched social problems and create a better society by using this paradox.

The *How* lies in the simple but powerful idea that if we can more effectively harness the skills of those affluent purpose seekers and connect them to creative thinkers and social entrepreneurs who have the potential to make change, we can all do better.

The *Why* is anchored in the very Australian tradition of egalitarianism, a sense that we share a common humanity - a grounded notion of happiness that suggests to be fulfilled we all need a combination of:

- Economic opportunity – the opportunity to participate
- Social connections – to family and community
- Personal significance – that we want to be valued and contribute

It's encapsulated in the very powerful idea of connecting our heads to our hearts. I want to share a story from the Social Ventures Australia Community Mentor Program, which we run with several major corporates that highlights what happens when this works. Our SVA Mentor of the year this year was Jonathon Deane, the Group Head of Strategy at AMP. This is a "two of us" story with a twist. Through our mentor program he developed an extraordinary relationship with Margaret Flynn... Margaret's world is a little different to Jonathon's. She runs Centacare in Western NSW and is responsible for a patch that covers 52% of the land of NSW and includes some of the really struggling regional and indigenous communities which have attracted such controversial recent press.

Margaret is not your conventional welfare worker. She sees possibilities and potential, not disadvantage. As she so beautifully frames it: "I have to find ways for these young indigenous children to see a view of the world that rises above the levee banks."

Jonathon Deane has taken the time and made the commitment to regularly visiting Margaret on her turf – a long way from the harbour views that are his daily patch. In that journey and in that process there has been a deep two-way learning and engagement. Margaret speaks glowingly of how much she has valued Jonathon's perspective and personal commitment, how much it has meant to her not just to have his strategic guidance and input but to know there is someone from that other world who genuinely cares. Jonathon talks about how much he has valued the experience and the opportunity. And when he talks, what flows is a sense of the social connections he has developed to a very different community and what the sense of purpose – personal significance that reflects his wonderful contribution – really means.

It's interesting to look behind what is driving the desire for this sort of engagement where two worlds connect. I wanted to share an experience that I think sheds some light on what is going on inside the heads of Hugh Mackay's affluent purpose seekers. One of the great gifts of what I do now is the opportunity to connect to some truly inspiring thinkers and leaders. One of these has been Norman Drummond, a Scot whose c.v. as author, executive coach, social entrepreneur, BBC Governor only goes a small way to explaining his real gift of getting people to hold a mirror to themselves about the things that *really* matter.

We ran an experimental one-day session with Norman a couple of years ago, with a dozen or so of my former investment banking colleagues and the same number of social entrepreneurs. It was a fascinating day, woven together by Norman, who based the whole day on a series of three simple but incredibly powerful questions.

The questions were:

- Who are you?
- Why are you living and working the way you currently are?
- What might you yet become and do with the rest of your life?

And as the dialogue unfolded and conversations between people from these two different worlds developed I watched a bit of magic happen. It was well captured by a colleague who said “Mate, I don’t know where you got this guy from but I’m having conversations that I haven’t had since I drank too much at Uni, and it actually feels pretty good!”

One of the privileges of our work SVA is to witness that when you give people the opportunity to connect their heads to their hearts, great practical good is unleashed. At SVA the belief that we can apply the best of both worlds underpins all we do. We start with the premise that if we can find outstanding social entrepreneurs, and support them with the money, the mentoring and the tools they need, we can change the map. It’s a model of what we call venture philanthropy and we know its working. We know that because the 21 social ventures we back - drawn from nearly 700 we’ve seen since we started - tell us we are helping them significantly: with funding from the over \$8m we’ve raised, with mentoring from people like Jonathon Deane and with tools that enable them to communicate what impact they’re having, what’s working and importantly what they can do better.

And if you look at some examples of growth and connection behind the ventures we back they are inspiring.

When Bill Lawson, Consulting Engineer and one of this country’s great social entrepreneurs walked into the office of Brooks HS Principal Peter Hutchinson, he heard a disturbing story. Peter told him he felt he was failing as a Principal because 30% of the kids leaving the school in year 9 and 10 were going straight onto the dole.

Bill’s response was to say I’m not exactly sure what I can do, but if we work together I know there are employers around who will get off their backsides and help if they’re asked the right way. They put together the No Dole program in the early nineties and it transformed a school that had a terrible reputation. With the engagement of the community, of mentors, of businesses, one on one, one by one and then in partnership, Brooks HS changed. In the first year of the No Dole program the number of kids going onto the dole dropped from 30% to 13%... then to 2%... then to 0.

It's a fantastic program and it's changing lives. It's creating economic opportunity, social connections in the community and personal significance because young people are making smarter choices about employment and education. And we are proud at SVA that Beacon Foundation says of us that we have been instrumental in helping No Dole grow from 8 to 25 to 40 and now 80 schools around the country, with mentoring, with funding and with the tools that enable Beacon to track and monitor the work they do.

I want to return to my colleague who was so profoundly moved by Norman Drummond's three questions. He said it took him back to when he was at Uni. That certainly strikes a chord with me. When I was invited to give a graduation address to the Commerce faculty a couple of months ago, and I was grappling with both what I could say and waves of nostalgia, it struck me how wonderful those undergraduate conversations were. They were about the big picture, about what was possible, about change and about the personal... and while they might well have been imbued with large doses of naivete and hubris, they were *great* conversations.

I find it hugely inspiring that there seems to be a wave of genuine practical desire to engage in communities from the campus. We are exploring ways to connect the experience SVA has in it's work to help the University develop more effective town and gown partnerships. Melbourne rightly prides itself on being the philanthropic centre of Australia and it's no coincidence 8 of the 21 social ventures we support are based in Victoria. We think there is great clay to work with, and I am delighted that my Victorian SVA colleagues Jane Laity and Seri Renkin who have been instrumental in establishing our Melbourne presence are here tonight, and can help build that partnership opportunity.

I've always regarded the four years I spent on campus as an enormous privilege and opportunity. As a kid who grew up in country town Victoria, this place inspired me not to be shy of dreaming the big dreams and connected me to people who changed the way I looked at the world. I was always struck by the challenging words of Woodrow Wilson, President of Princeton and US President in the early 1900s. They are words that resound across the turn of two centuries:

“You are not here merely to make a living. You are here to enrich the world and you impoverish yourself if you forget the errand.”

In the spirit of shared knowledge, learning and a happiness and social significance based on real contribution that the University represents, I ask you to please charge your glasses and toast “The Gown”.