

Ron Castan Humanitarian Award
Acceptance Speech Hilton Immerman 22 10 14

I'd like to begin by also acknowledging that we're on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and by paying my respects to their elders past, present and future.

Thank you so much for your kind words, Mel. [Melanie Schwartz, Chair of Stand Up]

Stand Up is such a remarkable and significant organisation!

A key reason for its success is the exceptional quality of its leadership.

I have learnt much from and been inspired by its 2 key leaders - its Chair, Melanie Schwartz and its CEO, Gary Samowitz.

Mel started the Derech Eretz program in 2005 with the then Hillel Director, Ian Jankelowitz. I was an observer to this historic initiative because Hillel is a core department of The Shalom Institute, but, the only credit I can claim is that I employed Ian and subsequently Gary – and Shalom provided seed funding for the project. Interestingly, Gary was a successor to Ian and he and Mel grew Derech Eretz in an exemplary manner – always remaining cognisant of the need to consult with and be guided by local elders – in this case, of Toomelah and Boggabilla.

Mel is engaged in innovative research at UNSW in areas such as legal issues affecting Indigenous people and Justice reinvestment – which is achieving promising results with young Indigenous offenders in the town of Bourke, NSW.

I worked with Gary at The Shalom Institute from 2006 – 2009, where he did an exceptional job. As *Stand Up's* first CEO, he's been amazing in growing and developing the organisation.

Now to the award... I feel so greatly privileged and honoured to receive this prestigious award and I accept it with profound gratitude on behalf of our important work in Indigenous reconciliation through our Shalom Gamarada Scholarship Program, which is truly a team effort.

Muhammad Yunus is one of many people whom I admire. He and the Grameen Bank were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 - essentially for enabling disadvantaged people to become independent by providing them with micro-finance.

The premise behind the SG Scholarship Program is similar.

Both comply with Maimonides' highest level of charitable giving or, more accurately, *tzedakah*. This form of 'justice' entails helping people become self-sufficient and, by so doing, retain their dignity.

Gamarada emphasises the power education in leading to social transformation. It is committed to making a contribution to closing the shameful gap between Indigenous and

non-Indigenous Australians through higher education and by increasing the number of Indigenous professionals.

Its name comes from the term *Gamarada ngiyani yana* in the Eora language and is translated as “We walk together as friends” – an obvious reference to the Jewish and Indigenous communities.

When I speak to new scholarship students, I sometimes point out that the Jewish and Indigenous communities have much in common. I’m initially confronted by sceptical and quizzical looks until I explain that:

1. both are small minorities;
2. both have suffered discrimination, persecution and genocide;
3. both have a rich culture lasting thousands of years;
4. in both cases, land is central to our identities – ours, of course, being Israel;
5. for both, memory, heritage, tradition and language are critical;
6. family and community are core; and
7. we both have a commitment to social justice.

Many Indigenous students find it difficult to succeed at university because:

1. they tend to come from disadvantaged backgrounds;
2. they often live far from university campuses and spend many hours a day commuting;
3. they generally have to work part-time to support themselves; and
4. they are seldom part of a ‘learning community’ as their family members and friends are unlikely to have had the opportunity to participate in higher education.

Two disturbing but hardly surprising statistics:

1. Aboriginal students have an overall degree completion rate of less than 50%, while 72% of their non-Indigenous peers complete their studies.
2. In 2006, only 4.9% of Aboriginal people aged 20-24 years attended university, which is only one-fifth of the rate for non-Aboriginal students.

The SG program helps to alleviate these problems by providing a ‘home-away-from-home’ at Shalom College on the UNSW campus, thus eliminating financial hardship and time wasted commuting and by creating an environment conducive to learning through tutoring, counselling and having a critical mass of other Indigenous students to support and mentor them.

Dr Josef McDonald was the 3rd Shalom Gamarada graduate. He has been working at the John Hunter Hospital in Newcastle, NSW, is completing a MPH p/t and is about to commence a psychiatry specialisation. However, it wasn’t all plain sailing to help get him there!

Josef, or Macca, has stated publically that, when he was in 2nd year, he was drinking excessively, often having to be hospitalised for many injuries including suffering from an array of broken bones. He was famous for his ‘nudie’ runs through college and has stated that he felt he was becoming an alcoholic and heading either for jail or the cemetery.

With patience, many conversations and hard work on his part, he managed to turn the corner sometime in his 3rd year.

