

Ron Castan Young Humanitarian Award Speech 2019

Intro

- I want to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land - the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation - and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.
- The first thing I need to get off my mind – and I’m afraid to admit it here at ABL, and in the presence of the Castan family – but one of the main reasons I’m here is because: *I left the law*. It was a big part of my life – 5 years of study and 2 years down the road at Mills Oakley – it helped shape so much of who I am today. But I had to follow my heart. And I want all the lawyers in the room to know that it isn’t personal.
- I also want to acknowledge **Debra Korman** the other Award recipient tonight - we live in an era of short termism and short attention spans. Debra’s work reminds me that true social change is a *long slog*. Her tenacious commitment to the community – much like Ron’s who stuck with the Mabo case for *ten years* - is an inspiration for a young person like me to *stick at it*.

Ron Castan

- Winning this award, named in honour of the great Ron Castan AM QC, I have had the opportunity to think about Ron’s legacy a good deal – and **what legacies are**.
- I find it best encapsulated in the idea that “people will forget what you **said**, people will forget what you **did**, but people **will never forget** how you made them **feel**.”
- While people are highly unlikely to ever forget what Ron did and said in numerous pivotal native title battles, I was struck by a comment I read about Ron that told me how Ron made people **feel**. In an obituary written by Bryan Keon-Cohen QC on 18 November 1999 about Ron, Bryan said:

*...most of all, it was Ron’s **personal qualities** that endeared him to his many friends, colleagues and associates. Blessed with acute intelligence and formidable abilities as a negotiator and lawyer, he was nevertheless **unassuming in nature, always kind and considerate** to others, especially those in need, always ready to hear and discuss ideas — however speculative or bizarre— and devoted to the purging of injustice wherever he saw it. To me, he demonstrated the highest principles of his faith, his profession, and of **caring humanity. He showed us through his daily work and relationships, what a human being can achieve for the betterment of the community***

- I'm uplifted by this kind of legacy, this side of humanitarianism. It is one that is accessible to me, and to everyone – a reminder that an award such as this really belongs to every person who lives a caring and considerate life; at work, with colleagues, at home, everywhere. I hope to live up to even part of Ron's legacy, may his memory be a blessing.

Stand Up

- I also want to acknowledge Stand Up, where I spent a number of my golden early 20's.
- One of my proudest achievements at Stand Up was overseeing the publication of the New Australian Haggadah for Passover, which some of you may have used at your Seder tables. I still get emails of thanks each year after the Seder - from people I've never met! - for the positive impact the Haggadah had at their Seder table. Sure, I also get emails highlighting the grammar mistake on page 23, and the missing word on page 91. If you too have found mistakes, please take them up with one of the many friendly Stand Up representatives here tonight - I'm off duty.
- Stand Up is a trailblazing organisation in the community that has become entirely synonymous with Jewish social justice. 5-10 years ago there was plenty of talk (by talk, I mean brief angry letters in the Australian Jewish News) about whether the kind of "Jewish social justice" advocated by Stand Up was simply a "light touch" dilution of "true" Judaism. Thankfully, such views become fainter by the day, and in my many ways Stand Up's mission to make social justice a mainstream conversation in our community has been thoroughly accomplished. I'm so proud of how far they've come.

The Man Cave

- I want to tell you a bit about The Man Cave where I've worked as Head of Operations for the last couple of years and which has worked with over 10,000 boys so far.
- Many boys and young men have **inherited the story that to "be a man" is to be tough, stoic, immovable and unemotional**. It's a story we see plastered in movies, gaming and media, and one which in fact served us for a long time. In the savannahs thousands of years ago, where 'might was right', immovable strength and stoicism meant winning or losing a war, or being on the wrong end of a saber tooth tiger – literally life or death.
- This stoic attitude, however, is now having devastating effects in our times:
 - **1/5 boys** are likely to experience **depression** before they are **18**
 - **suicide** is the **leading** cause of death for young men under the **age of 44** and **3 times the rate of women**
 - **95% of family violence** is committed by men

- At The Man Cave we don't believe that boys were born this way, and we're trying to **interrupt the cycle**. So what do we do? I will show you in three photos:

- This is Mitch, one of our star facilitators with a boy on a recent camp. A key principle of our work is to *listen without judgement*. Too often, boys are used to being told if their behaviour is right or wrong, good or bad. Soon enough, they learn never to open up again for fear of being wrong. Our facilitators are expertly trained to create an environment of listening without judgement. And key to that is sending in guys who are cool and relatable and who epitomise healthy masculinity. We have a saying that *you can't be what you can't see*. Many boys have never *seen* in the male role models in their lives what's possible. In our facilitators, often for the first time, they can.



- This is a powerful photo of a father and his son from a recent camp. It shows another key idea underpinning our programs – that the rites of passage that boys went through for thousands of years to become men have disappeared. Part of those journeys involved a father or older male role model sharing wisdom and stories from their lives about the complexity and struggle of life. It was a chance for the boy to see their father as multi-faceted, with flaws, in all their humanity. These programs are helping restore the lost art of “eldership”.



