

Ron Castan Humanitarian Award 2017

Speech by Nicole Mekler

I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I'd also like to acknowledge Elders from Gamillaroy country where Boggabilla and Toomelah are, and the Ngembe people where Bourke sits and the 24 different language groups that now reside there.

In doing that I'd like to acknowledge Elders who have passed, that we have been privileged enough to have an opportunity to learn from and grow beautiful relationships; Elders present, who work tirelessly and shape their communities, as well as guide our paths, and lastly for those coming up, those future leaders that I can already see so clearly coming through.

I am so honoured to even have my name associated with Ron Castan, such a strong human rights advocate, who has left such an astonishing legacy, as well as George Newhouse, a social justice warrior right across the field.

I want to share with you two areas that I'm committed to. One, is Stand Up's partnership with Boggabilla and Toomelah, and the other is Just Reinvest NSW and the Maranguka Justice Reinvestment project in Bourke.

There are lots of reasons why I have chosen you to work with Aboriginal communities, inequality, injustice, the alarming overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in prison, that I live on Aboriginal land, that my family too went through dispossession and genocide, just to name a few.

But most of what has kept me so captivated are the young people. Who absolutely inspire me, through their resilience, kindness, determination and insight well beyond their years.

As well as Aboriginal community members who amaze me, with their unwavering dedication to making stronger communities and to those deep never-ending wells of caring and compassion.

I've been involved with Stand Up's Aboriginal Partnerships Programs for just under 10 years now. This is Cody and I on my first trip, I spent a good chunk of that trip spinning her around endlessly. As you can see the tradition continued. Cody made this for me and I thought it was the easiest way to show time passed. This is us, on my last trip a month ago.

The partnership in Toomelah and Boggabilla, initiated so respectfully by Mel and Ian, fostered by Jo, Samo, Al, Lanz, Tal, Yvette, Deli, Ari, Hayim, Lici, Beth, Sara, all of the leadership group, and protected and nurtured so fiercely and beautifully by Kez, showed me how partnerships could look. All of them are so dedicated to the communities, have an endless want to learn and a genuine love, they mould me and inspire me in all the good ways imaginable.

Stand Up from when I was 17, told me that partnerships were all about being community led. And the communities of Boggabilla and Toomelah, told us that for them, it was about the young people in their communities, which was convenient because for me personally, from the first morning in Toomelah it has always been all about the young people.

I've gotten to watch kids grow up. Like the short little 10 year old boy that I met when I was 18, has become 18, A giant and this beautiful human, filled with so much caring.

I've watched a ridiculously cute but crazy shy 7 year old girl become a 17 year old leader, helping 12 year olds address their own shame and being a real role model for them.

Both these young people, and so many other young people are support to us when we are in the communities, they help us engage with other young people, they look out for us and we learn so much from them. On every trip to Boggabilla and Toomelah it is a week of constant visiting friends, deepening relationships, making new ones, laughter, hugs, games, selfies, so many selfies and filters.

As I mentioned, Aboriginal community members of both communities have been so generous to us in welcoming us in. They have shared parts of their culture and knowledge: Elders taking us to the Canoe tree behind Toomelah and Boobera Lagoon, where the Gamillaroy people believe is the resting place of the rainbow serpent. Hearing from Elders the most amazing stories of resilience, after terrifying stories of what colonisation meant and really still means. We have seen community members work so hard, unceasingly, for the young people in their community, and getting that term of respect of Uncle or Auntie so humbly and without expectation. We have learnt about the challenges and difficulties that face the communities, but also of the strength that you see and experience in every moment of being in the communities.

An Elder, that many of you would of heard speak, Auntie Madge said to us, If you're here to help us, you can leave, but if you are here to walk alongside us, you can stay. We have incredible volunteers, (including Ron Castan's granddaughter, Tinky) and we try and instil in our volunteers values of solidarity and that it is a privilege to get to walk beside the people of Toomelah and Boggabilla. Speaking from personal experience and I'm sure on behalf of many of the other leaders and volunteers, this partnership has imparted us with values and knowledge that make us into better versions of ourselves, and far better to walk with.

I thought I'd end on a little bit about one of the places where Stand Up has led me. Mel Schwartz got me interested in Justice Reinvestment or JR. JR is essentially a place based, data-driven approach to community safety that redirects money that would be spent on prisons into building up communities, making them stronger and safer places, and preventing crime from happening in the first place. Savings made by the strategies are tracked and reinvested into what is working in communities.

As an example of the potential savings there are to be made, nationally, the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system costs Australia \$7.9bn a year. Just imagine what that could be spent on for Aboriginal young people in communities.

JR is a common sense approach, it uses data to identify priorities and strategies, funds what is working and acknowledges that communities have the answers to their problems. For the organisation that I work for Just Reinvest NSW, that is a key component, JR means Aboriginal community led and driven initiatives. The principle of self-determination is key.

In 2013 Just Reinvest NSW began a partnership with the Bourke Aboriginal community to implement the first major justice reinvestment trial in Australia, the Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project in Bourke. Both organisations aim to create better outcomes for Aboriginal young people and keep people out of the justice system and in the community.

And while I don't have a lot of time to talk about this Project, it is incredible and trailblazing a new way of doing community business. What I will talk about is that for both Just Reinvest and Maranguka, the role of young people and the priority of giving them a voice and an

opportunity to shape change is key. I am lucky enough that it is part of my role to contribute towards this priority that underlies all the work that we do.

In Bourke, I work with Maranguka, the SOS Youth Coordinator and YOTS to run a Maranguka Youth Advisory Council. The council has discussed priorities and strategies for young people in Bourke, ranging from a slide at the pool, to suspensions, to less racism. Maranguka is committed to having young people at the heart of decision-making and action.

With Just Reinvest I also get to work with our Youth Ambassadors, who don't want other young people going through this broken system, whether that's the criminal justice system or out of home care. I get to work with them on raising public awareness, informing policy, breaking down stereotypes and so much more.

All these young people, have so much to say. That is so on point. And as I said, I feel very lucky to be working for people that value that, and volunteering for an organisation that is fostering young people to be able to do that.