

Future Generation and 2Fold: Investing for impact
Episode Nine | Caroline Gurney and Jane Rowe OAM

Future Generation acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia, and recognises their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Hello, and welcome to Twofold. I am Caroline Gurney, the CEO of Future Generation and that was Jane Rowe, Founder of the incredible Mirabel Foundation which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. Mirabel has been one of Future Generation's not-for-profit partners for years, since the beginning really, and it is an organisation that does amazing work supporting thousands of kids that have been orphaned or abandoned by drug addictive parents. Jane has won numerous awards including the Prime Minister's Centenary Medal and an Order of Australia. But what interests me as much as her charity work is the story leading up to it. So Jane welcome. It is lovely to have you on our podcast.

JANE ROWE: Lovely. Thank you Caroline.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Right out of the gate, I am going to ask you a question we ask all of our guests, but first a bit of background. This podcast is called Twofold because at Future Generation our purpose is twofold. We want to get the best investment returns for our shareholders and we also want to get the best social outcomes for young Australians by investing in mental health and youth at risk. So Jane, what are your two driving purposes in life?

JANE ROWE: One is a very simple one which is actually for people to be kind. Kinder to each other. Kinder to the vulnerable. Kinder to the environment. But in a sort of broader context and certainly with the work I do, I really want to raise awareness about the young people that we work with. I think there is not enough awareness about them and it is very much about lessening the stigma.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So, speaking of what you do, let's talk about Mirabel. You founded the organisation 25 years ago. So what was the catalyst for starting it?

JANE ROWE: At the point, I had been a drug and alcohol counsellor for many years and where I was working there were never enough beds for people in crisis. So when someone is in crisis, they need help now. So young people would come and see me every week and it was a residential rehab for addiction and they would say is there a bed yet and I would have to say I am really sorry it is still a few weeks away. One particular day, four people that had been on the waiting list for a long time came to see me, yet again I said I am so sorry, there is not going to be a bed for some time and they said well Jane we are just sick of this, we are all going to go out tonight and get stoned, right and I said look I cannot tell you not to do that, but what I will say is that you must stay together as a group. Heroin fatalities

were going through the roof at that point and I said those that are dying are those that are using in isolation. They all went out that night. They all four got stoned. They all passed out. Two woke up and two didn't. And the two who didn't were young mums and I had got to know their children in the previous weeks and months. And I went to the funeral of one of the young mothers and her 6 year old boy was at the funeral with Emergency Workers. Her biological family, drug use so fragments a family, so his biological family were there but they had no idea he even existed. His whole world was his mum. And as they lowered mum's coffin, this little boy went running up going where are you putting my mummy and he was taken away by Emergency Workers and his future would have been he would have been put in temporary care. It may have taken a year or two to find permanent care. He had lost all sense of hope and belonging and I just thought at that point, this young kid is going to be far more likely to use drugs later to cover up his bereavement, his sadness and we need to really step in now if we want to break the cycle of addiction. And there was no service or no awareness about what happens to the children of drug users or drug users that tragically and often needlessly die from overdose.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Oh Jane I mean it is incredibly tragic. Did you say he was 15?

JANE ROWE: No, he was 6.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Six. Wow you know and his whole life ahead of him. Let's just go back one step before we go more into this subject. You are from England. I am from England. We can hear it from our accents, but you had a relatively privileged childhood there. You know you attended a very posh boarding school, the same one as Princess Anne I think. So how did you actually find yourself in the field of drug and alcohol addiction, half the world away? What kicked this off?

JANE ROWE: Yes I had a very privileged life and you know left school, could not wait to get to London and I actually you know my first job was working in the Music Industry and I just got into drugs. It was, I say a very different world then without perhaps the dangers of it being highlighted. But regardless, that is what I wanted. I was reckless. I wanted fun. I wanted to party and I ended up being a heroin addict. And I was incredibly fortunate in as much as I had a very loving family, I had a very good education, but I was a wild kid and got into a lot of trouble and ended up with a very serious addiction.

CAROLINE GURNEY: It is amazing that you can speak so candidly about it because there is still so much stigma around drug addiction. People picture this sort of stereotype when it comes to drug addicts and you really do not fit that in any way. So what do you wish in terms of getting more people to understand about addiction?

