



**Official launch of 13 Adolph Street, Richmond  
6 December 2007**

**Brian Burdekin, Patron**

Thanks very much Kane, and thank you to all of you for coming along to support what I believe is an enormously important organisation and indeed, I guess expanding on the metaphor that goes with Lighthouse - it's like one of those words in English you get so familiar with it, you sometimes forget what it stands for, and of course it stands for showing the way, it stands for a powerful light, it stands for showing light in the dark places – and, ladies and gentlemen, I began a national enquiry on homeless children and young people 20 years ago almost to today, and after two years of chairing that enquiry I concluded that we had between 20 and 30,000 homeless young people, many of whom were desperately in need of support.

The Prime Minister at the time didn't take too kindly to that and as I recall he had just promised that no Australian children would live in poverty by 1990.

As Kane has just reminded you, we still have a situation in our community where in spite of our enormously wealthy country (and I'll say a little bit about our responsibility as communities in a moment) we still have as best people can judge, 20 to 30,000 homeless children and young people at least.

What I saw 20 years ago was a situation in which many young people who had quite desperate needs and in some cases very disparate needs, were rejected or marginalised by the refuges and sometimes the shelters that we had set up, albeit sometimes through bureaucratic programs that were well-intentioned at the federal and state level, but in reality did simply not meet the needs of many, many thousands. In fact they were hopelessly inadequate and for many of our young people they simply didn't exist.

I think the thing that made me most angry – and I live on the edge of Kings Cross in Sydney – was to find that virtually every child (my young sister came home in tears one night) and virtually every under aged prostitute in that area, was or had been a ward of the state.

I remember going to our Federal Attorney General, who was a very good man, and saying 'Lionel, this is intolerable – as lawyers, as a community, how can we live in a situation where we are pretending that children who have been abandoned or the victims of violence or abuse in our community, who are made wards of the state, who are legally in our care and protection, are left by our societies not only homeless, but in some cases in desperate situations. And I've just come from a state, ladies and gentlemen, where the third baby has died in the last month, notwithstanding contacting our government service in that state because the family desperately needed help.

I'd like to tell you we've got a lot better at it, but we haven't if we don't understand that it's **our** problem. I remember having a very long argument with my staff, who are very dedicated people, about what we would call that report and we called it "Our Homeless Children" precisely because of what the Lighthouse symbolises. Because it is **our** responsibility – these are **our** fellow Australians and they deserve and need, in many cases urgently, **our** support.

The state, in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, had failed and to some extent our state is failing. I was delighted to fly back the night before last from China and find out that our new Prime Minister had sent all his ministers out to see refugees. But there is something fundamentally different about the Lighthouse, and that is that it provides care and affection and love and attention, which is what we found in this enquiry was what our young people needed.

One of the reasons I did that report was because our initial research showed that many people in our community, many adults, believed that these were bad kids and that if they didn't run away there wouldn't be a problem. As I said to our Government at the time, the problem for these young kids is that home ran away from them. Home simply was not a viable option. Home sometimes was characterised by domestic violence, by abuse and by all sorts of problems – but the state simply could not handle this adequately in terms of our bureaucratic responses and the vision that our programmers in Canberra and the various state capitals had.

And I remember again going to the government at the highest levels and saying "look" and after a poem by a homeless young person in Tasmania, the first words in this report, and I am sad to tell you that this is still the case if we don't respond in the way that Lighthouse does, were "The fact is that there are homeless children and young people dying in Australia, some from suicide, others simply from neglect."

That's not something our nation can ignore, and I thought when I got back to Sydney 36 hours ago that perhaps things were better. I am delighted to see the political commitment at the highest level, but we have to understand until we have programs like this, until we have the commitment that all of you here tonight represent, we will not be offering these young people what they deserve, in some cases these children what they deserve, and that is the sort of care, affection, love and attention that all young people in our community need, a supportive family environment.

I am not going to talk about the philosophy of Lighthouse, pretty well all of you know what that is, but a supportive family environment, not in a state institution – state institutions don't deliver that – but in a supportive community environment. And I believe that is part of the genius of the vision that Susan originally had. Not only that we are supporting and helping these young people, but as we do, they're helping our community. And I think the importance of that philosophy, that approach can't be over-emphasised, because we have to challenge our community, we have to engage our community, we have to be part of acknowledging that it's our problem. And in doing so, we not only support the young people, I believe we enrich our community in a way which your presence here tonight demonstrates more graphically than I can say.

