

## **Ron Castan Humanitarian Award 2017**

Speech by Steven Castan

First of all on behalf of Nellie, Melissa, Lindy, Myself and the whole Castan family want to acknowledge that we are very proud to have my fathers name attached to this great organization Stand Up and to this award. We are ably represented here tonight by My sister Lindy and Rons grandchildren Sam, Ricky and Milan.

We would also like to thank Paul, Mark and ABL for hosting the event. Paul, our family and you go back many years all the way to Monash University. And Mark and my dad had deep and enduring friendship and shared values and approaches to indigenous rights and pro-bono in general...this endures today through the firms ethos and in particular the great work done by Peter Seidel with the firms full support

I'd also like to take this opportunity on behalf of the family to congratulate George Newhouse and Nicole Mekler on being the winners tonight.

Both Nicole and George are inspiring, humble, generous and gracious Jewish Australians actively pursuing social justice in their work and thoroughly deserve their awards tonight. Through their actions they are standing up for those who cannot in the community, and this is also what my father stood for. I have worked and continue to work with George on the National Justice Project & can attest to his dedication to Human Rights and making a change for the better. Thank you George.

Dad taught us a lot of things through his actions and words. We grew up watching him be involved with many social causes from aboriginal land rights, to challenging anti-Semitism and holocaust denial in the press, to taking the government to task on issues such as the right to protest against duck shooters, & police powers to fingerprint and arrest arbitrarily, to working along side the federal government to stop potential environmental disasters such as the Franklin Dam.

Growing up we didn't really question why dad was so involved in these matters; we just assumed that's what you do, if you can, if you have skills. If you are blessed with the time, the resources and intelligence...you just do it.

This led dad, and us as his kids to some fascinating journeys and experiences. From sitting with Eddie Mabo and having a smoko at the High Court in Canberra, to a week

on Murray Island after the case had been heard, playing footy with the kids and eating yams, to Alice Springs to meet with Ptjinjara Elders and having your portrait done by a wise old man who whispered in my ear “its all pretty boring eh” to having the opportunity to meet the Dalai Llama as dad was part of the organization who brought him out here and was involved in trying to assist the Tibetans win their freedom from Chinese oppression. On that day, I had sprained my wrist rollerblading, so the Dalai Llama spent our allocated 5 minutes trying to massage my hand and taking about this funny sport called “rollerblading” – my wife Lani to this day says she didn’t get to meet the Dalai Llama she just got to watch him be my physio!

There was always lot of robust discussion around the kitchen table as you would expect, and some themes have emerged that I have thought about a lot since his passing. These themes I think match up very well with Stand Ups philosophy of a Jewish organization standing up and taking responsibility for social justice outwardly in Australia and beyond.

Firstly, dad’s Jewish values and his understanding of what it is to be a minority, an oppressed people, who were to be destroyed but had survived the horrors of the holocaust drove his desire to right the wrongs as much as he could that had been wreaked upon the indigenous people of Australia – dad explained it himself in a speech in 1998:

*“What was the meaning of my determination to do my part never to permit a future destruction of the Jewish people, if I just stood by and participated in the bounty and opportunity of the Australian nation? What would that mean without doing something to expose and expunge the legal lie which lay at the foundation of the dispossession, disempowerment and attempted destruction of an oppressed group of fellow Australians?”*

The idea that as Jews who have survived and thrived in Australia, we especially cannot stand by and watch the effective genocide of the aboriginal people and their culture really drove papa Ron to take on cases like Mabo and Wik, and spur the nation to not shirk away from these issues and ignore its past.

Secondly, dad used to say to us that in everything we do...try to “walk softly and carry a big stick” – this is a phrase I use all the time myself and I do try to although I am not always as successful at it as he was.

I believe what dad meant by this mantra was twofold - that not only when you go out and do good deeds, you should do it humbly, without the need for accolade or recognition (which is how my dad operated) but he was also emphasizing his belief that a highly effective way to ensure change happens, is to do so within the bounds of society, using intelligence, skills and tools in a respectful and honourable way. In dad's case, it was his deep legal knowledge, combined with his negotiation & people skills and an understanding of the workings of the legal and political system that meant he was able to create change from the inside the law & society rather than from outside.

Finally, another theme we learned from our dad was that you must take action:

When dad died, Mick Dodson said "Ron gave the energy of his life and channeled his immense ability into the cause of justice. Not only for indigenous Australians. As he said "Justice is meaningless if it is not extended to all and a belief in justice is empty unless it is expressed in action"

So these themes or mantras that we learned from my dad through his actions have resonated within myself and our family inter-generationally – you must take action on the important issues, if you can - you must help people less fortunate than you with the skills you have, and you should do so within the bounds of society – not just in relation to indigenous issues, but issues of injustice everywhere in this potentially great nation of ours.

In 1993 dad gave a speech at the B'Nai Brith after Mabo when much fear mongering was being spread about what negative effects it would have on Australian society and economy due to land handbacks and mass compensation claims.

Dad believed, as I do, that Australia still had yet to fulfil its full potential as a nation and his words are very relevant today.

He said:

*The Australian catharsis has not been without pain. The boil of racism on the Australian body politic has been lanced. Much ugly matter is coming out. But the significance of Australia's indigenous inhabitants, and of their rights, to our national origins, to our sense of self as a nation, can no longer be avoided or discarded.*

*Whatever the outcome of the current political machinations, a new pride and new political leadership has been created among Aboriginal people, and they will continue to have enormous impact on our Australian life and identity.*

And he continued:

*The ugly anger of those who are grieving for the old world in which the cult of dis-remembering prevailed, will fade. Many of the current generation of commentators and politicians will in due course be shamed by their recent conduct. Yet Australia will grow as a nation, as it comes to terms with the reality of its own Aboriginal and Islander origins. The cathartic experience of Mabo will eventually be seen as the foundation upon which a new and stronger and uniquely Australian national identity will be forged.*

We may still have a ways to go in reaching that unique national identity but I believe that we have a chance with the work that is done by those in the Jewish community who do so much to achieve justice and reconciliation such as organisations such as Stand Up, law firms such as Arnold Bloch Leibler, and of course through this award and its well deserved recipients tonight George and Nicole.

*Our family believes that Jewish Australians need to stand up for those who can't themselves. We are privileged in many ways and have the wisdom from experience to know how important it is to stand up for human rights. So it is fitting indeed that this award go to tonight's recipients who both embody the characteristics of my father Ron Castan and who have achieved excellence in their chosen humanitarian fields – congratulations again to both of them.*

Thank you Gary and Jacqui very much for having us here and again also to Paul, Mark and ABL for hosting the event and for all of you for supporting Stand Up