

Council of Christians and Jews, Western Australia Inc.
Kristallnacht Commemoration 2024
Government House Ballroom
Sunday 10 November 2024

Mrs Darrilyn Dawson

Keynote Speech
Our Children, Their Village, Our Future

Kaya. Wanjoo – welcome, I see you.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet – the Whadjuk people of the Noongar Nation – and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

As our MC, Mr Trevor Creewel has already acknowledged our distinguished guests, I won't repeat them again, other than to say, I believe you're all distinguished, and on behalf of the Governor and I, welcome to our current home, Government House.

This is a place of great ceremonial and historical significance to both Aboriginal people, who have walked and gathered for thousands of years, and more recent arrivals from many nations who now call Western Australia home.

Government House is very special to all West Australians. It is a place on which we continue to meet to talk and walk together.

In some ways, the work of the Governor and I here, bears similarities to that of The Council of Christians and Jews Western Australia.

Reflecting and respectfully remembering and acknowledging our history, living in the present, and looking with optimism to the future, all the while taking into account lessons to be learnt from the past.

I must admit that preparing for this address has been quite difficult personally. Not because of the importance and the need to remember the atrocities of Kristallnacht, but because of the horrific event that occurred in Israel just over a year ago, and the subsequent ramifications that still continue on a daily basis.

This is the reality of why it is so important to not only remember Kristallnacht but to use these tragic recent events as a catalyst to educate our children in understanding the past, to ensure history does not repeat itself.

It appears to me that families from many countries who have suffered so much in the past, and who have found a 'safe place' in Australia, are now facing situations they believed were relegated to memories, memorials and history.

We need our children and grandchildren to have hope, to dream of a secure future, learn to discern the loud squeaky wheel minorities, and listen to wise considered leaders before acting.

We need to guide them, teach them and empower them to lead us all into a better future.

As we are all very aware, the existence of an entity such as The Council of Christians and Jews, is critical in fostering understanding and respect for our differences and indeed recognising and honouring our similarities.

In the current dynamic world events, I believe this is even more so. The spirit and intent of this organisation is even more relevant in the current geopolitical situation we find ourselves part of.

Given my long career in education the subject of my speech this afternoon should be no surprise to any of you.

Before I give my thoughts and experiences around our topic for today, *Our Children, Their Village, Our Future*, some of my own background will assist in you all understanding what made me the person I am, and why this issue is so important from my perspective, for our harmonious and stable future.

Born and raised on a farm in the Great Southern area of our state, from a long line of successful farming families, many would describe my childhood as idyllic. We had wide open spaces, pets, fresh homegrown food, close trusted family as neighbours and we never wanted for anything.

As a family we attended the local Bush Baptist church each Sunday afternoon. This meant mum had her permed hair in curlers all morning and we would not be allowed to have the car windows open, even on 40 + days — no air conditioning and a 10 minute drive that seemed like an eternity.

There were two reasons for this:

First, mum's strategically-placed and carefully chosen hat could blow off and she would then have 'hat hair' for the rest of the day and be totally embarrassed in front of the fashionistas at church;

Secondly, the billowing dust from the dry dirt road would envelop us all in a fine grey mist of dirt, especially if a car was approaching from the opposite direction.

My parents had an open home, and we often had visitors from diverse backgrounds and countries staying with us. They would be seasonal workers or those recovering from some trauma, using our farm, mum's cooking and the fresh country air as a retreat to reflect and reset.

I was always interested in their stories, even going as far as eavesdropping on the adult conversations late into the night behind a closed door! Thus, I became aware at an early age that not everyone lived a carefree life such as I did.

As the eldest of three girls and a much later addition of a brother, I guess you could say I was a tad bossy... I prefer to say determined!

After completing 5th year high school I had to leave my secure '*village*' to pursue a passion and career in primary education; teaching, leading and influencing many staff and students, mostly within dynamic and challenging communities. I loved seeing little faces light up when given an opportunity or experience that was beyond their wildest dreams... I still do.