JANE ROWE: People don't choose addiction. It is... you know no one wakes up and goes you know I want to be an addict. They find themselves in the grips of addiction and then life becomes one big compromise to keep your lifeline going. And I think we are in a far more complicated time now and as I said you know I had a lot of resources behind me. But if you look at young people now and you are

probably looking at, in some cases third, fourth, fifth, sixth generation of unemployment, drug use, there is a real sense of hopelessness, let alone the emotional things that we are trying to keep at bay, you know whether it is grief or trauma, some people use drugs to cope. There is an inner angst and it is about how they cope. And the stereotype of an addict really doesn't exist, it is just that they are more apparent. I think there are many, many people that are behind various addictions that you would not necessarily pick up.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So turning back to Mirabel. What kind of support do you give these children and their family unit?

JANE ROWE: We are all about keeping the family together and we don't say where a child should be placed, but without a doubt if a grandparent or aunty or uncle is willing to take on the child or actually more often they are not children, then it has to be the best option to keep the children together. So we support the carers, the grandparents, aunts and uncles because to support a child you have to support the most important person or people to them and that is their family. And then we do a whole range of programs that you know it all starts I think with a sense of belonging. We all need a sense of belonging and children need to know that it wasn't their fault. I mean time and time again we get young children who would have been the ones who found mum or dad overdosed and they will go it is my fault, you know I should have taken care of mum or dad. So it's about saying to these children it wasn't your fault. You were loved very much and then making them feel connected to the community because as you said you know at the start of this, there is still a lot of stigma and shame in addiction. Children inherit that shame and stigma, all that responsibility. So you know when they are being replaced with a grandparents when they start at a new school, one of their peers will say oh you know why are you living with your grandmother. That child is too frightened to say mum died of an overdose. They know that they will be judged. There is so much shame. It is about bursting the sequence and allowing children to hold their head up high and feel that they were not to blame.

CAROLINE GURNEY: I, I mean I really agree with you. The blame game is such a... it is a really hard one to counteract as well from what I understand. As you said substance abuse is often a way for people to cope with mental health issues or stress. Right now, times are really stressful. We've got... gone through the global pandemic. Things are really tough economically and you are actually at the coalface so what are you seeing now at Mirabel? What is scaring you about this increasing trend?

JANE ROWE: We are seeing children with far more complex mental health issues. If you look at pre-COVID, we were working with a group of children, the majority of whom were feeling very socially isolated and very different. They were falling behind at school because their lives have been so transient up until that point or they were so busy looking after younger siblings or mum and dad they had missed a lot of school. You then put COVID into the picture and these kids are getting more isolated. They are falling you know further behind at school and it is very, very hard for them to sort of re-engage. And I

think the whole news you know everything is... looks so hopeless and out of one's control and we have to put that hope back into a child's life and also we have got to assess them correctly. I think there is so many levels of mental trauma and grief and issues and we need to be really astute as to what a young person maybe experiencing to actually be of the most help possible.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So when you are talking about the families, what kind of family dynamics that you see working with grandparents, aunts, uncles and other kinship carers? What are the ripple effects on their lives as well?

JANE ROWE: Yeah the ripple effects are far reaching and long lasting. First of all there is the grief of losing a loved one or a loved one being perhaps totally incapacitated due to addiction. The shame. The secrets. You have got grandparents who were retired or about to retire and they have now got children to support and then you have got the grief of the other siblings. The aunts and uncles suddenly their own parent isn't able to sort of parent them because they are too busy with the grandchildren or perhaps the sibling that got all the attention during their life still is taking up all that attention. So it can cause a lot of resentment and other forms of isolation when families are put in this situation. I mean we have had situations where half the family have said no, you know relinquished these children into care. And other members of the family have said no you know we can't do that. So it is absolutely broad. Although I would you know like to also highlight there are families that absolutely navigate this and come out the other end and they really are you know the true heroes of the piece.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Let's talk about the support for kids and their families. What does the government do to support them?

JANE ROWE: Very little. I think a kinship carer and it does vary State to State, but a kinship carer which is an extended family member that takes on the care of the children, they are going to get minimal support. If it goes through the court system, which means a child will be placed in care before coming to live with the relative that they may get some support. But there is absolute minimal support financially, emotionally for these families and again I think the world has changed so much, so we are actually, you know they are really integrated laws that perhaps worked decades and decades ago when there wasn't drug use and there weren't mental health issues and that there were more resources. But kinship care has overtaken foster care. So there is a whole silent community of grandparents raising their grandchildren with minimal help and the worry of what is going to happen when they are no longer able to take care of the children. And to me it is the most compassionate and economic investment for us to support and invest these families. These kids are our next generation.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Jane, just to be clear. From my understanding, they in terms of support from the government they get even less if they take children into their care straightaway, rather than letting you know their grandchildren or say inter-family go first into State care which to me sounds absolutely crazy.

Is this a potential area of advocacy for Mirabel? Can you close that loop?

