

Speech for Ron Castan Humanitarian Award 2015

Melissa Castan

Thank you Peter, I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that we are meeting on, the Wurunjerri people of the Kulin nations.

On behalf of Nellie, Steven, Lindy, and the whole Castan family, I want to acknowledge that we are very proud to have my father's name attached to this terrific organization Stand Up and to this award.

We would also like to thank Peter, Mark and ABL for hosting the event. Peter, and I go back many years all the way to our early days as students at Monash University. And Mark Leibler and Ron had an enduring friendship and shared values and approaches to Indigenous rights and public interest law in general...this continues today through the firm's ethos and in particular the great work done by Peter Seidel, with the firm's full support

I'd also like to take this opportunity on behalf of the family to congratulate tonight's winners who have dedicated so much time and love to their work to benefit people.

Both Kathy and Dean are inspiring, humble, generous and gracious Jewish Australians actively pursuing social justice for all in Australia and overseas 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.

Dad taught us a lot of things through his actions and words. We grew up watching him be involved with many social justice causes from Aboriginal land rights, to challenging anti-Semitism or racism in the press, 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.

We didn't actually 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 get on with it.

There was a lot of discussion around the kitchen table, as you would expect and two main themes emerged. These themes mesh well with Stand Up's philosophy of a Jewish organization standing up and taking responsibility for social justice in the community, in Australia and beyond.

Firstly, Ron'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 address injustice, as much as he could, that had been wreaked upon the Indigenous people of Australia – Ron explained this 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 Australia 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?”

He never lectured us on this. He was just very resolute in the view that as Jews who have survived and thrived in Australia, we especially cannot stand by and watch the effective genocide of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their culture. This really compelled Ron to take on cases like Mabo and Yorta Yorta, and spur the nation to search for a just settlement of these issues.

Secondly, Dad used to say ...try to “walk softly and carry a big stick” – of course this means do good deeds because it is right, not because you want recognition or glory – Ron never made a big deal of what he did – he wasn't one for pushing himself above the issue he was fighting for - but I think its deeper than that,

He was also saying do what you can with the skills and intelligence and resources YOU have and do it gracefully, within society's bounds – like the recipients tonight – he pursued change utilizing his legal skills, his always questioning mind and a belief that change was necessary and can come from within the law not outside of it

Sometimes you also have to be flexible and realistic and take

immediate action to right a wrong...sometimes he actually told us to walk loudly and carry a big stick!! For example, when my brother Steven was young, he was told to stand up to the racist boys at school in year seven who were taunting Asians, Greeks and Jews by punching first (as soon as they made the next racist taunt). But then it followed with a very firm instruction that Steven report himself to the Headmaster straightway to take his punishment for fighting – and strangely he wasn't the one suspended. The issue of racism was tackled by the school and discussed widely and it never happened again...

So sometimes we have got to push the rules a bit, and take concrete action when it's needed. Sometimes that is running a ten-year long court case, sometimes it is more direct application.

So these themes that we learned from Ron through his actions have resonated within me and our family inter generationally – take on the important issues, if you can, help people less fortunate than you with the skills you have, and help them use their own skills – not just in relation to Indigenous issues, but issues of injustice everywhere, from refugees and asylum seekers, to family violence and the environment.

I believe these values continue to resonate through the Jewish community through organizations such as Stand Up and the generosity of law firms such as Arnold Bloch Leibler and of course through this award and its recipients.

Jewish Australians need to stand up for those who cannot do so 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 Ron Castan and who have achieved excellence in their chosen humanitarian fields – congratulations again to both of them.

We are honored to be associated with them and hope they continue to walk softly carrying that big stick!

Thank you Gary and Lillian very much for having us here and again also to Peter, Mark and ABL for hosting the event and for all of you for continuing to support Stand Up.