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Tribute for Dr Joe Tucci

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I first met Joe in 1987, when we were first-year social work students on placement together at the Austin Hospital in Heidelberg. He was studying at Monash University whilst I was at Melbourne University. He had previously graduated with Honours in Psychology (1986) but became more interested in the difference that could be made through a social work lens, graduating with honours in Social Work in 1988.

We fast became the very best of lifelong friends, sharing our personal and professional lives every step of the way. In 1989, we began our careers together in Child Protection in Melbourne and, for the last 28 years, we worked to grow the Australian Childhood Foundation, with Joe as CEO and myself as his Deputy. It was a privilege to work alongside him and a partnership I deeply miss.

Over Joe's career, he was recognised as an accomplished practitioner–researcher and thought leader with significant experience in child protection and working therapeutically with children and families. From the very beginning, Joe knew what his career would be about – he held a deep commitment to children's

rights and, in particular, their right to be safe and protected. He trained extensively in family and narrative therapies and was a Clinical Member of the Victorian Association of Family Therapists.

In 1993, he was awarded a Creswick Fellowship to work with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in the United Kingdom and study how emotional abuse was conceptualised across Europe and the UK. In 2005, he completed his PhD on the emotional abuse of children and young people, an area that at the time was little studied.

Joe was a visionary leader who drew like-minded people around him. He was one of Australia's leading child rights advocates. He held a clarity of vision for what children deserved, and an unwavering determination to realise that vision – for children to be safe, to be loved, to be respected, to belong and to be happy. He was also a very humble man who was deeply compassionate, kind and gentle.

Dr Joe Tucci



He never shied away from standing in the shoes of children and seeing the world through their eyes – no matter how painful their world was. This grounded Joe in everything he did. He was never afraid to take up an unpopular position or advocate, sometimes as a lone voice, for the rights of children. Joe's advocacy for children through his media commentary, journal articles and publications is widely recognised. He insisted that children's rights be upheld. He shone a spotlight on the ways in which systems designed to protect and support children were failing and demanded the change that children deserved from their community and all levels of government. He was a holder of hope for children that change for the better was always possible.

Joe once said that, in listening to children, we learn something about ourselves. He valued the wisdom of children and always made space for them to have a voice. Their knowledge shaped and influenced what he did.

Apart from his beloved family, leading the Australian Childhood Foundation (the Foundation) was his proudest achievement. Under his inspirational leadership, the Foundation grew from a small not-for-profit organisation in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne to a national organisation with a strong national and international reputation for practice innovation and knowledge translation. More than 20 years ago, Joe stewarded the Foundation to become a national leader in the introduction of trauma knowledge into its own work and that of other organisations and systems.

The Foundation is the embodiment of all that Joe wanted for every child. He empowered staff and managers to be brave – to lead, not follow; to be creative and innovative; to hold compassion; to not lose sight of the world from a child's perspective; to embrace the change that children need us to fight for; and to not give up. He knew that children needed adults to stand up for them and be in their corner.

Joe's influence across the many sectors that intersected with the rights, safety and wellbeing of children was highly sought after and valued. He participated on countless federal and state-based government and sector advisory councils and committees, including as Co-Chairperson of the Clinical Reference Group for Children who Engage in Harmful Sexual Behaviour for the National Office of Child Safety and as a member of the former Australian Council for Children and Parenting.

Joe was committed to creating knowledge in an effort to improve system and service design, practice and efforts to prevent child abuse. In partnership with Chris Goddard, Joe established Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia (CAPRA) at Monash University, one of the country's earliest research centres into child protection. In 2008, with CAPRA and Access Economics, Joe co-authored the first ever report into the economic cost of child abuse in Australia.

In 2018, he supported the implementation of the Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care, an intermediary attempt to improve children's experience of out-of-home care. Last year he spearheaded the establishment of an inaugural Research Chair into Out of Home Care in partnership with Southern Cross University. Joe also helped to establish, and was the inaugural Chair of, the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse (National Centre) a key recommendation out of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. His vision for the National Centre was filled with hope and optimism for the change it could create in the lives of those with lived and living experience of child sexual abuse.

Joe presented extensively at national and international conferences on child abuse, violence and child trauma. In October 2023, he was invited to speak at the United Nations in New York about how we could build a more trauma-informed world.

Joe published widely in academic journals, research reports and book chapters. Together, we published two books. Our most recent book, released just before he died, was one that Joe was particularly excited about. It seeks to achieve a paradigm shift away from trauma-informed towards trauma-transformative ways of thinking (Tucci et al., 2024). Joe strongly believed in the need to keep evolving our understandings about trauma and how it aids the conceptualisation of children's needs in the context of abuse, violence and trauma. Whilst CEO for many years, practice development and the evolution of ideas remained core to Joe's work.

Joe was widely respected by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations, and regularly forged collaborations that supported the achievement of their goals for their children and families. This work took him to all parts of urban, regional and remote Australia.

There was much that Joe still wanted to do in life, and there was so much that he was looking forward to.

We have lost a guiding light in the field. His loss has been felt both nationally and internationally, as his contribution to the fields of children's rights, child protection and healing childhood trauma has been recognised.

Joe leaves behind a legacy about which he and all of us can be very proud. The Foundation will continue to honour this legacy. Joe's compassion, courage and commitment to children will live on in everything we will continue to do.

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