Future Generation and 2Fold: Investing for impact

Episode Ten | Caroline Gurney & Bernie Shakeshaft

*Future Generation acknowledges the traditional owners of the 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 2Fold. I am Caroline Gurney, CEO of Future Generation and that was Bernie Shakeshaft, Founder of the awe-inspiring organisation, BackTrack. BackTrack, as the name suggests help kids who’ve gone off the rails to get them back on track. It is one of the not-for-profit partners that Future Generation Global support. Over the years, Bernie has won numerous awards for his work including Local Hero in the Australian of Year Awards and he is truly a man who does not just talk the talk, he walks the talk. So how did a guy who had a very troubled youth by his own admission turn his life around and become a lifesaver to more than a thousand young kids. That is the question I really would like answered. So Bernie welcome. It is great to have you on our podcast.

**BERNIE SHAKESHAFT:** Terrific. Lovely to be here.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** I am going to start by asking you the question we ask all of our guests, but first a bit of background. This podcast is called 2Fold 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 Bernie, what are your two driving purposes in life?

**BERNIE SHAKESHAFT:** Gee Caroline, how do I get it down to two? Let’s have a crack. I think definitely the number one would be to leave things in a better place than I found them. That’s been a philosophy of mine for quite some time. And the second one, we worked really hard for twenty years, I don’t want it to be dependent just on me - this organisation, so in the words of Martin Luther King, I have a dream. He didn’t have a plan. He just had a dream and I’ve got one, and now we have been donated that farm, we have done something a bit crazy this year we have started a foundation. We are not talking about what does the next five years look like. We are talking about what does the next hundred years look like. So to leave these young people with a home, a place they can go back to and that will be there well past my use-by date.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** Excellent. So we are actually going to come to some of those, those points you just raised. Speaking of the farm. I mean you founded BackTrack in 2006. What was the catalyst for that then and also tell us how you got the farm?

**BERNIE SHAKESHAFT:** After my wild years up in the Territory, when we would come back, when I landed in Armidale I got this job with TAFE and we have two local high schools and I had ten kids from each school that they were saying that these kids don’t have snowflakes chance in hell of making Year 10, just get them work ready. So we tried about 200 things at TAFE and nothing was really working until we introduced the dogs.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** What do you mean by dogs?

**BERNIE SHAKESHAFT:** So look we got kicked out of the welding shed. The kids made a bomb on day one and blew a hole in the roof and look whatever we touched from computers, everything went pear-shaped and we kept getting kicked out of these things, so I went and saw the boss of TAFE and I said look we are the only ones here tomorrow, I’ve got these pups at home and I’ve got these wild kids, so I like wild kids and wild pups, can I bring the pups in and of course the bureaucracy kicked in. Ah, no we can’t do that. Rah, rah, it is too dangerous, well you will need to have vet checks, who has done the risk assessment? We don’t have time for that risk assessment, we needed to do something with these kids right here and now. So in Bernie kind of style, I just brought the pups in the next day and I kept them out in the paddock and the kids were all sitting there and while the TAFE boss was back in his office again explaining my actions, I was looking over his shoulder, first time I saw these wash and tumble kids sitting with these tiny little pups and I just went, Bern there it is. We didn’t plan that but, being the opportunistic nature of what we do, I just went that is going to work. So that was where the dogs started. But at the end of that 12 months, they haven’t got those 20 kids work ready. Ah one kid suicided and another kid had gone to jail. I had 18 and I go there’s not an employer in the country that would give one of these kids a job. So in the standard operating procedure in Australia with our siloed funding, I was supposed to kick those kids out, go and get another 20 and start again. And I thought you know what, we’ve made so much progress with these kids and we’ve just about got this thing, you know we had stopped them fighting each other and carrying on and they’re all showing up, we can start to do something here now. I was supposed to kick them out and I felt like about, I don’t know, half of the job was done and just as we were starting to make traction, kick them out, start again? We would have been better off not starting at all and doing anything. We were just starting to give these kids hope, then we are taking that hope back off them. So that was the end of that year. I was really frustrated, when need to keep doing something with these kids, but that’s not the system, that’s not the rules, that’s not the way we do things. So I was at a Christmas Party with this guy and we were fairly new back to town so I didn’t know who he was and we were having a few beers and I was pretty frustrated and I said, mate look all we need to do to sort this problem out is get a damn shed. Anyway a couple of weeks goes by and get this phone call. Okay, so it’s Kevin Dupé, do you remember talking to me at the Christmas Party, and I’m kind of a bit scratchy on the details there buddy and he said, look I want you to meet me at this address. And I thought I know what this is about. I said who are you again? Kevin Dupé, I’m the CEO of Regional Australia Bank and crikey so what have I said. Anyway, I meet this guy down there. He’s got the Mayor with him and the Local Member and we’re standing outside the old council depot and there’s this busted, old, giant, big shed in there. And he threw me this set of keys and said there’s your shed, go and sort this shit out. So that’s how we started. No business plan. Certainly didn’t have any funding. What we had was a pile of boys with a half-finished job to complete, so just some mates and myself and we didn’t really call themselves youth workers or whatever, we were just pitching in to give a bit of a hand. So that’s where we started, a bunch of volunteers. We were still having to work through the week, but we were doing it on weekends. Those damn boys kept showing up.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** Then how many boys did you have?

