

TAKING ON THE FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

This is the text of an address given by Mrs. Gorman at a luncheon of the Children's Bureau of Australia on Tuesday 23rd October, 1984.

Mavis was fifteen years old when she first came into contact with the welfare department. The year was 1986. Mavis' mother had been placed in a foster home through a church agency when she was six and had always warned Mavis about the 'welfare'. But Mavis herself had only intermittent contact with her mother, since her mother's boyfriend had sexually assaulted her. It was then she decided to take her chances in the numerous youth refuges around the inner city and that is how she met the welfare offer she came to know and hate so well.

The five years that followed her fifteenth year were a nightmare. But gradually things started to change for the better around 1991. Now in 1997, she is twenty-seven years old and has two children by two different fathers. Feeling desperately lonely one day, she rang a telephone number she saw advertised and she came again into contact with the welfare. But she found things had changed dramatically since her last encounter with authority.

To begin with, no-one charged her with anything, although she expected to be charged with being an abusive mother, because that is how she felt. That is exactly why she had rung the welfare number at the front of the telephone book. After her contact she was encouraged to enroll at a family learning centre where she found a very different environment to the one she expected. One day she got sick. Someone picked up the children to look after them and someone else came to check on her during the day.

Her first 'course' at the family learning centre was a course in grooming. She was interested in her appearance but hadn't had much of an opportunity to pay attention to it. Bit by bit she became more interested in the other opportunities available at the centre. She started to do a computer skills course and she found that the computer would talk back to her and correct her grammar. It also suggested other ways to pronounce words which would be easier for the computer to understand. And she was able to talk to the computer and see her words on the screen. She found that a very important and exciting learning experience.

Through the computer and through the network to which it was attached, she was able to communicate with other people around Australia and she started to correspond with someone in America with similar interests to her own. She was thinking seriously of joining the International

University and doing a degree course there. It was an open university and there were many courses on television and radio that she could do. She was able to start at her own level and progress slowly through the different courses. There were also tutors available at the centre to help her with this work.

As a matter of fact, that is how I came into contact with Mavis. I had just finished my PhD at the International Open University. By this time I was getting a little long in the tooth but I had decided to use my so-called retirement years productively and I felt I had still a great deal to offer. I became Mavis' tutor.

The interesting thing for me was that my PhD has been on the documentation of the miracle that had taken place for children and families in Australia. The book I was

about to publish, based on my PhD thesis, was to be called **Miracle Australia**.

So what had I found when I did my research into Miracle Australia? And how had this wonderful transformation in services for families and children come about?

To begin with, I would have to go back to 1985 to explain its beginnings when the big economic crash occurred. That was when a lot of things that had been put on the back burner in Australia had to be rethought. Employment, the future of work, the number of people on welfare, all required a rethinking of attitudes and beliefs that had long been the foundation of society.

Over the next two years, Australia went through a very turbulent period and the results of that period was the election of a



good many women to Parliament and some of them had social welfare or social work qualifications. Indeed, probably the single most important thing that had happened during that period was the election of a female Prime Minister who also had a social work degree. This woman was not like Margaret Thatcher or Keneally's Big Betty, but she was a woman who had brought up children of her own and believed very strongly that all people in the community should benefit from the riches of society, particularly children.

So she had pushed very hard for a national rethink about human services, and she had the support of many women in the State and Federal Parliaments as well. Of course there were a number of supportive men who had not been able to have their own policies or ideas implemented over the years and they fell in enthusiastically behind her. One of the first things which occurred was a welfare summit with a particular focus on children.

One of the remarkable things about the summit was that the welfare industry decided to drop their divisive ideological differences and pull together and they took on a lot of the tasks burden of implementing the new policies. The first thing that happened was that everybody agreed on a philosophical statement. It was the translation of that philosophical statement into practice, which was probably the single most important change Mavis noticed in the welfare system.

The statement of the rights of the child had gone: that was seen as too negative and confrontational, and a more advanced idea about the child was adopted. This was the idea that society had a contractual obligation to the child by virtue of their birth.

The contract basically revolved around the right to be heard. Children who could not articulate what they felt were, of course, catered for. Through the seventies and eighties a body of knowledge about child behaviour had been assembled indicating ways children had of expressing themselves through their bodies and their emotional development. If a child was not doing well, was not gaining weight, was pining, was not walking early enough or was lagging behind in emotional development, it was recognised that something was wrong and remedial action might need to be taken at an early, rather than a too late, stage. The child was therefore heard through careful observation in that instance.

