



Melburnian of the Year acceptance speech

Firstly I would like to acknowledge the traditional land owners and pay my respects to elders past and present

I am sure all of the previous winners of this award must have felt like I do – that surely there has been some mistake. When the Lord Mayor rang to tell me that his appointed Committee had recommended that I receive the Melburnian of the Year, after a moment of disbelief, I suggested to him that perhaps he needed a new Committee!

I am however, humbled to have been chosen, and I hope over the coming year to bring credit to the City of Melbourne and also to Wintringham the organisation I have the great honour to lead.

My work with the homeless has enriched me beyond words and beyond awards. Working with people who have been disempowered by society, who routinely die 20 years too soon, and who live in the most appalling conditions, has inspired in me a sense of righteous anger that is showing no signs of dissipating.

Receiving an award such as this is something of a bitter sweet experience. I am obviously thrilled to be recognised in this way, but disappointed that the provision of services to elderly homeless people is still so unusual that it attracts attention. Really, all we do at Wintringham is to provide the type of care that you would expect your parents to receive – the only real difference is that our clients

are not your parents – they are the forgotten poor, who live in squalor and poverty that is almost unimaginable in such a wealthy country.

I started working at Gordon House in 1985 – 30 years ago. Gordon House was then the largest night shelter for homeless people in Australia, catering for up to 300 people every night. If buildings could cry, Gordon House would be have cried its heart out every night. While there were often random acts of kindness between the residents, all too often there were terrible scenes of violence. But worse than violence was the despair and loneliness that filled most rooms.

Gordon House gave me two important and treasured benefits. I made friendships with other homeless workers who are some of the finest people I have ever met, and who are here tonight; and it stirred me to believe that we could look after elderly homeless people in a better way.

Wintringham was established to try to do things differently. I didn't want elderly people living in homeless persons' night shelters and so didn't want to create another short term housing option with soup kitchens and other emergency services. And it never occurred to me to import or copy a model that might exist in America or Europe. I resolved to build something that would be unique to Melbourne and would be something that I would want to live in myself.

I wanted the old fellas I had met at Gordon House to get the same high quality aged care services that my parents were receiving. I wanted to build places where the elderly poor could live a dignified and safe life; or in the memorable phrase of my wife and great supporter, where they could have “A Home Until Stumps”.

While on this subject I was given strict instructions by my wife not to mention her in my speech. Well I am sorry Dot – I must tell everyone must know that nothing we have achieved could have been done without you.

Wintringham is different - we consider ourselves to be running a business – true it’s a business with a heart, but its still a business. I am acutely aware that for most of our clients, Wintringham is the only remaining barrier to the streets and death. The accepted wisdom is that the Aged Care Industry is based on the fees and capital bonds that clients pay to providers. Homeless people can’t pay those fees yet Wintringham continues to survive and grow. For the first two years I was the only employee, now we have 600 and the quality of our work is such that the United Nations Habitat awarded Wintringham it highest accolade: the Scroll of Honour, the first time the award has gone to Australia. That’s a home grown Melbourne business story I am proud of.

I have no doubt that Wintringham survives today due to the quality of our management team and to the loyalty and impassioned hard work of our staff. And it is here that perhaps I can offer something back to Melbourne in return for this award.

Working in welfare, we regularly hear that business can teach us skills that we desperately need. And it is true. As I look around at many of the organisations I see working in welfare, it is apparent that some of them could use a variety of business skills.

What is not heard however, is that welfare can at times teach business better ways to run their organisations. Wintringham works in an industry which has a very high staff turnover rate, yet we have an extraordinary stable workforce. In spite of working with some of the most challenging and difficult clients who have had horrific lives and frequently have some form of brain injury which effects their behaviours, our staff stay and work with a level of passion that continues to inspire me.

How we motivate staff to stay and to enrich the company's activities is a lesson that can be transferred to others. It is important for all staff to know that the CEO knows them, admires what they do, and encourages them when times are tough as they inevitably are.

I am sure that the major reason for the success of Wintringham can be quite easily plotted. The Board insists on and we deliver, a very simple business plan that is highly strategic; we are a specialised organisation only working in one field; we don't spend valuable resources on self promotion; and we empower all of our staff to work within a social justice framework. The end result is that staff stay and we build a real and genuine knowledge base within the organisation.

Thousands of older homeless people have passed through our doors. It's so hard to pick one to tell you about but I'll try with Claude. Do you remember the days when older homeless men were all around the Vic Market? Well Claude was one of them. In many ways Claude and the Vic Market have been litmus tests for Wintringham. 30 years ago, the Market was full of old characters like Claude. I remember, as I am sure many of you do, the numbers of men in old grey great coats. Lying behind that image was a social outrage. All these men were homeless and they passed the day away at the market waiting for the night shelters to open at 5 pm. I have used that recurring image of the 1980's as a motivation for our work here at Wintringham. The fact that we now only rarely see guys like Claude at the market is an indication of just how many we have been able to house.

But back to Claude. How many times had he gone to hospital only to be discharged days later. Or on one occasion, when he heard that there was a party at Wintringham, he discharged himself. He turned up in a wheelchair and bottle of oxygen and held court until we had to get an ambulance to take him back.

Another time when I had a phone call that Claude was dying, I went to Royal Melbourne Hospital to say goodbye. I found him curled up in a foetal position. The young nurse was very worried and mentioned that he was refusing all liquids. I told her to give me what she wanted him to drink. I went over to his bed and said 'hello Claude'. One eye opened and recognizing me he croaked 'giday Bryan'. I leaned into him and said 'Its ok Claude, I've brought you a beer.' Claude immediately sat up and I gave him the drink that the nurse had given

me. He got half way through it and then said “this isn’t a bloody beer”. “Of course it is” I said “you must have dementia you silly bugger!”. He gave me a grin and drank the rest. And of course he recovered and again came back to Wintringham.

There is an old Blues song where the singer says that all he wants is for a pretty girl to cry at his funeral. When Claude died a little bit of all of us went, but it was also a reminder to us that for all we have achieved much is still be done.

Thankyou Melbourne