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Executive Director, Inspire Foundation

The purpose of the Inspire Foundation is to benefit others by using the Internet to inspire young people, foster generosity and build community. Inspire works closely with leading corporates, government, and community organisations to develop highly innovative and practical Internet-based projects that deliver substantial benefits to young people. Inspire has an impressive track record in using Internet and communications technology to pioneer new models of social services delivery. Our flagship project Reach Out won the 2000 Australian Information Industries Association Award for Best Use of Technology by a Community Organisation and both the 1998 and 1999 Australian Internet Award for Best Community Web site.

In late 1995 when the Net was a relatively unknown phenomenon for many people, we came up with the idea of using this technology to prevent youth suicide. No one had done it before and there were many sceptics and cynics. We had no models to work with. When we started the Reach Out! project we never knew if we'd be successful (but we had a good hunch). Since then we've had over 500,000 visitors, won awards but most importantly saved lives. We've also extended our work around a host of other initiatives which seek to deliver social services online - these can be found at www.inspire.org.au

We currently have requests to replicate the Reach Out! service in New Zealand and The Philippines. We have had preliminary discussions about extending our Digital Bridge Program to the Asian region.

I am the Executive Director and Founder of the Inspire Foundation. I spent many years in the Public Service where I worked in a number of key departments including Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Prime Minister and Cabinet. I was Speechwriter to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Trade prior to taking up a Speechwriter and Senior Adviser position with Prime Minister Keating.

I am also a father, husband and Buddhist who has spent too much of my life doing overly serious things.

Interview with Jack Heath

To what do you attribute the causes for increasing number of youth suicides in Australia? Which strategies do you advocate that business, community, and government use to address this problem?

Well, the good news is that youth suicide rates have been trending downwards for the past few years following a peak in 1997. But they are still far too high - if you take your average Year 12 Australian classroom at least one of those young people will have attempted suicide. Seven of them will have experienced a recognised mental illness and of those seven only two will have sought professional assistance. So we still have a very long way to go.

As to the causes, that's very much the big question. In any one young person who is feeling suicidal there are likely to be a number of contributing factors. Increasingly evidence is emerging that points to a very close link between sexual abuse and suicidal ideation. Other factors are relationship difficulties be they at home or among peers which are then exacerbated by alcohol and other drugs. So through a combination of factors coupled with a lack of experience that tough times do come and pass the young person's suicide attempt can often be a spur of the moment thing that might not have eventuated had they more life experience.

In our very early days, I think I'd have to admit that we tended to focus on the suicide side of things, that this was an issue that we needed to talk about more and get it out in the open. It flowed in part from my own experience of trying to come to terms with my young cousin's very horrific suicide. Early on, however, we made a clear shift in how we dealt with the issue - this was informed by both the young people we dealt with and experts working in the field. So for a long time now we have been talking about "helping young people through tough times". We leave it up to the young person to define what's a tough time for them and we don't focus on suicide per se because we believe that in some circumstances that runs

the risk of becoming counterproductive. Through our Reach Out! service, www.reachout.com.au we provide a whole raft of information, stories and profiles of people who have got through tough times. We are sending a message to young people that if you have a problem you should feel normal, not weird and that you should also know many people have been where you are and found a way to get through it all. We are keen to provide young people to have a sense of control in their own help-seeking behaviour because we believe that leads to more powerful outcomes in both the short and long terms. This is why we use the Internet which is anonymous and available 24 hours a day.

In our work we've linked up with a number of corporates from the clothing store General Pants and working with the young guys manning their stores to the team at Bristol Myers Squibb a pharmaceutical company that is providing training to our youth ambassadors as well as a generous cash contribution. We have lawyers and accountants who provide invaluable pro bono services as well as a whole host of media companies and other who provide the space that enables our message to get out to young people.

So we believe that there are many avenues for government and corporates to link up with community organisations in this area. That said, any partnership that is about providing hope and inspiration is also about preventing youth suicide because it is through building a sense of optimism, belonging and opportunity among young people that they find a reason for living. The word "inspire" means to breathe life in or into. In all this we should never underestimate young people's incredible resilience in the face of what to most of us would seem overwhelming circumstances.

What have been some of the success stories of the Inspire Foundation?

Our key success has been the number of young people who have told us that Reach Out! has stopped them from suiciding. Every three months or

so we get a piece of feedback from a young person telling us that thanks to Reach Out! being there so are they. At the same time, we are getting constant feedback from young people thanking us for our work and letting us know in now realising they are not alone that their problem suddenly seems smaller and more manageable. We are now averaging around 1200 visitors to the Reach Out! service every day of the year! We have won awards for our work both in Australia and overseas and Harvard Professor Robert Putnam (“father” of the term social capital) has commented “Reach Out! is the best example I have yet seen anywhere in the world of using the Internet to build social capital among young people.”

Our success has also extended to taking the Reach Out! message directly to more than 38,000 young people throughout rural and regional Australia. As part of our commitment to assisting our most marginalised young people most of whom do not have handy Internet access, we have put in place 20 Internet centres in rural NSW and by the end of 2003 we will have established 15 Beanbag centres in marginalised urban communities in the nation’s capital cities. Through these Beanbag Centres we provide a combination of equipment, Internet access and specialised training with the opportunity for young people to build their own websites. We’ve also worked with the young Indigenous people of Kempsey and local Indigenous organisation to develop a very special internet site promoting their health in mind body and spirit. Another major highlight was our inaugural Inspire Conversation in 2002 where we facilitated a dialogue with young people and the Dalai Lama that was broadcast live over the Internet.

