

Feature interview: Ian Darling

Ian Darling is a documentary filmmaker, producer and co-director of 'The Oasis' a documentary about youth homelessness which recently screened on ABC television. Ian is also Chairman of the Documentary Australia Foundation, a new philanthropic initiative for foundations, charitable organisations and documentary filmmakers, and Chairman of The Caledonia Foundation, a private foundation (PPF) focusing on the education, training and welfare of underprivileged young Australians, which funded 'The Oasis'. He is also Chair of the Sydney Theatre Company and STC Foundation. He spoke with Louise Arkles about innovative philanthropy, planning for high impact, and the wearing of many hats.

How would you describe yourself to our readers?

At the moment, primarily as a documentary filmmaker. I don't really see myself as a philanthropist. Perhaps it's an age thing – I've always viewed philanthropists as in their 70s and 80s, I'm only in my 40s. Social entrepreneur sounds far too progressive for what I do, but in terms of philanthropic activities I get involved with I really like to roll my sleeves up and get very involved.

What were the early influences that led you to become engaged in philanthropic giving?

Early on in my career I was invited by a friend to join a fund-raising committee for the Salvation Army and did some volunteer work over the Christmas period. Around that time my colleagues and I were evolving our investment business and researching what other investment groups around the world were doing, and realised that giving was actually a very important part of business. No one told us we should become more involved in community issues, we just did by osmosis.

What is your approach to philanthropy?

Our approach at The Caledonia Foundation is based on a business approach. In business you need to keep reinventing yourself and keep assessing whether or not you're making an impact and maximising your return on investment, or from a philanthropic perspective, whether you're maximising



Oasis documentary co-director and producer, Ian Darling (front), with the Salvation Army's Paul Moulds, manager of The Oasis Youth Support Network, and formerly homeless young men, Darren and Beau. Photo: © Newspix/Alan Pryke.

the return on social capital. There's a big learning curve that happens initially – we spread our wings quite widely, while defining our focus to helping young Australians. For the first few years we gave many small grants, and got swamped with applications – which is a healthy thing as we were able to see what was happening across the field.

Part of that process led me to see how significant the problem of youth homelessness was – we were getting hundreds of applications from groups trying to help. Over the course of the years we started to question whether we were making a difference by giving lots of smaller grants, and also whether it sustained us as grantmakers – which is often an overlooked thing.

Philanthropy, I think, is a long, committed journey and grantmakers have to feel inspired and enthused to keep doing what they're doing. It's not just writing a cheque but keeping engaged, that's part of proactive giving. One great thing about PPFs is that people are wanting to wrap their arms around the issues they engage with, which sustains them for the long haul.

Has your grantmaking changed as a response?

We felt that we needed to improve our grantmaking and make more of a difference, and rather than providing bandaids to all of the things we were giving to, we decided that every year or two we would make a profound difference in a specific social issue at

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the macro level, while still supporting a number of smaller groups.

Using youth homelessness as an example, we’ve been supporting a number of organisations that have been dealing with the issues for a while now, and we wanted to try to put it squarely on the agenda – to encourage the government to focus on the issue, secure significantly more resources, and bring the community behind it. By showing a degree of leadership in this space we hoped to get corporate Australia and other philanthropic foundations to focus more on homelessness too.

How important is it to you to talk publicly about your giving?

We used to be very shy about talking about what we’re doing at The Caledonia Foundation, and we still don’t reveal how much we’re giving, but now we do talk about what we’re doing. Foundations do need to openly, and without embarrassment, show that they believe in something and want to make a difference. We felt that if we aren’t prepared to go on the public record then maybe we aren’t maximising our impact. By getting over the hurdle of showing what we’re doing, without showing the sums involved, we feel our shared experiences can be valuable for the sector, just as we have gained enormously from other case studies here and abroad. Maybe the day will come when we are happy to show how much we’re contributing financially, but for now that’s not important.

This is a bold move for us, for us to have gone out so publicly and put our name to the first independent report into youth homelessness in 20 years, associate ourselves with the outreach and education of the documentary and push so hard to get an issue on the national agenda. Rather than just a campaign, we needed to put a face to youth homelessness, we also needed to back it up with the facts and

figures, to offer a report that had recommendations, that was by the community. We think it’s quite a good model for private philanthropy.

Tell us about your first documentary film on Warren Buffett, ‘Woodstock for Capitalists’

At Caledonia Investments we had based our business on Buffett’s investment philosophy. We went over to his shareholder meetings every year and one of the things we observed was that attendance at his annual shareholder meeting was growing from 200 at the first one, to 400 at the next and 800 the following year! (Over 30,000 shareholders attended his 2008 meeting).

We realised that, whilst he was regarded as the best investor in the world, if it was only about money this sort of phenomenon wouldn’t be happening. There must be more to it, and we discovered that there was a group of people with shared values who saw that Buffett represented the good side of capitalism. At the close of the film, we summarise that Buffett has shown that you can do the right thing by your employees, by your shareholders and by the community, and at the end of the day you can still have the best investment record around. It’s not an either/or. This was a positive message we wanted the audience to take away from the film.

How much overlap is there between your various activities and hats?

Everything seems to be enmeshed, my films and my communities. The third film I made was ‘In the Company of Actors’ on the Sydney Theatre Company (STC). I’m a strong believer in the arts, not only as entertainment but what the arts can do for the community as an education tool, a tool for personal development, or for social change. For a health society it’s really important to have a strong, vibrant and thriving arts community. Since making that film I’ve become

Chairman for the STC, extending my interest in the arts. ‘The Oasis’, my latest documentary, came out of having spent 10 years in a variety of voluntary roles, with Paul Moulds from the Salvation Army. I worked in Oasis as a volunteer, getting a sense of how big the whole problem is. So each of the films has been in a sense a personal journey, but over time I’ve been able to relate them to my philanthropic work – so I’m proud to say I eat my own cooking!

Why has ‘The Oasis’ been so successful?

It’s still early days, so its success is still being measured. But we felt the timing was right, with the issue rising on the government agenda, which helped enormously. I’d like to think we had a very considered approach to it, bringing out the documentary and the report, and developing a communications strategy to ensure there was a single message.

We realised this message was too important to let it slip, so our communications team organised the National Youth Commission launch and all the press around that, and co-ordinated with the Salvation Army media unit, the Oasis team, and The Caledonia Foundation – so there was a huge wheel that needed a central voice.

How would you like to see the philanthropic sector changing in the next few years?

I think the trends are really good, it’s great that more and more new foundations are being created. I’d like to see corporate Australia significantly increasing their contribution to the community. One of the things I’m thinking about is, just as we have a compulsory super contribution 9 per cent, we institute a 1 per cent ‘compulsory community levy’, whereby every company was given a big incentive to put a large capital sum upfront to establish a corporate foundation, and then put 1 per cent of profits annually into that vehicle, which has its own independent board of trustees. It’s a pity to think that we have to force it on the corporate sector, but with the right incentives it could be a great awakening for corporate Australia, and they’d see that being a good corporate citizen is not only important but also very rewarding.