In his 4th year, he was interviewed about the program and said:

“For me it has been a life-changing experience. The fact that I have had a friendly and supportive home in a racist-free environment, with healthy meals on campus, lets me do the job I have to do to pass my exams. The scholarship - without question - has allowed me to stay at uni and get on with my dream of becoming a doctor. I want to make a difference to my people. To help close the health gap, there is no substitute for Indigenous health professionals from the local community who are known and respected. This scholarship provides Indigenous people with the opportunity for self-determination regarding their health outcomes.”

In an interview with him after he graduated, he made 2 important observations:

1. “Something that I definitely suffered from in the early stages of university was the imposter syndrome - which is where you don’t really believe that you’re a true candidate to become a doctor, you’re just an imposter. And it’s quite easy to feel this coming from my background to a university where you’ve got the most well-supported, the most widely-travelled, the most well-educated people – not only from Australia - but from around the world. And I think it was really the turning point when I was mature enough to say that this isn’t necessarily the way things have to be done. The way I do them is just as valid – and, in some cases, perhaps even better.”
2. And his final perception comment was: “I think it’s fairly ironic that moving to a Jewish college made me more comfortable expressing my Aboriginality.”

Let me give you a very quick snapshot of the program:

- From one scholarship in 2005, we now have 28 in 2014, which means that just over 20 % of the Shalom College population is Indigenous.
- A total of 67 students have been assisted.
- To date, 6 students have graduated in the faculties of Medicine, Law, Optometry, Social Work and Architecture, with another 6 - including 5 doctors - due to graduate this year.
- In the last 10 years, UNSW has gone from having one of the worst retention rates for Indigenous students, to having the best in the country.
- Gamarada students are currently achieving a pass rate of 90% – which is higher than that for non-Indigenous Australian students in long-haul courses like Medicine and Law.
- Our scholarship students now represent over 20% of Indigenous students studying Medicine at UNSW.
- The Gamarada program won the prestigious LIME Award [Medical Deans of Australian and New Zealand Universities] as a model of best practice in the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal medical students
- We partner with the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation which matches each scholarship with another – doubling the value of each scholarship dollar raised.

We will now watch a short video. I point out it was made independently by UNSW TV in 2012. Content remains valid but some of the numbers are out-of-date.

Show SG Video: [Shalom Gamarada Walking Together](#)

We now need and are seeking new scholarships. If anyone has ideas of individuals, foundations or companies who may be willing and able to provide one, please let me know. Since we have a number of Law students whom we can't accommodate, a Law scholarship from one of the law firms represented in this room tonight would be wonderful!

Let me conclude with these few comments:

Former Justice, the Hon Michael Kirby said of Ron Castan:

"As a Jewish boy at the Carey Baptist Grammar School in Melbourne he learned what it was to be different. Each one of us is different. At school, I too found that I was different. A civilised life teaches that difference is the glory of the human species. As the mind of Ron Castan, schoolboy, was formed, it came to appreciate the richness to be absorbed from different cultures and different identities. Avidly he kept his mind open; and he did so to the end."

There are so many things I admire about Ron – and you have heard some of them earlier tonight.

Ron once said: "It troubles my conscience that it took me until 1971 to really see" – and I paraphrase here - 'that I cannot stand by the persecuted Jewish people, without standing by another oppressed people downtrodden and persecuted within my own country.'

True to character, Ron did not focus on others and lay the blame with them, but rather looked to his own conscience and acted with personal responsibility. He was a true Australian National Treasure and I feel both greatly honoured and filled with awe to receive this award in his name.

I'd like to pay tribute to the recipient of this Award in 2013, Howard Goldenberg –. Howard spent more than two decades working as a relief doctor in remote Aboriginal communities. I received a congratulatory email from Howard last night. Being in the company of such a truly remarkable humanitarian, I feel humbled and privileged.

Thanks to:

1. Steve Castan and the Castan family for this great honour.
2. My lovely wife, Marilyn who is my partner in all things. For whatever I have achieved, she more than shares the credit because it would not have happened without her support and wisdom.
3. The Shalom Institute – especially Ilona Lee a co-founder of the program and Penny Hurst, an exceptional human being and role model who gives so much to the community. Ilona and Penny are both Gamarada Trustees – they great lay leaders with whom I've had the pleasure and privilege of working for many years.
4. Let me end by commending Genna Radnan, the Young Humanitarian Award winner.

Thank you all.