

EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE: THE IMPOSSIBLE JUST TAKES LONGER

Stephen Hagan*

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, wife of John F Kennedy and First Lady of the United States of America from 1961-63 once said that if you bungle raising your children, nothing else you do really matters.

I support those words from the former First Lady of the USA. The actions of the parents of Indigenous children, especially in their child rearing practices, will have serious ramifications for us all today, and in the years to come.

If lessons are not learnt, and damaged minds healed, then adverse inter-generational symptoms will continue to be played out in thousands of Indigenous homes around the nation regularly - if not daily - for many of our mob. The insidious diseases of alcoholism, drug dependency, domestic violence and paedophilia have no colour prejudice when afflicting victims.

If you wish to drink and take drugs to excess, and become consumed by uncontrollable jealousy, then you're a possible candidate for one of these diseases. While the symptoms are widespread, the cure is unfortunately something you can't just buy in a packet or bottle at your local pharmacy.

What I believe we need to do in addressing many of our social ills is to return to the past to find answers for the future. Take, for example, my father Jim Hagan, who most definitely wasn't born into a life of comfort.

His grandmother Trella was a Kullilli lady from far southwest Queensland whose memory of her early childhood, like her ancestors before her, was one of having no recollection of the European race. But in her later teenage years, Trella's lifestyle as she knew it changed irreversibly with the unannounced arrival of a traveling band of peculiar looking white people in unfamiliar clothing to her country.

Included in this horde of pale skinned invaders in search of instant riches and a new beginning was an oddly appealing fellow who became openly besotted by her - an Irishman named Joseph Hagan.

Joseph Hagan, a hard working entrepreneurial man who turned his hand to all challenging rural pursuits, continued his affair with the beautiful Trella on her traditional country and had several children with her before returning to southern New South Wales to be with his Irish wife and their 13 children.

When Trella and Joseph's son Albert reached working age he traveled within his vast traditional lands working from one cattle property to another before meeting and settling down with his wife Jessie, from the neighbouring Mardigany tribe, on the fringe of Cunnamulla, with a long term goal of providing a stable education base for their expanding family.

Albert emulated his Irish father, not in the procreation stakes, but as an entrepreneur running his own grocery store in a fringe camp populated by over 300 other displaced traditional owners who arrived in the 'Yumba' out of necessity rather than choice.

Try picturing an Indigenous man, in 1937 - 30 years before the referendum - setting up a grocery store with no electricity or running water selling non-perishables in direct opposition to the local chamber of commerce members 2km away; members who frowned on him as a 'dumb black', who saw him as financially inept, and who he thought wouldn't last a week in that commercially challenging line of business.

Albert, who successfully managed his flourishing business for many years, wanted more than anything else to be a

positive role model for his children and grandchildren. To that end he exceeded all expectations. Albert's youngest son Jim, my father, benefited from a good formal education before leaving school at 14 to be taken under the guiding arms of his mother's brother, as was the tradition, to learn the ways of the pastoral industry.

When dad was in his early 20s he met and later married my mother Jean Mitchell, a proud Kooma woman, on the Cunnamulla fringe camp where she lived with her parents. It is rather ironic that both dad and mum's only form of income at that time was from the minimum wage earned by working cattle or toiling as a domestic servant scrubbing dirty floors, pots and pans in the sprawling homesteads of white landlords who grew fatter in wealth and girth by the hour - on the land that was once owned by their forebears.

Mum, after marriage, gave up her domestic job to raise a family while dad continued his calling in the cattle industry. There was no welfare income to speak of and all able-bodied men and women, who chose to, enjoyed full time or casual work in the pastoral industry or in and around the nearby township.

In 1967 dad sought a personal loan from his station manager for a deposit on a parcel of land in the township. With good references from the mayor and president of the local branch of the Labor Party he was successful with an application for a housing loan from the Commonwealth Bank.