- Finally, this photo encapsulates our group workshops. The most common feedback we receive from boys is that they realise through the program that their struggles are not unique and in fact are shared by their peers; that they are not weird or strange for feeling shame, guilt, stress, anxiety or depression. These are normal human emotions. I



occasionally take the opportunity to co-facilitate our workshops. In one of them I was holding a circle with Year 9 boys, and in that circle sat a boy who the teachers forewarned was the “bully”. True, he was disruptive a lot of the day and tried to derail the program. Until late in the day we just asked him: *is this who you really want to be?* And in that moment he said no, not really. He described how he felt trapped to be that way, in that identity - to prove himself and to survive in high school. He was actually a relatively quiet boy who hated getting into fights. The other boys in the circle were blown away seeing this other side of him. For the rest of the workshop he demonstrated great leadership and a side of himself he probably never knew existed.

So why is this work so powerful for me?

- In last week’s Torah portion, Moses is giving his final legacy speech before dying. He recalls the **Exodus** - the story of a struggling, slave nation that overcome all odds to arrive at the **Promised Land**.
- And really, the “Promised Land” is a **metaphor** for that place that is **just beyond reach** for each one of us; a place that is hard to get to, and where the only route involves **struggle, and stretch, and taking a risk**.
- For me, the most important part of the story is not so much the getting to the Promised Land – it’s the fact that the Israelites almost gave up and pleaded to **return to slavery. Why?**
- Erich Fromm in *Escape from Freedom* explains that the reason was, going back to slavery “promised relief from **uncertainty**, even if it deprived the individuals of their freedom”. Better the certainty of slavery to the uncertainty of freedom. This is symbolic of commons struggles we see all around – for example, many would prefer the drudgery of a job they didn’t like because at least it was the devil they knew.

- Erich Fromm elaborates further:

*"Modern man lives under the illusion that he knows 'what he wants,' while he actually wants what he is supposed to want. In order to accept this it is necessary to realize that to know what one **really** wants is not comparatively easy, as most people think, but one of the most difficult problems any human being has to solve. It is a task we frantically try to avoid by accepting ready-made goals **as though they were our own.**"*

- This work with The Man Cave is powerful to me because it involves encouraging boys – as well as their parents and teachers - to step *towards* emotional freedom, *not away* from it. It is as Joseph Campbell says: *The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure that you seek.* For boys, that cave means taking a small risk to support their friends and accept help when they're struggling, even at the risk of being perceived "weird" for showing their feelings. Or to talk, instead of fighting, because we're not on the savannahs anymore. All of this in the hope of regaining their humanity and a deep connection with others.

TMC as an organisation

- We strongly believe that if we are to invite boys to take challenging emotional steps that we must role model that as an organisation. We believe that the workplace is a microcosm for community and can be a source of tremendous social change.
- We do **check ins** every morning where we sit in a circle and everyone has a brief opportunity to share how they're going – maybe a friend died that week and you're struggling to focus; maybe someone you know is getting engaged and you can't contain your excitement. Maybe someone is nervous about their Ron Castan Award speech. We do this to ensure that despite all of our busy work, the humanity of who we work with is paramount.
- We then do a brief round of "**clearings**" – an opportunity to state if there is something on your mind that is stopping you from relating clearly and freely with a colleague; maybe they inadvertently hurt or insulted you, judged you unfairly, wasted your time by missing a meeting. The clearing is a chance, without judgement or moralising, to share with a colleague the impact of their behaviour. In so doing, we resolve our disputes rapidly and don't carry resentment around with us; especially not back to our homes, families and friends.
- We finish with a round of **gratitude** – a quick way to become present and acknowledge that no matter the struggles of the day ahead, or what's going on in life, there's always something to be grateful for.
- Many of our staff have taken these practices into our homes, communities and sports clubs to

create a better world. I have taken them into my partnership with my partner, Leora, and there have found new levels of love for her; I've taken them into my relationship with my family, my shule community, anywhere I can.

- Note what Ryan said about Ron in his obituary, that Ron “*showed us through his **daily work and relationships**, what a human being can achieve for the betterment of the community*”. I will now take Ron’s legacy into our workplace as a reminder of what can be achieved by bringing our humanity to our daily work and relationships.

Finally, my quests:

- Mum and Dad – who gave me everything, a wonderful childhood and every opportunity, and without whom my life would be no more than an idea.
- Penina, my sister – who raises her three boys, my scrumptious nephews, with care, love and attention, and who role models what it means to be a powerful woman - the exact things Joey, Zac and Ziggy need to grow into respectful and sensitive men who find their place in the world.
- Leora, my partner– beautiful and caring and giving, a young Jewish humanitarian in her own right, helping give kids the ability to communicate their deepest needs and wants in her work as a fine speech pathologist.
- Howard – my dear friend, first recipient of the Ron Castan award, forever giving and connecting and trying to make the world better. And his grandson Toby, who I had the privilege of hiking with to the Mornington Peninsula Lighthouse. Toby, you’re likely the youngest person in the room tonight – I hope you have seen and heard things that inspire you to make the world a better place. I’ve no doubt you will.

Thank you again for this honour and have a wonderful evening.