**BERNIE SHAKESHAFT:** Look there was down to about seven at that stage that were regular kids. We call them the Magnificent Seven. Still know them all and all of them thriving. So I don’t say they haven’t had some bumpy roads, but that’s where we kicked off with seven kids and now when I drive through that gate and I look at all the action down there, I kind of shake my head and wonder whether it is a bit… feels a bit surreal some days.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** So tell me how did the farm come into being?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Yeah, well here we are, 16, 17 years down the track and ah a guy I went to school was very senior in corrections and their family, they’ve had a family farm close to Armidale at Enmore for 45 years. His Mum sadly passed away and the farming thing kind of wasn’t where he was heading in his life and came and saw me one weekend and said Bern, we’re going, you know we’re selling the family farm. I’m going to sell the cattle next week and we’re going to donate all those proceeds to BackTrack. I said crikey son, that’s pretty generous, but could you just give me a couple of weeks because we are in a good season, cattle prices are really high and I said our dream was to have a farm one day what about if you let me see if I can buy an adjacent paddock and we will work with the kids in a structure like that. Well, a week later he comes back and says oh Bernie I’ve sort of changed my mind about the cattle. He said I’m going to give you the cattle, but I’m also going to give you my half of the farm. And so I was a bit gobsmacked, but when you have an intention, something out in front just what we teach the kids, the dream, ah sometimes you just don’t see those things coming. So the following weekend, so here I am with half a farm.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** And what’s half a farm? How big is that?

