

**Ron Castan Young Humanitarian Award Winner**  
**Acceptance Speech**  
**20<sup>th</sup> October 2015**

Dean Cohen

I am passionate about working with people with special needs and providing opportunities for young people to be engaged in our community.

I do with an incredible team of young Jewish leaders. We provide opportunities for people with special needs and their families and we are shifting the mindset of the community towards people with a disability.

We champion tolerance, acceptance and respect. We champion equal opportunities for independence, success, love and employment. Above all we champion the idea that inclusion is a human right.

These are values that I have held to be true since I fell into the disability services sector after school. I got a call from a parent who heard that I play soccer and said that she needed someone to have a kick with her son who has autism. Not knowing what on earth autism was I got involved and ended up working with him for 2 years.

I was fortunate enough to accompany him on a trip to Israel with 10 other young adults with special needs and I learned that working with people with special needs is first and foremost about supporting people to be included and to experience the same opportunities as everyone else.

At the same time I was going through my youth movement Habo, gaining confidence in my own abilities and being empowered to take ownership over the things that I am passionate about.

In 2013, I headed up to Sydney, and volunteered on a camp for people with special needs called Camp Sababa.

Based off of the Camp Sababa Sydney model, Camp Sababa Melbourne was founded in 2014, and runs respite camps for children with special needs and training programs for young adults to work in disability services. Last month we also ran our first respite camp for siblings of children with special needs.

We have also recently kicked off The Best Bunch, a social enterprise flower business that provides an employment opportunity to people with special needs and aims to generate revenue to contribute to the funding of camp Sababa.

We are passionate about providing opportunities for people with special needs and I believe our team has laid a solid foundation to be able to have a huge impact in this area.

Daniel has Autism; he's quirky and fun, likes swimming and dancing, he's non-verbal, and has real trouble communicating all together. His mum is a single parent. She desperately needed a break but she had never let him go before. So one day we rock up at their house and try to convince a mother to let go of her son for the first time in his life and to put him our care for 3 nights.

Part of the process was introducing him to some of our volunteers before camp, so one day two of our year 12s and I went to his house and we took him swimming... He got in the pool and *screamed*, his face got a bit wet and he screamed, we dried it, he screamed, we went closer to him OR we went further away, and he screamed. At the top of his lungs.

After an extensive process getting to know Daniel, he came on camp with us. This picture is of him, comfortable, happy, swimming, NOT screaming, with one of his buddies Sophie.

Society's inability to accommodate and provide opportunities for people, gives them the label of having a disability. It isn't their problem; it's ours. Daniel is able to thrive... in the right environment.

The late Stella Young, an inspirational disability advocate, said, "My disability exists not because I use a wheelchair, but because the broader environment isn't accessible."

We are laying the foundations for a systemic shift in the mindset of our community towards the inclusion for people with special needs. This year we have 90 volunteers that have put their hands up to undertake an extensive disability training program and to support our campers on our summer camps.

Every single one of the volunteers that goes through Camp Sababa will have a life changing experience that will shift their attitude towards people with special needs and shift their behaviour to ensure that they are more likely to support, accommodate and include people with special needs throughout their lives.

We are working to create a world where no one feels like they are on the fringe. The current reality is far from that.

Many families who have children with special needs in our community feel unsupported, excluded or even stigmatized. Many children go to a special school because they can be accommodated far better than in our Jewish schools. Even in a thriving Jewish community that owns and operates hundreds of businesses, adults with a disability still can't get

a job and because of it many just don't have a reason to wake up in the morning.

We must ensure that everyone feels as though they are a part of society and can experience all of the same opportunities. We can facilitate that within our community, or we can fight for the value of inclusion to be upheld by all communities and for all people, this is a goal that I believe Camp Sababa and Stand Up share.

This is not just a belief or a dream. It is achievable, and more importantly, it is also unequivocally necessary if we wish to live in a just society. It is a fundamental principle of a just society that people are able to participate and to feel included. Inclusion is a human right. To ever have to say, in a community as prosperous as ours, that people are, or feel, excluded, is absolutely unacceptable.

Throughout my time doing this work, I also spent a bit of time bored out of mind getting through my commerce degree.

The best lesson I learnt was in a random management subject. We learned about Servant leadership as the leadership style employed when you put, above all else, the needs of those you serve. Through elevating the people you are working to support, you are kept grounded, on task, and ego is kept out of the picture.

Edgar Guest, penned a poem called Compensation, that encompasses the way I want to lead and the impact I hope to have through my work.

It goes:

I'd like to think when life is done  
That I had filled a needed post.

That here and there I'd paid my fare  
With more than idle talk and boast;  
That I had taken gifts divine.  
The breath of life and manhood fine,  
And tried to use them now and then  
In service for my fellow men.

I'd hate to think when life is through  
That I had lived my round of years  
A useless kind, that leaves behind  
No record in this vale of tears;  
That I had wasted all my days  
By treading only selfish ways,  
And that this world would be the same  
If it had never known my name.

I'd like to think that here and there,  
When I am gone, there shall remain  
A happier spot that might have not  
Existed had I toiled for gain;  
That someone's cheery voice and smile  
Shall prove that I had been worth while;  
That I had paid with something fine  
My debt to God for life divine.

I know I am getting the *young* humanitarian award so I have a bit of time left to work on all of this. But if I want to change the world, I think it's probably important to get a head start.

Sam Blashki, in his essay "My Grandfather, Ron Castan" writes that at the age of 7 that he was taken in a light plane by his grandfather to visit a remote aboriginal community. Even without knowing the rest of the story, there is already a profound lesson in this, seen through the exposure of a 7 year old to a different culture and people and the lessons that accompany an experience like that.

All of my experiences with Ron's grandchildren are that they are people who are passionate about doing good. To Sam and all of the cousins, I am excited to see what we will achieve together throughout our lives, I am excited for you

to share the lessons of your grandfather with me and for us to work together to uphold his legacy.

We are never too young to start learning, questioning, helping and of course giving this 'changing the world thing' a really good shot.

We need to encourage all of the other young leaders in our community are encouraged to do the same. There is a vast pool of young leaders who are passionate about doing good and living conscious and active Jewish lives.

We need to tap into this pool of innovative young leaders, and we need to value their input more. We need more young people in leadership positions in our community, on boards, driving our community forward. Not as the youth director of the organisation but as a board member, the CEO or the President.

Jan Owen, the CEO of the Foundation for Young Australians, echoes this, explaining that every person over the age of 40 needs to have a mentor under the age of 30.

In order for the next generation of our community leaders to be engaged now, we need to develop more intergenerational conversations where each generation can learn from the other. The Nordia Foundation, The Fouress Foundation, Stand Up and many more in the room, have all started these conversations and I am so grateful for the support that I have personally received throughout this journey.

Only together can we create a community, and in turn a world, that upholds inclusion as a human right. I am excited to continue working with each of you to make this a reality.