

## BEST PRACTICE FOR A CAUSE

A small organisation with a huge charter took out the top charity gong.

story by Margaret Harlow

The Givewell Best Practice Not-for-profit Award is in its fourth year. The award was inaugurated in 2003 to recognise an organisation that exemplified 'best practice' in the not-for-profit sector, 2004 saw the addition of a Givewell award for Best Community Project. The high quality of the short-listed candidates for this year's awards resulted in a difficult, extended decision-making process, but we finally managed to agree on two outstanding winners.

The Best Practice Not-for-Profit Award recognises an organisation that not only focusses on a good cause, but also exemplifies 'best practice' in the not-for-profit sector. With donors now expecting charities to demonstrate good governance and credentials, the winning organisation needed to be, at a minimum, transparent, accountable and well run.

Using these criteria, we undertook a detailed search of the 2,000 plus charities on the Givewell Research Centre database and identified 152 candidates. These were further scrutinised to identify those charities who were dealing with root causes and addressing big problems across a range of social capital dimensions, including: awareness raising; developing networks; finding solutions; and providing support.

The 5 finalists were: Brotherhood of St. Laurence, which has delivered numerous cutting edge social programs to disadvantaged members of the community in Victoria; Novita Children's Services, a South Australian disability services organisation which has virtually reinvented itself to improve its governance and services; Rainforest Rescue, who provide volunteer opportunities for people to save our rainforests for current and future generations; SANE Australia, a small organisation which has, through extensive collaboration, developed widespread community support and awareness of mental illness; and Vision Australia, the first truly national agency serving the needs of the blind and vision-impaired community

The finalists then went through Givewell's 'Safe Hands' due diligence process, which comprises thorough internet searches, a comprehensive review of the organisation's latest annual report, an interview with its CEO and referee checks. This year's winner was SANE Australia (Schizophrenic Australia Foundation).

### An awareness of mental illness

One in five people will experience some form of mental



illness at some time in their lives. SANE Australia's mission is to work for a better life for people affected by mental illness, through education, applied research and campaigning for improved services and community attitudes. CEO Barbara Hocking says that one of the most important aspects of the organisation is that being non-political and non-religious, SANE is totally independent, while its project driven approach allows it to be 'alert and fit as to what's going on'.

SANE Australia provided clear evidence of meeting the basic criteria of transparency, accountability and good management. Its 2006 annual report has already been published and is available by request – tellingly, rather than being a glossy affair consuming valuable resources, it uses a basic layout to present their Director's Report and Financial Statements in appropriate detail. The report shows significant revenue growth of 34%, which Hocking says is 'largely due to SANE's improved submission writing skills'. She also believes that this growth can be attributed to the 'better recognition of mental illness as an issue right across the board, meaning that people are more likely to fund our work'.

SANE has a solid and well-rounded funding base, with fundraising activities being the largest source of revenue (37%). It has also managed to keep fundraising costs very low, indeed they dropped to 5% of gross fundraising revenue in 2006 from 13% in 2005. Also of note is the fact that investment income accounts for 32% of revenue, something that is rare in the Australian charitable sector. Naturally, it receives a proportionately smaller amount of money (22%) from government, with Hocking describing this government contribution as being 'very important' as it 'adds to their credibility as an organisation'. In addition, SANE works in partnership with a wide range of groups, including community and academic organisations, national and international bodies, corporations and philanthropic trusts. With a

gross revenue of only \$1.6m, Hocking states that 'being small, we are seeking a range of partnerships in the mental health, health/employment and general areas' and that SANE 'works laterally' with their partners to 'work with the community to better understand mental illness'.

### Small beginnings with big plans

SANE began in 1985 as Schizophrenia Australia, becoming the Schizophrenia Australia Foundation in 1986, to work as a national body to support those affected by schizophrenia. In 1996 the foundation began using the business name SANE Australia to better reflect the broadening scope of SANE's work to embrace all mental illnesses and not just schizophrenia. The organisation has also won a number of other awards, such as the Best Australian Community Website for 2006 in the inaugural NetGuide Web Awards and the Gold Award for Best Mental Health Promotion Program in 2001 for achievement in fighting stigma.

The highly successful StigmaWatch program is part of the SANE Media Centre, monitoring media portrayals of mental illness and suicide to determine whether they are accurate and respectful. It has also launched a dramatic new advertising campaign that aims to connect people concerned about mental illness with the help they need: Mental illness can be confusing. Getting help isn't. 1800 18 SANE.

The national freecall Helpline and Helpline Online are the only helplines in Australia that provide information and referral services for people concerned about or affected by mental illness. The ASX-Reuters Charity Foundation has provided financial support for these helplines for the past three years, with Reuters' Fiona McDonald describing their selection process as involving 'a lot of charities seeking support, which we have to knock back unless they continue to meet our criteria. The fact that SANE have continued to stay on our list means that they're doing great work'. She goes on to describe Hocking as being 'very compelling and passionate about her organisation, especially since she is dealing with a particularly difficult area'.