**BERNIE SHAKESHAFT:** Ah so half the farm it is 300 acres.

**CAROLINE GURNEY:** Wow. How generous.

**BERNIE SHAKESHAFT:** Yeah. So, I’m thinking how is this going to work with half a farm? We had actually just had a big Feasibility Study done by KPMG. Did a wonderful job for us but came back and looked at us and went, there’s no way you guys can ever buy a farm. It’s just not viable. It will crash your organisation. And they looked at every single detail you know what it would cost. How much to stock it and they said the risk is just too big, you can’t do it. So, another wonderful funder of ours from Sydney who has been helping us out in just really crazy different ways for years, was up at in Armidale for a wedding and I was telling him about this crazy thing that happened with these cattle and this half a farm. He said can you take me up and show me. So I went and showed him and yeah the next morning he rings me up, oh no I get this text message about four chapters long and he said, hi Bern, I have been thinking about this farm thing all night, he said I’ve got three options. He said the first is I’ll buy the other half of the farm. It’s somewhere I can bring my kids up from Sydney and whatever and he went you know look if you and I have a falling out, that’s probably going to be a problem. I don’t really like Option One. He said Option Two is I’ll just give you an interest free loan for a million bucks, you buy the other side, pay me back when you can. Ah, but he went it’ll take so much focus off what you’re doing and working with kids and whatever, we don’t really like Option Two. He said Option Three, we normally don’t make a gift this big, mate I’m going to buy the other half of the farm for you. So in a handful of weeks, there we were from a tin shed in town, to now here we are, with a one hundred year dream. A farm, with cattle and to see those young people out there, boys and girls, man bring a tear to your eye.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Oh that’s such a, that’s such an amazing, amazing story. I just… amazing beginning really isn’t it in terms of what you can now achieve. But let’s let’s go back to your teenage years, because I think that does sort of set the scene in a way. I know from what you told me you weren’t exactly the ‘model teenager,’,= but what was your youth like?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Oh look I think my early schooling days, quite traumatic. Look if I went to school now, they would diagnose me with dyslexic, ADHD, oppositional behavioural defiant disorder for certain and I think Tourette’s probably, help me poor Mum. So, I was one of those kids that this education thing was never going to bring out the best in me. So, I think when you are in that position, you learn pretty quick that to be seen as “dumb” is one thing, to be seen as the “class clown” or you know, the “naughty” kid and I chose the “class clown” thing, so school was pretty traumatic you know. Reading and writing was a really difficult concept for me. Sitting still was a really difficult concept for me. Doing as I was told was a really difficult concept for me. Look I think my last year at school, I spent that much time in the principal’s office, I was starting to think I might have been the bloody principal.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So what age did you leave school?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Ah I left a couple of times and I sampled a few schools. But in Year 11, I mean you know I came from a loving, big family or whatever. I look back on those days and go, if I had all that stuff, a roof over my head and a meal and a family that loved me and I couldn’t succeed in that system. What about if you know the types of kids we work with what, what chance have they got? So, I think I was in about Year 11 when I finally dropped out. Back in the old days with HSC, I knew I was lining up for a score less than 100 and that shame factor that was the final straw for me.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So then what did you go and do?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Of all things and someone that hates maths beyond belief and the deal was I had to have a job to leave school. So I got a job in a Travel Agent and the maths there just blew me out. That was more embarrassing than being at school, so that didn’t last long. I went back to TAFE and did my HSC. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking but there was something about that environment that was different. Come if you want to come. Don’t if you don’t. Don’t have to wear a uniform. You don’t get into trouble for not showing up to classes. Do the work if you do and I did fairly well somehow or rather, but I was always destined to leave Sydney you know. Grew up in Armidale, I did my high school years in Sydney and that was just traumatic as well. Dropping me out in Sydney was a bit like let a feral cat out of a potato sack. Traumatised it.

CAROLINE GURNEY: [Laughing]. That’s an expression I haven’t heard. Your experience would’ve really formed how you deal with these young people and then you went on to be a Jackaroo and a dingo tracker. I love that story. So, how… and I remember you talking about how you worked with some amazing people who taught you how to dingo track. Maybe tell us a little bit about that?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: I was lucky enough to hang just extraordinary bushmen you know. I went to the Snowy Mountains, a lot of those people looked after me as a young fellow. I was probably 18 at that stage, they showed me that thing about caring and not judging and you know because when you are 18 and you “know it all” and hanging around with people who seriously do know it all and it gets a bit embarrassing. But anyway, I just wanted to be wild and ride horses that was my big thing, you know. So they moved me on to Victoria. I was lucky to work there again with another bush legend, Jimmy Matthews and he was mates with big station owners up in the Territory and he could see ah the wildness and so close to Melbourne, it’s not going to be an ideal fit. so I rolled up the swag, chucked me on a bus and sent me up to Newcastle Waters Station and I think that’s where my real education started.

CAROLINE GURNEY: And where is that?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Smack in the middle of Australia.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Right okay.