What I have seen and heard over many decades in a diverse range of primary schools is both inspirational, and all too often, heartbreaking.

The Story of Jane

Jane... that's not her real name but I'll call her Jane...

Her father was one of the stolen generation, but he didn't tell his family, as he didn't want them to become bitter.

He wanted them to take opportunities they had available, which they did.

Not long before he died, he typed out his story and I was privileged to read the actual document...

The last time he saw his mother was when he was 4 years old. One day, without warning, he was scooped up and placed with many other 'half caste' Aboriginal children on the back of a truck.

He watched his mother disappear into the distance. She was crying and running behind the truck with outstretched arms, before she was hidden from view amidst the swirls of red dust as the truck gathered speed and disappeared forever.

As far as I am aware he never saw her again.

It's a heartbreaking story. I can't imagine how such an event would have made him anything other than bitter and full of hate.

This was not his story though... he chose to pass a positive legacy on to his family... his children and grandchildren.

His positive choices, as a result of trauma he experienced, made a huge difference to future generations without him even realising it. What a wonderful man.

Many of the stories from the young primary school children I remember had no 'village' and seemingly no bright future. All too often their 'village' was just normalised intergenerational trauma.

However, I found it remarkable that the resilience and 'Spark' to become a light and create a better future was also found within the spirit of so many, who actually had no idea what a bright future looked like or if it was even possible.

I recall a 13-year-old boy, a year 7 primary school student whose mother was a heroin addict. He was being monitored by 'welfare' as he called it.

At the end of the school year, after everyone had scampered, I was catching up on many admin tasks in my office when he materialised at the door and asked to see me.

He took the time, against all instincts, to return and say 'Thank you' for showing him what he could be. Without the support of our school, he believed he would have been in "juvie" without a plan or dream of breaking the abuse cycle he was born into.

I don't know what became of him, but I believe he had the strength of character to follow his dreams. I hope he did.

Ability of children to adapt

Children have the extraordinary ability to bounce back from life's most challenging moments. They can adapt and recover from difficulties and emerge from them stronger, especially if there is a significant positive influence in their lives, or even only one significant event that had a 'light bulb' impact.

Our children are our future

Children can be likened to a tree. As they grow, they'll develop many layers – influenced by the many experiences in their lives – but at the core will always be their family and home life which inevitably provides the basis for their values.

This is our responsibility... as caretakers... to ensure the influence we have on younger generations results in actions we would be proud of.

The 'Up' Documentary

Given my deep interest and passion in education, I have an ongoing curiosity relating social history to children and their development, including how early influences impact upon how they respond to events in their own lives.

Of particular interest to me was and still is the groundbreaking documentary series called 'Up'.

It began in 1964 and followed a diverse group of 7-year-olds, from different social backgrounds in the United Kingdom, through their life experiences, positive and negative, every 7 years, until they were 63.

It captured how their development, experiences and perspectives evolved, and were impacted by influences in their “*village*”.

These children were initially asked what they would be doing as adults and what fascinated me was that the majority of them had either tried, or as adults were still involved in activities they had espoused at the age of 7!

The series was produced by Michael Apted for over 60 years, who was acting upon the venerable Jesuit edict, "Give me a child until he is seven, and I will give you the man".

Historians now suggest this is even older, with the then provocative suggestion coming from Aristotle in 300BC. Coupled with what we know now with latest research and lived experiences, he was way ahead of his time.

The latest Up episode, ‘63 Up’, was released in 2019, and offered some profound insights into social class, family pressure and expectations, personal development and the human experience over time.

If you haven't already seen it – I highly recommend it.

Visit to Ngala, brain development

There may be people here today that have used the family and child services of Ngala – an organisation that uses the latest internal and external research and training, alongside community stories and experiences to develop and deliver support services to parents and children.

