

I feel very humbled **and** inspired to be receiving this award tonight. Thank you Stand Up – Jo and the team for considering me a worthy recipient; thank you to ABL for so generously hosting this evening. And thank you to the Castan family who has made this award possible, for ensuring that Ron’s legacy of speaking up for those who cannot, continues to inspire others to be moved and to take action, that we **can** make a difference to those who **don’t** have our voice and our resources.

To be receiving an award in the name of Ron Castan is a great honour, the man who made Mabo part of our vernacular for truth and justice. I was transfixed by this case. Here was a David and Goliath battle where David actually triumphed, where justice was served, where the displaced were finally **seen**. (And as you have heard tonight) Ron forever remains a national hero.

I have always been drawn towards the disadvantaged. There go I but for the grace of God. Perhaps I harboured a sense of guilt or shame for my parents not going through the Holocaust. I’ve always wanted to make up for my family’s geographical good fortune and have always felt a strong empathy towards refugees, the stolen generation, homeless people ..... anyone dislocated from their roots and from their family.

As a young child I remember lying awake at night trying to imagine what it would have been like for my **friends’ parents** who, after surviving the horror of the Concentration Camps were **completely** .....alone.... in the world.....no friends, no family, no home!

And as a Jew living in comfortable Melbourne I am surrounded by family and friends and a community. I feel safe and supported. But on any given night in Australia, more than 1 in 200 people do not feel safe and do not feel supported. They are homeless or sleeping rough and this figure is increasing every year.

So from humble beginnings outside the Gatwick (with Henry Nissen, Henry Ser, Josh Artz and Allan Rutman), 15 years later we have 80 volunteers from Kehilat Nitzan Conservative Synagogue who are rostered on every Tuesday evening, come rain, hail or shine and set up a community meal in Port Melbourne to feed, and to bring comfort and joy to the lives of vulnerable people in the area.

They say it takes a village..... and this is all driven by a team and this award also belongs to them – my right arms - Sue, Ros and Carla and also Pam, Jake, Greg, Gersh, Henry, Gary, Maurice, Harold, Eli and Allyson. They pull this together week after week, working tirelessly to create an environment where these disadvantaged people are treated with dignity and feel respected, loved and heard, where they can connect with others and feel part of a community. It is like one great big family. It is a night of friendship, love and camaraderie.

And perhaps secondary to all this is our amazing food! Cooking is an expression of love and I believe our food tastes so good because it is made with the pure intention of bringing comfort to those who eat it. We work in partnership with the Father Bob Maguire Foundation and it is a bit like a pop up café in a park. We set up long tressles under canopies and serve main meals buffet style, and like any good Jewish function, we have a table set up just for desserts. We try not to make it feel like it is **us** serving, and **them** taking, so our volunteers are encouraged to sit and chat and eat with the clients.....When I look up I love that you can't really tell who is with KN and who is a client. It is just a sea of people happily enjoying a meal together. And when the clients help with the pack up as a token of their gratitude, the differences between us have all but disappeared.

Whilst many of our clients or **friends** as we like to call them are **not** homeless, they are often just one rent cheque away from **becoming** homeless.

For them it can be a choice between paying the rent or buying food. By providing free meals on the night and sending home take away packs for other nights... and food for school lunches, they are more likely to be able to pay their rent and to remain in housing. Our ultimate aim is to cut the cycle of homelessness because once you lose your home, it is extremely difficult to get back into appropriate housing in Melbourne. The list is a mile long.

Many of our clients live alone and do not work, and may not have spoken to anyone all day, or even for **days**. They really look forward to us turning up week after week. It is the one constant in their often precarious living situations.....Many clients come just to chat and some .... just for a hug. On Tuesday evenings we give lots of hugs!

To give you an insight into the demographic – some have mental health problems and drug issues, but increasingly I meet middle class people who have lost their job, or who have separated from their family because of divorce or are fleeing family violence. It can happen to **anyone**..... I meet highly educated and articulate people **every** week. Last week I met a man who is living in his car waiting patiently for emergency accommodation. Imagine how hard it is trying to go for a job interview. No toilet, shower, no iron....

More and more we are seeing children and young teenagers coming. The food van gives us a fantastic opportunity to mentor these kids. Some of them help serve the food. They find purpose in coming and the best part is we have 2 exceptional role models Jake Arzt and Greg Sachs, who are in their 20's and who the young kids see as cool, so they can chat and hang out with them....I think Jake and Greg are playing a critical role in these kids' lives. Even though the kids are from struggling and broken homes, I think there is every chance they will make it out of their disadvantaged situation because they're learning 3 precious life lessons – how wonderful it feels to **contribute**.... to be **valued** ...and to be part of a **community**. I believe they will take these values home with them and on through journey to adulthood.