Another example of listening to children came through the behaviour of runaway children. Running away reached epidemic proportions during the 70s and 80s. If a girl, for example, ran away from home in the past, she was charged with being an absconder or exposure to moral danger and she was either put into an institution or sent back home. But the research indicated that many young girls who ran away from home did so because they were being sexually abused at home

and nobody listened to what they were saying, nobody had wanted to listen to what they were saying. So now at last with the big chance, we were prepared to face the awful truth about some of the things children were 'saying' about families and about society.

The change also meant that engineers and other people involved in designing the built environment had the responsibility to build that environment so that it was safe for children. That was part of the contract. The environment had to be conducive to children's survival, healthy growth and development.

Once things were measured against this contract many things started to change. A whole education programme was developed. Amongst which were courses in negotiating skills themselves so they could sort out the conflicts that arose between the partners in this contract.

Parents were also helped to understand what was going on in the child's life. Since many of them didn't have anything else to do, as unemployment was high and there weren't enough jobs to go around, they were helped to take part in the whole educational process. Of course the research had shown that children do much better when the parents are involved in the process (the Suzuki method of teaching children was taken into main stream thinking).

That is why when Mavis went to the family learning centre the children were in a place very close by. She was able to drop in on them at any time, she was able to take part in what they were doing: to read to them, to have them read to her. There was no restriction as to the time she could come, if the children wanted to come and sit on her knee while she spoke to the computer, that was okay too. So there was a great deal of interchange between parents and children and there was help and advice available when people needed it. Services were not divided off into health, welfare and education.

This was another part of the miracle. The three Government departments that had administered policies for children were able to bury their differences and form a more integrated system. This had come about largely because services had been localised and administration and power had also been localised, local government had been drawn into the system, heavy central bureaucracy didn't administer anything any more. Bureaucracy was seen to be antithetical to the whole idea of human services and, for that reason, large schools were also done away with at this time. Bureaucratic services were seen to be totally at odds with the new philosophy for children's growth and development.

Of course, the learning environment had become much richer. Learning materials, information, computers had made all that possible and schools as we knew them in 1984 no longer existed.

Big institutions for children were

closed down and their places taken by quite exciting and imaginative community services. The whole idea of institutionalisation was a thing of the past and seen as being antithetical to the development of the emotional needs of people.

Regional infrastructures had been set up to support this whole system. Many of the family learning centres were the old schools of the past which had been converted into buildings which housed this wonderful learning program. Libraries and other public places carried the theme through that had been developed in the family learning centre. So their integrated holistic thinking pervaded the planning.

Along with this, a very large media program had been devised and the ABC and commercial television stations had enthusiastically joined in the whole process of educating people and selling them a whole new group of notions about children, services, the aims and goals of society. A lot of this was originally made possible because of the work of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and their war against poverty. They had created a political environment in which these notions could flower and flourish.

Another thing that affected the climate of opinion was the Bicentennial year in 1988 and in particular the Bicentennial Futures Project which created a great discussion about these and similar issues and set goals for the future of a number of different policy areas. One of the things that the media program effectively did was to recruit a whole new group of people to take part in services and service delivery. These were mature women and mature men who had brought up children themselves and who wanted to put meaning back into their lives. They also branched into care of the aged. Many of these people were middle aged but had a great deal to offer in experience and compassionate understanding. They attended new human development courses and made excellent workers.

There was massive retraining of professionals to accommodate this whole new system and perspective. Industry and the Public Service were encouraged to change their approach through these training systems. Generally the system was accommodating itself well to this new approach. Seriously disturbed children were treated in supportive settings with workers and parents involved. A new commitment from social workers and psychiatrists emerged. To abandon a family half way through a program unless there were serious reasons for doing so, was a thing of the past. Drugs were used rarely and only in exceptional circumstances. Play therapy, drama therapy and similar techniques had replaced the old primitive services which were available to the emotionally disturbed. There were very good staff ratios and parents and children were involved in the residential programs together.