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: So, near Elliott, a bit north of Tennant Creek, a big station, 10,000 square kilometres.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Wow.

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: That was the place for me to be wild. So I worked the outstations, but breaking bones and fighting and drinking and carrying on like a lunatic, that was just a perfect age for me to… and the Territory, particularly in those days was a good place to be wild and not get into trouble for it and it had another other likeminded, wild souls up there.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So did you go tracking? How did that come about?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Moved on from the station stuff. I met a girl up there, had a baby way too young, all that sort of thing. Kids having kids. And pretty tricky trying to learn this parenting thing and I had a bad bust off a horse, I really got smashed up pretty bad. Anyway, ended up in Tennant Creek and working for a community-controlled Aboriginal organisation. I was just goofing around fixing cars and bits and pieces, but those old men were always humming around there you know and two old fellas [inaudible] I can’t say their names because they’ve both passed away, but I was lucky enough to spend a whole heap of time in the bush with those guys. They didn’t speak English. They spoke about eight different Aboriginal languages and I only spoke English. But kicking around with those guys, boy did I start learning stuff about bush things that I didn’t know. And as a white fella, I was just lucky to get exposed to and lucky enough to be open minded enough to go, like what is going on here? So one of the stories, part of my job was carrying the chainsaw and cart the bits of wood they wanted to make the boomerangs, hunting sticks or whatever back to the ute. First time I went out bush with these guys, we were out there in the bush and this pack of dingos started coming around us and I’m climbing up a tree going holy smokes we are in trouble here. These old men it’s like they, they knew the dogs or something you know. Anyway, we get back to the car and I’m still sweating buckets going holy smoke that was close, we got away with that one. We went in a different direction the next morning and not as far out of town and when we got there that same pack of dogs was there waiting for those guys. This went on for a month. North, South , East, West, 10 kilometres from town, 70 kilometres from town, the same pack of dogs would show up within five minutes or they would be there before these blokes were there and I was going like I was waiting for my mate to give that hand slap going isn’t cool that this happen, like you’re watching it, they’re living it, it’s not like somewhere you’re sending the dogs or drop pin with where to meet these fellas, but it’s the same pack of dogs showing up. So I went like, how does this work Brody when he came back you know. And he went look, it’s hard to explain in white fella ways, but he goes what those old men are doing is they’re looking 10% behind at what those dogs were doing yesterday. 10% of the energy or whatever you want to call it they’re looking at what those dogs are doing now. 80% out in front is where they see those dogs tomorrow. Whatever people want to call that or try and come up with a name for it I don’t know, visioning, or something or other. Anyway, I went on to have an extraordinarily successful trapping career. Put research in it with Parks and Wildlife and did work up on Fraser Island, caught dogs all over Australia. And it was those skillsets and when you work with an old man to dog, they can touch a track and describe the dog without ever having seen it and they will describe it exact. Male, female, how big it is. So that was passed on some of those little gifts, learnt some stuff out, but eventually it just wasn’t enough catching dogs and a lot of the stuff we do in Australia I probably disagree with fundamentally, so it was time to move on from that. But the interesting part about that was talk about them old men seeing things forward. I sat bolt upright in bed one morning about 8 years ago and went, you idiot! Those old men weren’t teaching you how to catch wild dogs. They were teaching you how to catch wild kids. As it went, you know the process is exactly the same. I’m not a ‘youth worker’, I didn’t do any formal things, so I just started making stuff up doing it, but I had a look at the way we manage young people now. These kids in trauma, about 10% of the time we’re looking at where they’re from, what there is. We can’t change it if the kid has been sexually abused or kicked out of home or his father has died or whatever, so if we can’t do anything about that, don’t spend too much time there. Good to know it, you’ve got to it helps with understanding. And then I look at the 10% right here now. Trouble with the cops. Kicked out of school. Lots of things not going along well in life and I think a lot of youth organisations that’s where they spend that time back behind or here in the now trying to sort out this how do we get the kid back in school. We don’t worry too much about that stuff. Our vision is out in front for these kids. That’s why we talk about what are your hopes and dreams. Every kid down there can tell you what their hope and dream is in life and we spend 80% of the time out the front going, that’s what you want. Don’t worry about this messy stuff in the middle. But it was the same stuff that those old men showed me with those dogs. 10% behind. 10% now. 80% out in front. And now we have got a farm, we can be 80% out in front, I believe that.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So let’s talk a little bit about the boys in the BackTrack program and it is mostly boys. You know what support are you giving them at BackTrack?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Here’s our saying: ah we keep kids alive, keep them out of jail and we chase their hopes and dreams. And you could not specifically say what it is that we do. We do whatever it takes for as long as it takes. So when a kid first comes into the program, usually it takes us about 12 months just to sort out their legal stuff. If they need somewhere safe to stay and are unable to find it, we’ve just got to stability in their life, so that’s the first part. But while we’re doing that, all these other things we’re wrapping around. So we’ve got a school teacher. We want these kids to be able to read and write. Most of them come with ridiculously low literacy, numeracy levels and a whole heap of trauma. So we start chipping away at that. We do school in a completely different way. Then we start giving them these human relationship messages all the way along. So if you’ve been kicked out of home, you’ve been kicked out of school, you’ve been kicked out of the footy team, kicked out of the shopping centre and kicked out of your community basically, the last thing that kid can afford to hear is that there’s a chance you could get kicked out. So the first thing that he hears is you can’t get kicked out of BackTrack. You can choose not to be there and that’s okay, but we’re not kicking you out.