JANE ROWE: We are definitely... advocacy is a big role for Mirabel and we work with other organisations and I think the only way you bring about change is the louder the voice. The more of us that are able to talk about this and bring it into the radar and disrupt the norm maybe is the only way we are going to bring about this change. You can't be silent and hope that things are going to change.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Just to explain to me, if a child is left, you know been orphaned or abandoned because of their parents in terms of issues that they have gone through, that child has to go into State care and therefore the people, the grandparents that look after that child will get more government support. But if the family take that child in immediately, there is very little government support?

JANE ROWE: Yes. Look and it is fairly complex, but yes and a simple way to sort of illustrate it would be that... and this has happened you know a lot you know... a grandparent gets a knock on the door, there is the Police with their two, three, four grandchildren, the grandparent is told the tragic news that their daughter died from an overdose and will you take the children. Well obviously yes. I mean that is what is going to happen. But should they say no I can't, then the children are then sort of separated, put in temporary care and it goes through the courts and then the grandparent may go to the court and be asked and put their hand up and it has gone through the whole system, then they will get some support.

CAROLINE GURNEY: How long is that process? How long would it normally take?

JANE ROWE: I don't know whether I can give a norm on that, but I would say it takes a long... we're not talking of days, we're talking of a long process.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So you have lived and breathed Mirabel for 25 years and I am always fascinated by people who dedicate their lives to something so absolutely selfless and I am incredibly lucky in my job, I get to meet quite a few of these people and of course you are one of those. So what do you think it is that makes some people focus on the good of society at the cost of personal wealth or individual success perhaps?

JANE ROWE: Is something that I'm totally unaware of to be honest. I think wealth comes in many forms. I think richness comes in many forms. And for me, you know working with people was the only thing that was going to make my heart sing really. Like I wouldn't be able to do anything else and so I don't think it is a selfless, I mean it is very flattering what you say but I am not sure that it is a selfless choice. We just look at something and go that is where I want to be. That is what really puts the fire in my belly and our lives are richer because our work gives us real purpose.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So Jane I've known you nearly 20 years and I have always been amazed at the work you do, but was it your family? Were they compassionate and empathetic when you went through you know what you did? Do you think that has been some of bedrock of how you have then wanted to

treat other young people?

JANE ROWE: Yes I think we learn... kids like... we learn through our environment. Yes my parents were incredibly kind and compassionate and non-judgemental, so that just becomes the norm for you. That is sort of... that is your reality and I was always told as a child, I mean my mother always just said just be kind, be kind to one another. So I think that was something that definitely I completely absorbed and just became the norm for me.

CAROLINE GURNEY: We have talked about you know the stigma and the shame around addiction and how does that impact the lives of Mirabel kids? Are the children and their parents judgemental about their situation?

JANE ROWE: Yeah. The shame and stigma is still incredibly apparent. You know one of the first things we do when children come to Mirabel is we do a lot of activities which you know because you have been involved in those because we have volunteers that help with that, so the first thing we do would be what we call a big day out, which is a child's first introduction to Mirabel. We try and take them somewhere really fun and there could be up to 90 children and when they go home that night, the grandparents will ring us the next day and they will say they were a different child on the way home because they said nan you are not going to believe this, every other child there is the same as me, they are all living with a nan or an aunty and their mum or dad have died or in prison and it is that immediate shift of being able to be truthful with one another, it lifts that stigma. And I think they go to school and as I mentioned before they don't want to talk about the circumstance of why they are with their grandparents. So as a community we really need to change the way we look at drugs and addiction because I think we need to look at the whole big picture for things to change. And shame, blame, stigma really holds children, young people back. Hey, it holds adults back. So it is very, very critical that part of the work that Mirabel does, even though it is quite subtle in a way, is constantly saying to the kids, you are not to blame. You have done nothing wrong. Mum or dad did nothing wrong, that was how they coped with their mental health or depression and you are really empowered young people and you are part of this community. The community is not judging you.

CAROLINE GURNEY: I think it is just like you know your parents saying be kind to one another and I have heard you talk about that sense of love and belonging are incredibly critical to kids and I am a huge believer in that. And I see so many of today's problems seems to be... it seems to be caused by that breakdown of the community. Like I just remember being brought up in a community, you know you have aunts, uncles, neighbours involved in kid's lives and families now are far more self-contained. What is your view on this? How can we get that sense of community back?