Helpline staff receive regular training, support and de-briefing with Hocking noting that due to the small staff numbers, SANE can 'approach staff training and development on an individual basis', allowing for flexibility and personal interests to keep staff engaged. Hocking describes her staff as having energy and an interest in 'making a difference' in mental health leading to a low staff turnover and better service delivery. Sandra Whitty from The William Buckland Foundation reiterates this, describing SANE as a 'very

harmonious organisation' whose CEO has 'real vision and such integrity'. She explains that her relationship with Hocking is a not a personal one, and that Hocking is a 'highly respected CEO in the not-for-profit sector', which is all the more significant as she believes that there is a 'shortage of good not-for-profit CEOs out there'.

The same integrity and commitment can be found on SANE's Board of Directors - Hocking describes the board as being 'highly involved in shaping the overall direction of the organisation', yet 'refreshingly hands-off' in their approach. The board's diverse make-up, it is 50% female and includes people living with mental illness, provides SANE with a broad range of skills. Hocking describes the board as 'dynamic - driven by the needs and wishes of people living with mental illness'. Utilising the skills of a board member with expertise in law and governance of not-for-profits, SANE's constitution is now being used as a model for other not-for-profits.

The William Buckland Foundation has funded SANE on several occasions, and Whitty's personal view is that they are 'one of the most ethical not-for-profit organisations in Victoria'. In the past, the Foundation has funded SANE to produce a series of pamphlets on mental illness which she said were 'simple and effective, not big and glossy'. The pamphlet's success was demonstrated when they reached beyond their target audience to the broader community and were also 'extremely helpful for people with low literacy levels and indigenous communities'.

SANE, with further funding from the Foundation, is currently undertaking a review of its 'whole process'. Whitty says SANE are 'always keen on external evaluation - they want to make sure they are providing the best service and that there are no gaps'. Whitty sums up the organisation's work by saying 'I truly respect SANE; they are solid and sound and don't try to bite off more than they can chew, and they do this with a great deal of integrity'. □

### Givewell Charity Awards Past Winners

2003	NFP Technical Aid to the Disabled NSW
2004	NFP Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation Project Deadly Treadlies, Alice Springs Youth Accommodation & Support Services
2005	NFP Save the Children Australia Project Mutual Friends, RSPCA Qld
2006	NFP SANE Australia Project First Language Reading Course, Australian Literacy & Numeracy Foundation

# TALKING ABOUT COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Saving indigenous languages from extinction also gives birth to literacy skills.

story by Niall Mulligan



The basic criteria for the 2006 Givewell Best Community Project Award were reasonably straightforward. The project needed to focus on a major social problem, to provide an innovative, imaginative, practical solution, and to have clear, attainable outcomes.

The winner, the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation's First Language Reading Course, (ALNF) imaginatively addresses the literacy problems which can occur in remote indigenous communities. At the same time this project is helping to preserve ancient indigenous languages whose continued existence is under threat.

The first requirement was the conversion of the oral Waramungu language into phonetically based reading course-work. Working with the local elders, ALNF devised a phonemic code-marking alphabet for the language. Once that was completed, the next step was the construction of first language literacy teaching materials.

Mary-Ruth Mendel, a Sydney speech pathologist, played a key role in the program design: 'The development of pre-literacy skills in a person's first language is an essential component in building the neurological pathways that lead to effective literacy skills.'

With the help of indigenous tutors, often parents or volunteer teacher aides, the course's unique teaching materials are used at Tennant Creek High School. With 74% indigenous students the school provides a basis to assess the effectiveness of the scheme's methodology. Meg Iles, principal of Tennant Creek High School, said

the project had already made a significant difference to the school's academic life.

'The program has given indigenous students an understanding that the school is genuinely about and for them.

'Speaking and working academically in their own language has given them a sense of pride and engagement, this pride is reflected in our 86% attendance record for indigenous students,' she says.

The next phase of the project will apply phonemic awareness principles to other indigenous languages. Work has already begun on building phonetic alphabets for the Wambaya and Warrimirri languages.

Funding is via the **Coca-Cola Amatil** Foundation to the tune of \$300,000. Alec Wagstaff, Director of Corporate Affairs, explained that they were drawn to the project by ALNF's 'exceptional passion, innovativeness and lack of fancy overheads.'

The ALNF had previously worked with the Foundation on the literacy programs that were a requirement of J K Rowling's licensing of the Harry Potter image rights to Coca-Cola. □

## Other Finalists

St Lucy's School, *Grey to Play* playground project took a dull, lifeless space and transformed it into a colourful, engaging and educationally structured environment

The new playground allows St Lucy's teachers and volunteers to develop the students' imaginations while simultaneously providing them simulated real world experience. St Lucy's raised more than \$400,000 to fund the building of the playground and are now working hard on fundraising more than \$3m for a ground-breaking Creative Arts Centre.

*Safely Home*, a joint initiative of Alzheimers NSW and the NSW Police, uses a customised database and numbered identification bracelets to provide some security for those Alzheimers sufferers who have a tendency to wander.

Parquod Victoria's *Career Path* provides a flexible training environment for sole parents who wish to pursue accredited courses of study in the disability sector. The scheme recognises the students' transferable parenting skills while offering peer support and a study program whose timing allows for the family demands placed on a sole parent.