

# Senior Australian of the Year Valedictory Speech

This has been a year of wonders.

This year Australia reached a watershed, where this year state governments will use evidence based schemes to train teachers to teach literacy, and to help kids who have missed out. Not all State governments, and not all those in education accept the concept of 'evidence based'- yet. But this year, for the first time, I believe the tide has turned.

This year I saw communities along a river system challenge a mining company who wanted to build a cyanide processing plant on the top of the river system plant- and win.

In NSW government now compliance officers check that mining projects truly are obeying their conditions of approval, instead of those companies doing their own assessment.

This year I have offered 60,000 kids five dollars each if we can't find them the Magic Book- the book that is so fascinating they cant stop reading. Group of small boy have taken my email address and plotted to pretend to be 10 kids and get \$50. But not one kid has asked for the money, though thousands have written to tell me about the books they love.

With Harper Collins we ran 1,000 Books for 1,000 Kids, offering a books to kids who needed one, something I hope to continue all my life.

I have been the Ambassador for My Story Programme at Sydney Writers Festival, where young people from cultural diverse Western Sydney share their stories; have seen thousands of Tasmanian kids cheer at the idea that every single person can learn to read seen at Mona 24 Carrot Festival in Tasmanian; have watched the new Narawadaken Academy for Indigenous kids in remote NT start to soar.

This year I have seen drug crazed or suicidal youth given self esteem and future in schemes in the NT. I have seen WA Care schools that in their many different ways give literacy and hope. I have seen tens of thousands of people of goodwill across Australia who may get very very tired, but will not stop to create good.

I have seen Drisana, Juliette, Rosie win battle after battle.

You never know what seeds you plant will grow; if they will keep growing; who will take them and tend them. But there is one thing I have learned in my 62 years: keep planting seeds.

Never think: I am 62 and still have not achieved world peace, universal tolerance and justice, or even an Australia where every single child is given the chance to learn to read.

Change is never fast enough for any person of goodwill.

**A rain drop is just a rain drop. But together we are a flood. Together we have changed the world.**

When I was young few schools accepted Indigenous kids; women did not have equal pay; married women were barred from jobs; three kids in our street alone were crippled in one year from polio. Our nation has changed so much. Sometimes we need to stop, and look back, to realize just how far we have come.

Focus on what has been changed, and is being changed, and you will have the courage to keeping working for good in the future, too.

Each of us have their own tools for change. Mine is the power of story. So I will tell you a story now: a 14 year old girl who could not read; who found people of skill and kindness who helped her; who then picked up my book I am Juliet, read it, liked it, so read the Shakespearean original. And then she wrote to me: "The words were weird at first, she said, but then I heard the music."

It reminded me of another letter, about ten years ago, from a boy who, also at 14, had just managed to read his first book. It was Hitler's Daughter. His letter simply said 'What I have learned from this book is to be very wary of anyone who makes you angry.'

And he is right. Be very, very wary of anyone who tries to make you angry, because that is how they make you their slave.

Hated is contagious. Hatred is how Hitler convinced half of Europe to follow him. But kindness is contagious too. And in the long run, it is far more powerful. Bullets only ever win a short reprieve from war. Often that reprieve is necessary, so that our other weapons can work.

Our nation and our planet face many different kinds of battles now. Let us fight them with the tools of kindness. Let us fight with scientific research, and with determined voices to let that research be heard and used; with mentoring schemes; with determination every single day not to turn away from anyone in fear or need. Let us fight with literacy programs so that by reading books every child can learn to understand each other, and themselves, so every child has the knowledge and imagination to say: this is the future and I will work for it.

These last two years I have seen thousands of people of goodwill work – not tirelessly, for they are often very tired, but unstoppably, to give our children hope. There is no way I can thank them for the inspiration they have given me. Nor do they work for thanks. But working together, for others, gives the greatest joy and fulfillment you will find, even if at times progress seems slower than a snail through talcum powder.

Let us give our children role models who do not, will not despair, no matter how long it takes to change the world. And let us never surrender, no matter how tired we are, or how long it takes. Because with these weapons we shape the future of our planet.