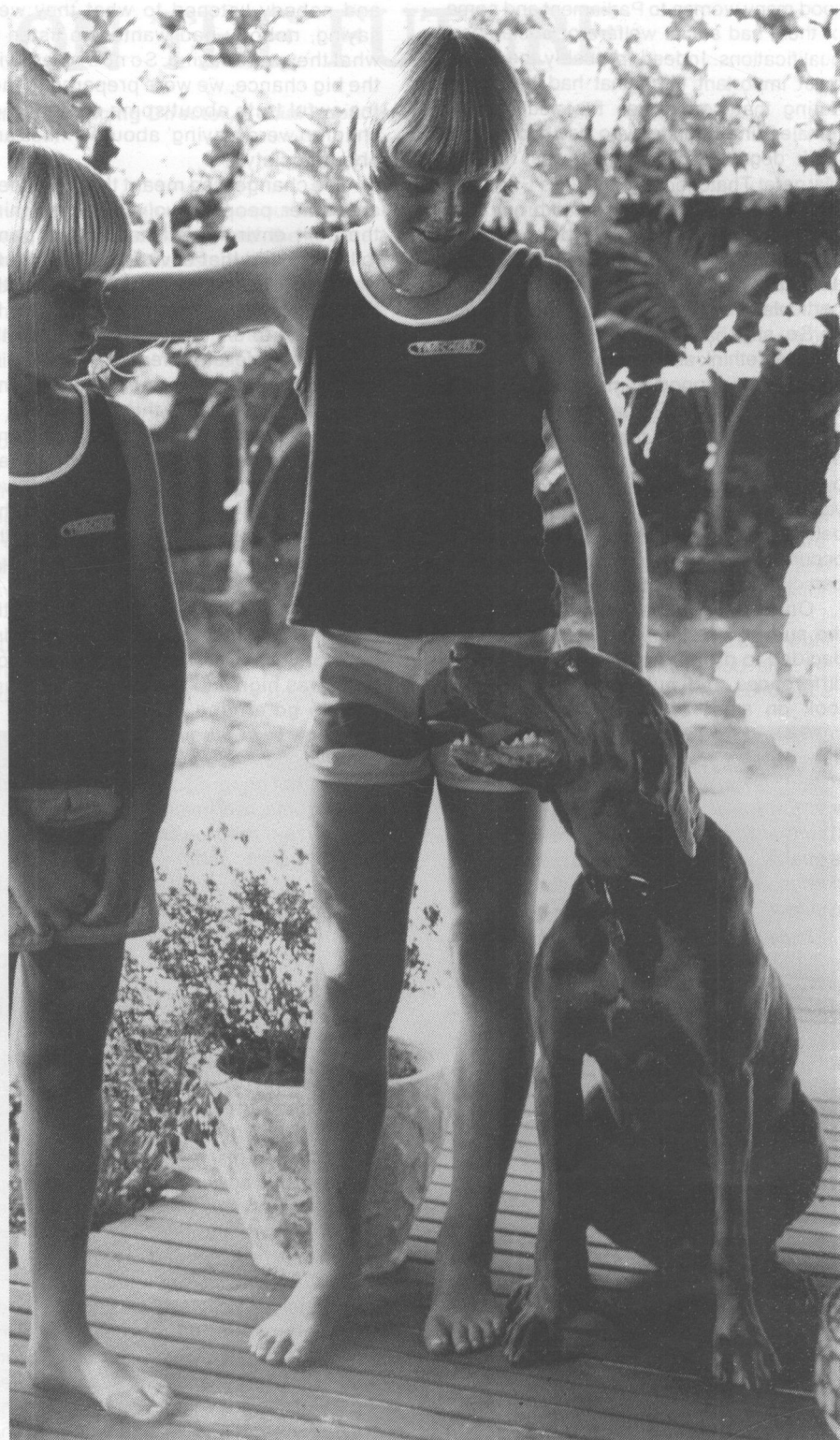
There was no such thing any more as a court where children came and were charged. The whole legal profession also had to be retrained and their approach had to be rethought. In fact, they were given child development courses and they started to understand the dimensions that they were dealing with. Children's cases were dealt with not in a court room setting but much more informal settings and children in trouble were given a proper say about what they wanted and what their experience was.

As you know, NSW dragged behind in the process I've been describing, but caught up suddenly in the early '90s. Victoria and South Australia led the field, Western Australia did quite well and Queensland came good after the complete change in Administration after Joh Bjelke Petersen's death. Tasmania was declared a national and international tourist treasure after 1990s if you recall, and only tourist people lived there and it was administered by Victoria. Of course, it's the great holiday place for children and many of our excellent national children's camps are situated there.

The national goal now is "No Child at Risk" by the year 2,000 and the miracle is that reaching this goal, for all of us here today, looks like becoming a reality. All of you know about these changes and have been part of making it happen but it is always worth looking back to see how far we've come. So just before I came to talk to you today, I found a quotation from the Speak Out Project book which was a project we ran in 1979 during International Year of the Child. This was one of the first attempts at allowing children to speak for themselves — particularly young people in residential care. One child said this:

"One Social Worker — we only knew him once — he was supposed to come there every Tuesday night and have these meetings with us and we were supposed to write down all these personal things, you know — and he said — 'It's alright — I won't read it out or anything' . . . and we felt really great you know — 'cause he never came after that and here he is with all our personal references and we never see him again, you know."

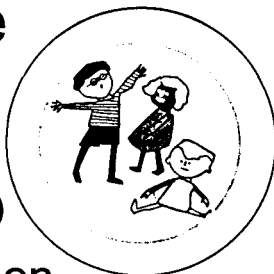
I put it to you under our contract with children and since Miracle Australia this could never happen now could it?



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