CAROLINE GURNEY: And if they leave, you’ll always welcome them back?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Always welcomed back. Bit like parenting. I can’t split the difference between parenting and the work that we do you know. If your kid is ready to leave home, go, but if they need a hand would you take them back? Most parents would. So we just do that, you know that belonging. Most kids will tell you BackTrack time is a second family. So we’re working on that belonging peace. Making sure you feel comfortable here. We base it on the Circle of Courage which says you know and it’s First Nation’s from Canada’s big dreaming stuff.

CAROLINE GURNEY: That’s the Circle of Courage that was all yeah.

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Yep. So these four things you get them in balance. Belonging, being part of and connected to something; mastery, doesn’t matter what you’re learning as long as you’re learning something; independence, the kids call that earning your own shit, having a say in your life. And the last one generosity, giving back. So that’s all the stuff that we’re doing at the same time. We concentrate on practical skills. So Chainsaw Certificates and White Cards, First Aid Certificates, anything that will make them more employable when they get through, as well as the reading and writing. But we do the maths in the bush. So if you’re in the shearing shed, rather than sitting down and doing maths in a classroom situation, that blows most of these kids up, we’ll do it by weighing a sheep. How much drench does it need you know. How do you mix chainsaw fuel, like how many litres goes into that.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So much more engaging.

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Well, and it’s what should’ve happened for me as a kid and that would’ve engaged me. And you know Pythagoras’s theorem and we all break out into a cold sweat. Until I see the welding guy teaching kids Pythagoras’s theorem to build gates with, that sort of stuff. Then we hear all these kids doing this formula on a calculator that can hardly read.