JANE ROWE: I don't know how we get it back because everyone and you know people are working two jobs. Families are working, again it is so simplistic isn't it is kind of going back to kindness. It is

smiling at your neighbour. Smiling at you know people down the street. But community is essential and it doesn't have to be a big community, it needs to be connection. I mean they say that a child or a young person can just have one person in their life and that can make the difference. One positive, interactive person. It is about connection. I think the breakdown of the community really accounts for a lot of, not only where the Mirabel kids are at, but where everyone that sort of your mental health that we are very disengaged and we are humans and we are a pack animal and we need one another. And it doesn't matter what age we are, we need that. And I think loneliness, whether it is emotional, social, is really prevalent these days and that is a lot to do with the big picture of what is going on globally or on our street corner.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Yeah and I think all of us are so aware of that now and it is a conversation that we are having a lot more than we used to. You are the Founder and obviously the CEO of Mirabel and your name is very... is really synonymous with the organisation. That obviously has benefits, but of course it brings in that sort of key person with it. How are you navigating that? What are you telling your supporters and so many people that support you?

JANE ROWE: Well I am incredibly fortunate that a lot of my team, I have got 36 amazing people working with me through Victoria and New South Wales and I think the average time that they have been working with Mirabel is 14, 15 years. I have got two staff that have been with me that entire time since I started Mirabel from home. So I think often I feel quite fraudulent that I get all the accolades about Mirabel, but actually it is the people working at Mirabel that are doing the most amazing work. And they have the culture and they have their history and they have the values. So yes although there is sometimes people through a bit of a risk you know the Founder has been there 25 years, what happens to Mirabel afterwards. We definitely have an amazing Board. We have Strategic Plans. We have got every scenario written in from Contingency Plans to when I go and I actually think Mirabel will evolve and it will get stronger and be better and there will be younger people running it that are really switched on to the environment. So I personally have absolutely no concern about the future of Mirabel. I don't think my Board has any concerns and hopefully when donors ask and we talk about it or they see our Strategic Plan, they feel assured as well.

CAROLINE GURNEY: You are celebrating 25 years this year in terms of your anniversary for Mirabel. Along the way I know you have had a lot of challenging times. Can you tell me about one of those?

JANE ROWE: I don't know if there is one specific challenging time, but I would say most of the challenges are about not growing too fast and not being reactive. I think often there has been pressure on us to grow, to get bigger, and I really had to hold my ground not to because I don't believe you can be everything to everyone. I think in this field collaboration is the key. There are so many organisations doing wonderful work that we can work together with. So I would say the most challenging time for me has been saying no, we are not going to other States or we are not getting bigger. This is who we are

and what I want to do is make a real difference to as many children as we can which at this point has been thousands, as opposed to diluting what we do and I guess that is you know keeping the culture and the values of the organisation true to how they were set up.

CAROLINE GURNEY: It is a very challenging time at the moment. You know it is a very tough environment especially for not-for-profits. How are you coping and what do you need?

JANE ROWE: Yeah it is a really tough landscape at the moment. Well we need the goodwill. We need the advocacy. We need the volunteers. We need all of that and ongoing so. But we need resources and we need donations. You know the truth is drug overdose is not going down. We are still getting as many children referred to Mirabel as we were years ago. It doesn't make the Papers as much, but it is still happening. So for me, and that perhaps goes back to your last question about challenges, it is having the optimism that we are going to have enough resources to actually work with all the kids that are coming to us. And we said 25 years ago we will never turn a child away and we haven't and I am determined not to and that's from you know my earlier years working when I saw people in crisis and there not being help available. But I think that is in this environment it is very challenging. I think there are a lot more organisations addressing the mental health things in recent years, so there is less money to go around more organisations. And I preach you know belonging and hope are my two catch cries and I have got to apply that to Mirabel and feel hopeful.

CAROLINE GURNEY: And finally, I was in Emergency in a regional hospital quite recently and I noticed there were so many young people with drug addiction primarily ICE I believe. Are you seeing that increase a lot?

JANE ROWE: Yes we are. But the whole... you know what drugs are being used, I've been working in this sector for 35 years, it's very, very different. I think there are drugs now that born out of society where people just want to be in an altered reality. So you know there are drugs there that are cheap, nasty, bring on psychosis, so what we are seeing a lot more is children being removed from the home due to violence, due to abuse and in many cases it is you know long term psychosis. People are not necessarily recovering emotionally.

CAROLINE GURNEY: It is incredibly tragic, but I think the work that you and Mirabel and all your team are doing is really inspiring. I can't thank you enough for the work you do and thank you very much it has been a pleasure to have you on our podcast.

JANE ROWE: Well it has been my pleasure too and I can't thank you enough for everything that you do to help us and I just want to say to people you know we can make a difference. We can fix this. Don't get overwhelmed. Working together we can absolutely make a difference and turn people's lives around.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Thank you. Thank you very much Jane.

JANE ROWE: Pleasure.

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