The Governor and I are proud to be their joint patrons.

During a visit to one of their centres, they were explaining the development of the human brain, and demonstrating how much it grows and the key stages of development.

At birth, the average baby's brain is about a quarter of the size of the average adult brain.

Incredibly, it doubles in size in the first year. It keeps growing to about 80% of adult size by age 3 and 90% – nearly full grown – by age 5.

The importance of making the most of these early years to optimise opportunities while the brain is so receptive is critical.

Importance of support from the “village”

A child's brain is both vulnerable and malleable. There is boundless potential waiting to be activated. Each is born with curiosity, imagination, and a desire to learn. But just like the seedlings of a tree, the environment around them greatly influences how they grow and ultimately shapes who and what they'll become as adults.

When children have positive role models in their “*village*”, they see kindness, integrity.... and resilience. They learn how to approach challenges and treat others with respect.

Each of us here has a role in building a nurturing, positive environment that inspires those we inadvertently influence, to respect both themselves and others. We all should model compassion, respect, hard work, and kindness in our actions – so our children can carry these qualities forward into adulthood and in turn pass these attributes on to their children.

When it comes to overcoming hardship, the compassion and support of the “*village*” makes the tough times more bearable. In the midst of the most challenging of situations, community or a “*supportive village*” is a lifeline. It has the potential for collective healing. Throughout history, change has often been driven by the actions of communities and individuals who are committed to a cause.

Story of two young women

Many years ago, I spoke at a small international gathering in Perth. Afterwards I met two young women who were there, a Palestinian and an Israeli who were working within their communities to foster relationships with young children from border townships. They were passionate about developing one to one friendships, and creating bonds that could transcend political and religious differences. And their focus was on young children. They faced many hurdles but they persisted, one friendship at a time.

They were doing what they could do to make a difference, and created opportunities for those fortunate enough to have been influenced by them.

Our Priority: Development of Young Leaders

When the Governor and I took up residency at Government House, we set about defining some priorities to guide our efforts during our time here.

Two of those are particularly relevant here today.

The first is Children’s Progress

We believe that all children, irrespective of their situation and social determinants, deserve access to support that assists in achieving their greatest potential in all aspects of life. We’re involved with and patrons of numerous organisations, such as Ngala, who are focused on early intervention strategies and research, leading to action and changes from pre-birth to 10 years of age.

As research shows, the earlier a child is exposed to and assisted through supportive interventions, the better the outcome for the child, family, and therefore wider community.

The second is the Development of Young Leaders.

In Western Australia, we're very good at celebrating the achievements of our brightest minds and our best sports people, but there's a 'missing middle' the kids who are doing great things within their "*villages*" but not receiving the recognition.

So we're aiming to recognise quiet achievers and role models, and motivate others to ignite the 'spark' within, and take the first steps towards making a difference.

We want our children to be well prepared to lead us successfully into the future, to be aware of the impact of the past in order to avoid the tragedies of history being repeated.

What can children achieve with the right foundations?

What can children achieve when they are exposed to and influenced by strong moral and ethical "*village*" behaviour?

Anything!

By simply leading by example, we can prepare our children to grow up with the natural inclination to avoid conflict *when possible* and to promote peace *where possible*.

In 2024 we are global citizens more than ever, thanks to global economic integration, international study and training opportunities. Combining this with the ability to work remotely, people travelling and working abroad has increased significantly.

We must prepare our children to live in diverse environments, with an understanding and respect for different cultures and religions, teaching them to uphold human rights and equality, and develop empathy and understanding of the struggles others might face.

Our children are the future. They will be the ones to lead the way to foster unity and understanding across cultures. But just like any effective strategic plan, children need a foundation to build upon – it's our responsibility to give them the tools they need to succeed.

We are in fact the architects and builders of our own future "*villages*", so let's all take seriously this responsibility to leave the world in good hands.

Our future depends upon it.

Thank you