And I want to pay a special tribute tonight to those of you who serve on the Lighthouse Community Committees, because you not only support these young people, you contribute, I believe, very sincerely to the communities in which we all live. You do our nation proud and notwithstanding our wealth, that is something that we still desperately need.

You know, in the last two or three months, because of the work I now do, I've been in China, Thailand, Mongolia, India, Jordan, the Middle East and there are millions of children – millions – Deborra-lee referred to this – who are homeless, abused and in some cases destitute.

Two of our states alone, just think about this – two of our states alone, Western Australia and Queensland – generate more wealth than 70 of the poorest countries in the world. We have no excuse as a nation. I used to go to governments and ministers and chief ministers and premiers sometimes, and they would say “Oh, we can't afford it”. Whenever a politician tells you they can't afford something, it means it's not at the top of their list of priorities and while I applaud Lighthouse and I applaud the involvement of our community, I sincerely believe that as Australians we should never let up conveying the message to our politicians that they need to do more to understand this issue and to understand what is an effective response to this issue.

When we did that report I met leading figures in our community who said – “look, we've got an abandoned railway station – we could put them in there” – simply no comprehension that just providing a roof and shelter wasn't an appropriate response to this very, very challenging issue.

In Sydney, we were bringing children and young people who were homeless from Wollongong and Newcastle and sticking them in refuges in Kings Cross where the drug dealers were shoving drugs under the door in little plastic packets. And I remember saying to the political authorities in that state, “What are you doing? Why are you bringing children from their communities where we could provide them with support?” “Oh well, because we've got a refuge in Kings Cross.” I mean, you cannot believe the unimaginable stupidity of some of the policies that have been dreamed up, in some cases by people like me who'd had the privilege of going to University and been studying for years!

Finally I want to touch on something that is very, very important to this project that I think you are all entitled to know and it's already been mentioned. I am very pleased that some of the people I met many, many years ago, when I was chairing that Enquiry, are here tonight – it's enormously encouraging to me. It's inspiring to see people who are still hanging in there 15 or 20 years later, because I know, I've seen it in community groups, how hard it is to stay committed, what the burn-out rate is, and believe me ladies and gentlemen, in this area, in very many community based organisations, it's very high.

But when we – Ulrike Schuermann is here tonight – she was the executive director of our foundation for disadvantaged young people when I had the privilege to be the Chair - when we gave the initial grant to Lighthouse, it must be 15 years ago, or thereabouts, part of that grant, a very significant part, was for an independent evaluation – and guess what, as Kane said, that evaluation and every evaluation that I am aware of that has been done since, has demonstrated, in empirical terms, because this is what our politicians and bureaucrats want to know about it, but it's what we as a community deserve to know too about this very important vision that Susan had. These empirically based evaluations, not based on what I think or you think, or Susan's vision and commitment to young people, but they demonstrate that this kind of service is not only enormously worthwhile, it makes an enormous contribution to our community.

So I want to thank all of you, in particular I want to thank Victor Smorgon; I want to thank John Mirabito. I'm not going to try and name everybody, but philanthropy I believe – that

sort of generosity of spirit – it doesn't matter that we've had 15 or 16 years of straight economic growth and enormous surpluses, what we need is a generosity of spirit towards each other and in particular to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged and sometimes marginalised and alienated young people in our community. And so I thank you very sincerely Victor and John. I think that sort of generosity epitomises the sort of support that Susan and her board and her colleagues are entitled to.

And I thank the many other donors who are here tonight. My father was a clergyman - my favourite parable, or perhaps his – which is why it became mine - was the one about the 'widow's mite'; some of us might have a lot, some of us might have a little, some of us might contribute in cash, some of us might contribute in kind – but when you look around this room, and I have the privilege of knowing many of you personally, what you see among the carers, among the patrons, among the donors, is the sort of support that can really give an effective result to the sort of vision and commitment that Susan originally had.

So thank you very much, all of you, most sincerely. I believe this organisation is a Lighthouse in our community. I know it's being looked at in other states and I heard what Kane said – I believe that every child and young person in Australia who doesn't have a loving, caring family is entitled to this sort of support and opportunity and I thank you very much for whatever kind of support you're giving. Thank you.