So our food van is not really a soup kitchen. In fact it is our policy NOT to serve soup. It is a night of sharing and togetherness. You learn very quickly no matter which side of the serving table you stand on, we are all just the same, sharing the same innate hopes and struggles, and just wanting to live in peace and dignity.

Before I tell you about another project very close to my heart, a special mention of thanks to my husband Braham who has supported and encouraged me along my journey. I know at times he has worried about me but he is wise enough to know that I get back 100 fold from what I put in and he has never wanted to thwart my passions which include among other things my work with asylum seekers and more specifically with a young man called Alex.

In 2011 there was a lot of publicity about boat arrivals from Afghanistan, Iran and Sri Lanka. I remember watching on TV these rickety old boats full of desperate and hapless people who had been forced to flee from their homes for fear of their lives.... and make the death defying journey to a far away country.... Where they think they will finally be safe .....only to arrive on Xmas Island to the welcome of Customs Officers who are anything **but** welcoming, where they are thrown into detention, where they are called an “illegal”. It was gut wrenching.

I was desperate to offer support and I was put in touch with Alex a 20 year old Iranian boy who had escaped from Iran by way of a people smuggler. He had been tortured and imprisoned for 3 years after getting caught up in the large anti government protests in 2009. He was 17. And his mother did not know for those 3 long years whether he was alive... or dead.

I remember nervously driving off to Sunshine to meet Alex. His English wasn't great and he was very shy and I couldn't understand a lot of what he said but by the end of the afternoon he seemed to relax. We met a couple more times over in Sunshine and then I asked him for Friday night dinner. I didn't realise at the time that that was the first nutritious meal he'd eaten in 4 years. He came for a few more meals and then I asked him to stay for the weekend, and then it was for a few nights and before long I asked him if he wanted to move in with our family. It was just a natural progression and it felt right. From the first time we met, we seemed to connect very easily.

Alex used to sit in my study every day while I worked. He was a bit like a puppy dog. He just wanted to be around “life”, another human being. He had been on his own for so many years...in prison , waiting for a boat in Indonesia, months in detention and then living in Sunshine....always alone. So my study became a haven really but I remember one day distinctly when he seemed quite agitated and restless and he said “I have an internal war in my heart and I don't want to be a Moslem any longer. I can't think of anything else day or night.”

He told me that when he was alone in Sunshine with nothing to do, he started reading the Koran. His family was secular and he'd never actually read the Koran before. Alex found that the Koran was not in alignment with the values with which he'd grown up, and he was thinking about converting. He wrestled with this desire for about 6 months, not even daring to tell me, because in Islam apostasy, converting out of Islam is punishable by death. And he had never heard of anyone doing this before. So it was a **very** frightening prospect for Alex but something he just could not stop himself thinking about.

Alex believed in God so he knew he wanted a monotheistic religion. Living with us he had become familiar with Judaism – I'd taken him to shul so he wasn't left at home by himself and he'd had a Seder with us and many Friday night dinners, but he knew nothing about Christianity. So off he went to church but he found it difficult to relate to the services in the same way he could in Synagogue.

So Alex made the life changing decision to become Jewish and after 22 months of study he converted to Judaism and as far as we know he is the only asylum seeker to have ever done this. Alex said this was one of the happiest days of his life.

I shouldn't have been surprised by Alex's desire to convert. Alex loved coming to synagogue with me, and the shul community had been incredibly welcoming and supportive. He had finally begun to feel part of something again, a community....after so many years of displacement.

(Alex was granted a temporary visa after a harrowing interview in which the Immigration officer disputed the only physical proof Alex has to his story - the scarring on his back received from torture. The officer said this was likely due to self flagellation which is what some extreme Shia Moslems practise, even though we had a forensic doctor saying that, with the uniformity and horizontal lining of the scarring it was impossible to be self inflicted, and could have only been from torture.)

Despite enduring unimaginable horror Alex now lives independently, has a lovely and supportive girlfriend, and a wonderful job in IT after completing studies at Box Hill and topping the faculty of Computer Science. He is still very much part of our family. He has come on family holidays with us and calls my mother "nanna". His move out of our home

has meant he has had to foster other friendships which in turn has made him a more balanced and independent young adult.

Working on the food van and with Alex has affirmed to me our shared humanity and how critical it is for us as human beings to not only connect with each other but to also look out for the other, and to dance or even just limber up in each other's shoes. It has reinforced my belief that kindness is the cornerstone of all humanity and that we are all in this dance of life together. The secret is to make **space** for one another. As Ghandi said "A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members". I believe we can all be the hero of our own story.

Thank you.