

Philanthropist Profile

Susan Barton is about kids. She has six of her own, including two adoptees, and nine and a half grandkids. As a young Melbourne mum in the late seventies she fostered numerous kids, and over the last 19 years has provided housing, education, care, and life guidance for another 500 under the umbrella of the Lighthouse Foundation.

Not surprisingly it was a kid who motivated Barton to make a difference. At a hospital in Sri Lanka, the [then] young Barton nursed a severely malnourished baby for a number of hours. Later that day she found out the baby died. The child's death was her epiphany: "It just changed my life. All the things about owning my own home, driving the right car, all just diminished, and I knew I never again wanted to see a child die on my watch," she confides.

Today, the Lighthouse Foundation is making significant inroads into fulfilling Barton's calling through its work with homeless, disadvantaged and traumatised kids. Using a therapeutic model of care, the organisation sets up community-based homes for kids (Light Houses). While the official organisation vision is 'ending youth homelessness together', Susan's own philosophy is 'eradicating homelessness'. Her personal view is that it should never exist. Using the words of Nelson Mandela, Barton says a true indicator of a society's evolution is how it treats kids.

Behind both the Lighthouse Foundation and Barton is the philosophy that homelessness is not simply 'houselessness'. "Putting a roof over a kids' head provides shelter, but it doesn't heal young people who have been severely traumatised," Barton explains.

A CALL TO CARE

Susan Barton - Melburnian of the Year



Article by Peggy Hailstone
Photos courtesy
City of Melbourne
and Susan Barton

The homes we create are about giving these kids the opportunities to settle long-term and belong to groups and communities that really care about them," she explains.

With a tenth Melbourne home soon to be established, with 26 carers now employed by the Lighthouse Foundation, and with another 9 staff working in organisation support, Barton's achievements are significant. It's even more commendable when you realise she left school at Year 10, has no formal tertiary education, and is an introvert by nature. Looking back, she describes herself as 'very naive'. "I didn't know what I was doing," she chuckles. "And, I had no idea about boards or governance," she admits.

A major breakthrough in Barton's professionalisation came through Ian Kiernan of Clean Up Australia. In the early nineties, Kiernan's campaign drew 300,000 Aussies out of their homes and into their neighbourhoods. Barton realised that to reach out to kids en masse, she needed to harness and inspire the community to pick up the pieces of these kids' lives. Mobilising others, via volunteer work, through the community nature of the Light Houses, is at the heart of her work today.

When asked about the benefits of her Melburnian of the Year award Barton is quick to point out the value for the organisation and the kids. "It has assisted Lighthouse's branding and awareness ... it reinforces we are on the right track ... and the kids love it ... [because] they feel like they belong to something important." The downside, she says, is that the award acknowledges her, individually, rather than the team around her.



Giving homeless kids a future

The team around Barton is very important and relationship is writ large in her organisation and personal dealings. "It's not about going in and getting money. You actually have to really care about and love the people you are working with, that are going to financially support you," she says.

Important operational learnings have been bringing on people committed to the cause that have high levels of competence, leadership, and accountability and who wish to discharge their professional responsibilities more effectively. Extremely important to Barton is a positive attitude toward, and commitment to, implementation of the Therapeutic Family Model of Care -- from Board level down.

In recent times Barton has moved from Lighthouse CEO/Founder to recruiting a CEO. "There have been some huge learnings in this," she says openly, "and lots of pain on the way." The pain, which unfortunately involved some good people getting hurt, occurred as a result of misaligned values. It's something Barton doesn't ever care to repeat. Consequently her and several other non-profit CEO/Founders are putting together a book called *Handing Over*. While she agrees there's no one right way to hand over—there's so many variables in the non-profit organisation—the group feels a compendium documenting shared experiences could be nurturing for both incoming and outgoing parties.

In terms of achievements she is proud of, Barton immediately returns to the subject of kids. "I'm especially proud of my kids for hanging in with me because they had to fit in while I was a carer building the model." These days her kids and grandkids are her gauge. In her dealings with them she always reflects: Have I been unconditionally loving today. Did I respond in a loving way? Was I caught up in task rather than relationship?

Continued page 47...

There's little doubt that Barton is entrepreneurial, an idealist, and — by contemporary measurements — successful. There's also little doubt that along the way she has kept her head, remembered her roots, and graciously accepted her challenges and achievements.

"I am a 'believer' in humanity and in the goodness of people," she says, as we wind up our interview. "My kids and grandkids are the people that challenge me and continue my trajectory into actualisation. And they remind me I've got a long way to go."

To find out more about the Lighthouse Foundation go to their website:
www.lighthousefoundation.org.au



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