CAROLINE GURNEY: It’s real isn’t it? It means something, they can do something with it. That’s an amazing breadth of support really that you give to these kids. So BackTrack is quite hard to categorise. So how do you get Government funding because you know it’s hard to get Government funding because they fund for a particular you know, part. How do you manage?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: So the Government funding in Australia is siloed. If you work for the Education Department, you just get money to teach kids to read and write. If you work for the Mental Health Department you just work on the mental health of the kid. If it’s around homelessness, if it’s around whatever, but it’s all siloed. At BackTrack, we don’t do any siloing. I know if a kid is living under the bridge, he’s going to have mental health issues. Maslow taught us this stuff how long ago you know, ah you’ve got to have somewhere safe. So we started a residential. Wherever there is a gap and we just keep filling it. So Government funding, ah less than 5% of our budget is Government funded. Everybody knows who we are and what we do, but they would give us Government funding if we changed our model to do it the way they do and that often doesn’t work, we’ve set up a different thing. So unfortunately when you take a long term approach, when you take a holistic approach, when you do whatever it takes, whatever it takes for as long as it takes and you don’t go away and that cuts us out of Government funding. Do you know we have almost a 90% success rate of getting these kids into jobs? And we’re starting with the 5% of kids that no other service would touch and the kids that should be locked up in prison. So if it is around success and taking kids off and kids end up jobs that don’t end up on the dole. We’re making taxpayers here. And when I look at those older boys that come through and I watch them raising their own children now and I’ll ask them you know, you reckon your kid will finish school? They look at you like you are some kind of a nut. Ah, it’s an absolute given that yeah that kid is going to finish school you know. What about, do you think they will ever have a job? Because some of these kids come out of three generations that never see any of them go to work. This is how we break the cycle and then when I look at that guy answering me back saying, mate, my son already has a part-time job and he is still in school. I go, there you go. That’s the circuit breaker. Those kids will. And to watch these young fellas you know, raising their own children and still living the same philosophies, those simple things that we taught those kids at young age.

CAROLINE GURNEY: That is, that’s an amazing statistic. I mean 90% go on to getting jobs. The other stat that I’ve always found incredible is that BackTrack has been credited with bringing youth crime down in Armidale by 40% and you’ve managed to do that the same way.

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Ah really simple stuff, by taking that holistic approach. Let’s have a look at the problem. I think what we’re good at in Australia is defining the problem and we get stuck when it comes to the solution. So what is the problem? Kids running around on the street Friday and Saturday night, taking drugs, alcohol, of course there’s going to be trouble. That’s the same nationally. They reckon about 20% of the kids do 80% of the damage. Now I’m not Einstein, but let’s see if I can work this out. Say, you work with those 20% kids and you do something meaningful and constructive at those times of high risk Friday and Saturday night, what you think might happen? This is the dogs. This is where the dogs came into it. We started taking these kids competing in working dog high jump events, which are on a Friday and a Saturday, most of the shows. And we’ve been doing that for 17 years.

CAROLINE GURNEY: And you’ve got to travel with the dogs and the kids to get there in the first place, so that they’re engaged?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: And they’re winning.

CAROLINE GURNEY: You know they win everything, don’t they? I bet it terrifies people when you turn up to the country fairs?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: They turn around and take their dogs and they go like here’s those professionals and OMG, professionals.

CAROLINE GURNEY: That’s great for the kid’s confidence, yeah?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: And we’ve never had a spare seat going away dog jumping you know. Those kids are down in Melbourne at the moment you know. We’ve had a world record. We’ve won Australian titles, but it’s not kind of about that. I mean, it is in a way because it breaks down a lot of barriers and it’s these kids seen on a successful platform.

CAROLINE GURNEY: And they’re good at something?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: And they’re really good at something. And they’ve got an animal to care for and be responsible for. Do you know in 20 years doing that, I don’t think we’ve even been even chipped by a security guard? So these are the wildest, roughest kids that we’ve got, that would ordinarily been in jail. Here they are, on the show circuit not getting into trouble. When we started, the Children’s Court used to take three full days in Armidale and now Children's Court starts on a Monday at nine and it is done and dusted by lunchtime. So, and I think the wait is higher than 40, I think it is down about 48%, almost 50%. So we’re the only…

CAROLINE GURNEY: And you are the only organisation in the area that help young people?

Right.

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: And yeah we’re the only LGA in New South Wales with long term juvenile crime stats headed south, not north. What has it cost us? Not much. A little bit of care. Putting some good people around them and a handful of dogs. But it doesn’t have to be dogs because it is the same process whether you go to a different town in Parkes or wherever, if you can target that 20% of kids, at the time of high risk, you’ll get a result.