Dad was the first Aboriginal to design and build his own house in Cunnamulla. Following in the footsteps of his industrious father Albert, dad also demonstrated great leadership ability in setting up crucial Indigenous housing and legal services to provide better opportunities for his people to escape the appalling conditions experienced by them in that era.

Dad went from being a humble stockman to holding the highest public office for Indigenous Australians, when in 1980 he became the Chairman of the National Aboriginal Conference. In the same year he became the first Aboriginal to address the United Nations in Geneva when representing the Nookambah traditional owners in their fight to stop mining on their sacred lands in Western Australia.

So what are the lessons learnt today from my personal journey of discovery? Here are four issues that need to

be addressed: housing; alcohol and drug dependency; unemployment; and education.

Housing, as it was in my grandfather and father's era, is still the principal concern for Indigenous families. Sadly it is commonplace today for as many as 20 people from three generations of the same family to live in a three-bedroom house sharing one toilet and shower. A possible solution in the short term would be to prioritise funding for housing modelled around donga style accommodation (two to three air-conditioned bedrooms) which is offered and erected quickly on mining sites to house their hundreds of workers in remote areas. Land is often not an issue so if these were built on a minimum of five hectares per house per family it would allow for extensions or construction of new homes as funds become available.

Alcohol and drug dependency, although not a major problem in the past, is today out of control and is seen as the primary cause of all anti social behaviour and rampant violence that taints communities and creates dysfunction within family units. Alcohol and drug detoxification centres should be built just outside the communities, but within walking distance, and be fully staffed by professionals as well as appropriate community members to wean our affected mob off their addictions. With extensive community consultation an alcohol management plan should be developed to regulate hours and sales quantity of alcohol, selling low strength alcohol only or banning the sale of alcohol altogether. As a deterrent to the alcohol and drug runners their boats and vehicles should be confiscated or sold and the proceeds from crime used for identified community projects.

Unemployment has created an idle, passive group of people living within our communities who will sink further into the quagmire of despair of their own making the longer it is allowed to fester. We should double the old CDEP annual allocation and make work compulsory for all participants for a minimum of four days a week at the award rate (but this is only applicable to a possible incoming Labor government who can rename the project because the Howard Administration has rendered CDEP defunct). Training should be compulsory in plumbing, carpentry and horticulture and industries created to enhance community and personal wealth. This is taking on responsibility and building community capacity. It is developing essential skills to fix issues like plumbing or basic repairs and maintenance projects that have been left dangerously unattended in rented homes for too long. The

new pay scale will increase community member's personal income base which will make home ownership an affordable reality. Every five hectare property should have its own fruit and vegetable patch as well as a dozen chickens in a special enclosure to supplement the family's diet and lessen the burden on their grocery bills. I'd much rather see children collect eggs than empty beer bottles and cans.

Education is a major problem in most communities as most schools fail dismally to reach the national bench marks in years 3, 5 and 7 for numeracy and literacy. Teachers in discrete communities on a base salary should be remunerated if they achieve the bench marks with a sizeable boost to their pay. If they don't reach it then they shouldn't get any bonuses or they should be moved out of the community and replaced with more committed teachers. Teachers in consultation with community leaders and parents should identify the smarter children for scholarships in Years 11 and 12 and then onto tertiary studies.

If you think this is all beyond the good folk living in discrete communities, think of Albert Hagan. He started off with no government welfare to depend on, while trying to provide for a growing family in a tin humpy, with no running water or electricity, in an era where Indigenous people had no rights. Albert dared to think outside the box and commenced a legacy that was emulated on July 13 in Darwin when his son and grandson became the first father and son ever to win consecutive national NAIDOC awards in different categories for outstanding achievements as Person of the Year 2006 and Elder of the Year 2007.

To this day, whenever I read Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis' famous quote, I still reflect on the triumph of the effective child rearing practices passed on through the generations from my great-grandmother Trella. If you bungle raising your children, nothing else you do really matters very much.

Endnotes

- * Stephen Hagan is an Associate Lecturer (Preparatory Studies) in the Kumbari/Ngurpai Lag Higher Education Centre, University of Southern Queensland.