CAROLINE GURNEY: I think a lot of governments across the country are actually grappling with youth crime. When I just look at the numbers and they seem to be on the rise. Many seem to talk about incarceration as being the solution. What is your view on that?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: The way we incarcerate young people is shameful for me in Australia. If there was one thing I could change, it would be that. Do you know from 10 years of age we can lock a child up in Australia. Do you know what that costs? I think the latest numbers out are something like a million dollars a year to lock a 10 year old up and we go that is the best solution. That’s garbage. But go and have a look whether it is Don Dale in the Northern Territory, you know and we talked to those guys. They are about to close the facility in Tasmania, you know. Once kids get locked up, ah it gets worse. When you look at the reoffending, I think it is 80% of kids within 12 months go back in. Once they get on that cycle…

CAROLINE GURNEY: It is like the window closes of hope?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: In the early days we put young people that have been locked up 10, 11, 12 times, that is not the way to bring up a child in Australia. Little known stat. Do you know, when you look at incarceration rates right around the world and so I’m including the adult population as well as kids, I think Columbia is coming first. Turkey is coming second. Have a guess who is coming third in the world? Right here in the lucky bloody country, Australia. Coming third in the world. Sorry, not good enough. If there weren’t alternatives, ah no worries. But I don’t know what it is in this country where we’ve got this law and order thing. Have a look in Queensland, what are they doing around youth crime? Building two new detention facilities. For goodness sakes put that money… let’s get up the stream and see what’s going on. I don’t think there is a kid which is born bad. There is just circumstances around their growing up that makes them. Why don’t we spend the money, and the time and the effort jumping in and doing that? Is it possible? Have a look at the Scandinavian countries. The Scans, they are closing their jails. Some of those countries have only got a handful of kids in juvenile detention and I’m not for one minute saying there isn’t a place for it. There will always be a place, but it’s not every case you know it’s just, it’s out of control. It doesn’t work. We know it doesn’t work and we continue to do it. Einstein’s definition of insanity, keep doing the same thing and expecting a different result. We need to look at the causes. What is going on for a kid to end up. You know, the number of young people that I work with that ah their first contact ah police and with the criminal system is for stealing and stealing food ah to look after… oh look I remember this kid came in with his first police caution for stealing nappies. Now…

CAROLINE GURNEY: Nappies?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Why would a 12 year old be stealing nappies you know? But I mean to wear them around the street out in public? He is doing that because he is looking after younger kids in a dysfunctional family at home, that drives me mad. I go surely we can look beyond that sort of stuff and go what is going on here? But we don’t and we continue to do the same thing.

CAROLINE GURNEY: But there is only one of you and we need more, more of you. I mean you do have an incredible record in terms of helping young people without a doubt. So I really like the how you’ve looked at that sort of Tracker Network to actually increase you know the way you work across Australia. So, tell us more about Tracker Network and how is that doing?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: So, nearly all our funding comes from private philanthropy, FGG is a fine example of that. So replication can you scale that? And the number of times I’ve heard it just works because you’re there, I go I don’t believe that. I reckon there are Bernie’s in every town and city around the world and when you find those people, this is what they want to do. So we trialled the replication years ago, seven or eight years ago, but we went into a partnership, it was too heavily reliant on us, my personal time really. We worked out after 12 months that’s not the way to scale this thing, so I don’t know for about the last six years we’ve been looking at this Network concept, where we go and find a Bernie in a different town. And often they are already there doing it, quietly or in a volunteer capacity, but you need someone in that town that is going to do it, that is from that town and it’s got the grit to not go away. Then you also need an ‘ambassador’ I guess you’d call it at the top end of town. Whether that’s a Mayor or a Director of Education or the Superintendent of Police but you’ve got to have someone with the power ah that also has the belief that we can do things in a better way. Once you get those couple of things lined up, then you can start making a difference. So that’s what we’re targeting. It’s not easy. And those organisations have got to have their own governance. These are all the learnings that we’ve had and then we put them into a network where we collect the same data. Future Generation’s fund is a perfect example of this and now we have this collective of organisations and we can help move that hard stuff, but starting a small business is not easy and regardless of what it is. And you know, dealing with really complicated kids in the system that is kind of up against you a little bit.

CAROLINE GURNEY: And how many Tracker Networks are there?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Like we have something like 100 communities on the waiting list going would you help us get something started? What we’ve got to do is get the model right first, you know. The data collection stuff is really important. We must be able to prove what it is that you do. Having multiple funding sources and taking on the same approach that we do you know, the holistic nature, the long term approach to it.

CAROLINE GURNEY: And so do you go and spend time there or does some of your team go and sort of you know what I mean, it’s like a success transfer?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Yep. I love going there in the early days. I love those community meetings where people go oh this is not possible. As soon as I hear it is not possible man I’m in for the long haul. Here we go. But to see them, so yeah sometimes I go there, but we have a really committed team and they bring those groups together four times a year and we will concentrate on different things, you know. Do we need to work on governance? Know how to do stuff with social media? Can tell good stories about these young people. Our particular style of youth work. We are actually developing at the moment our own training module. So, we used to put a lot of kids through a Cert 4 standard in Youth Work, but that’s not fit for purpose to work with the type of kids we’re working with, we need something a whole lot more relationship kind of based and the different ways are doing what we do. So with an RTO, we’re actually writing our own Youth Worker Course at the moment. And all these guys are going through that stuff as well. So you know, all the little nick knacks and the things that we’ve learnt from the best around the world, over many years.

CAROLINE GURNEY: At the moment, life is tough. I mean not-for-profits are really finding it hard to fundraise. I mean where are you at? I assume it is the same for you. So how are you coping and what do you actually need?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: You know, money is the thing. Without that money we don’t keep rolling, it’s as simple as that. We are also working with the Government. We have always been chipping away in that space, but kind of has to be on our terms. We can’t afford to change what it is that we do. Why do we need money? Our budget keeps getting bigger and bigger and when we’re taking on other towns and helping them get going and our kind of fundraising for the group.

CAROLINE GURNEY: So where will you be in 10 years?

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Where will we be? I think the replication is going to get a roll on. You know there’s not a State or a Territory in Australia that is not asking us to come and give them a bit of a hand. I think we’ll start to pop up more and more. I think the training of this stuff. We don’t want Armidale to get any bigger, I think it’s a perfect sized organisation for a town population of that size. I want to see these things replicated in as many places. How many are in our care and the dream is to make sure it is in other places that we’re giving communities, we’re giving kids the one thing that I love sharing the most and that’s hope. It is possible to do this stuff when the intention is there and you are prepared to get in and roll your sleeves up and have a go, the sky is the limit. I don’t like thinking too small. I like the crazy stuff. And I don’t like scaring my board either.

[Music]

CAROLINE GURNEY: But Bernie we wish you every success and thank you very much. It’s been absolute pleasure.

BERNIE SHAKESHAFT: Terrific. Thanks for taking the time to hear the story.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Thank you. We hope you enjoyed today’s episode. For those that are interested in the Future Generation, we are Australia’s first listed investment companies to provide investment and social returns. We offer a unique opportunity for shareholders to invest with leading Australian global Fund Managers while supporting high impact youth focused not-for-profit organisations. Today, the companies have more than $1 billion in assets managed by over 30 leading Australian and global Fund Managers. These fund managers generously manage our funds pro bono and don’t charge management or performance fees. This then allows us to give 1% of our net tangible assets each year to carefully selected not-for-profit organisations. So far, the Future Generation companies have given $65.2 million making us one of Australia’s top 30 corporate philanthropists. This has been made possible through the expertise and generosity of the Future Generation pro bono fund managers, service providers, Board Directors and Investment Committee Members, all of whom waive their usual professional fees. For more information about Future Generation, please go to wwwfuturegeninvest.com.au.

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