As Inspire Foundation evolved and mushroomed into a network of associated initiatives to address key youth issues, how did you secure funding from corporate and government bodies. What difficulties did you encounter and how did you overcome them?

We first started with a \$10,000 grant from Microsoft so working with corporates was something that we have always done. Because we weren't your traditional charity plus the fact that our Board was active in the business world, in particular in the technology area, means we found it relatively easy to link up with corporates. In fact on a number of occasions we were approached by corporates. We are probably at the stage where we have enough corporate partners for our existing initiatives and those relationships range from the philanthropic, to the transactional (ie sponsorships) to the more strategic partnerships as we have with BMS. The important thing in business partnerships is being very clear and realistic about what it is that each can deliver for the other - there is a romantic tendency to want engage more closely than is really possible given limited time and resources on both the corporate and non-profit side.

Because our work seeks to be highly innovative people in business tend to appreciate risk taking more than the government bodies. Also because we don't want to operate in a competitive space, that is, if someone else can do something as well as we can, we'd rather leave it to them, we are often looking for funding for work that governments haven't yet thought about. We receive less than 20% of our funding from Government bodies. That said, we are keen to do more with Governments and should acknowledge that a major grant for the Federal Department of Health was key in getting Reach Out! up and running. One of our challenges is that because we are seen as well connected with corporates and have all the appearances of being "successful" people sometimes think that we'll get the money from somewhere else and they don't think they need to support us. Also having worked in Ministers offices it is sometimes easy to forget that you worked in the bureaucracy as well. It is only in recent times that

we have been able to think about putting aside small amounts that can help us in emergency situations. We still are very much a hand-to-mouth organisation, but we are looking to change that so that we can spend more time on our programs and less time on fundraising.

We have had some issues whereby people from outside NSW see us as the “flash Sydney mob” but by and large we’ve had excellent dealings with a number of Government departments around Australia. If people give us the opportunity we usually deliver results.

What advice would you give to those people who find it difficult to attain seed funding for initiatives that focus on empowering their communities?

While it might be an easy thing to say, if you really believe in what you are doing and have some picture in your mind of a better future for your community then with determination, advice and persistence odds are you can get there. So I’d start from an optimistic base but not underestimate the challenges that lie before you. Obviously having a well thought out proposal with sound strategy and a comprehensive budget is important but take advice from people have started up projects themselves. Also make sure that you look after yourself and take time to step back from your project and ask, “why am I doing this?”. If the answer is because I want to improve the lives of others then time to stop reflecting and get back to work on getting support for your initiative. When I look back on the early days of the Inspire Foundation a logical analysis would probably have suggested that we were mad and crazy dreamers, but those bold visions have now become a reality. Another key thing to do is to assemble around you a team of outstanding people both at a Board/advisory level but also who can work on the project, so it is a team taking it forward rather than just you. Also work out who you are looking to benefit and then talk with them directly about what it is they really want and need. At the end of the day when you seek to be of genuine service to others then the rewards will undoubtedly come, not always as soon as you might like, but they do come.

In retrospect what have been some of the encouraging and disparaging lessons that you gained from your 'political days' in the 80's? Did any of it have an impact in what you do now in your professional life or how you do it? Do you harbour an interest to be involved in Federal Politics today?

I very much enjoyed my time in politics in the late 80s and early 90s. I was buoyed up by the notion that with a vision you can lead people to a better place. And that it only takes a handful of people to effect change at the national level - which of course has its downside as well. I don't believe in the never-changing landscape - political decisions can have profound impacts on people's lives. But you have to be optimistic. You have to believe in people's inherent good nature and common humanity otherwise you end up playing a politics of fear that divides the world into us and them, that appeals to the more base aspects of our natures, that fights other people's wars and hardens our heart towards some of the most desperate people in our community. If you can't imagine a better place for your country then you will never lead people there. The harking back to some romantic notion of a former golden era is not too helpful. I look at the obscene amounts of money that are being spent on defence when I know that with just a fraction of one percent of that directed towards our work we could have such a big impact on the lives of so many more young people. Violence against others, however you dress it up, diminishes us all.

Sadly there seems to be a lack of nobility in politics today - I'm not sure if that is just a cyclical thing or that I am just growing older and more conservative/cynical.

Naturally, I draw on my political experience to gather support for Inspire's work. It means I am comfortable and actually enjoy dealing with polities as well as senior bureaucrats and also senior businesspeople which is important for Inspire. I have a reasonable understanding of the politics of situations and so don't get despondent when things turn out differently from how you had hoped or planned. Polities of all persuasion are basically

decent people but sometimes they seem to have forgotten why they are there and who they were elected to serve.

I've got too much on my plate to be involved in politics and think I am more effective at a social level doing what I am doing. I'm not sure I could stomach the party system or even if people would vote for me. I'd need to feel comfortable with a group of people who shared similar ideas to mine and I'd always want to know I was doing it for the right reason - politics can become so seductive. That said, I'd have to fess up and say there is a political animal that if one of my Buddhist teachers told me it was the right thing to do I wouldn't be too disappointed. But with a young family, a fairly time-consuming spiritual practice and a great organisation that still has a long way to go, I'm happy doing what I'm doing for the rest of my time in public life.

As a Buddhist what does the concept of leadership mean to you? Do you see yourself as a leader?

In Buddhism there is reference to three different types of leadership - I think you find this elsewhere as well. There is the king like approach where you go out and achieve things yourself, lead from the front as it were, and seek wisdom/power in order to benefit others. You go to a better place yourself and invite others to follow. Then there is the captain who steers others in a boat across dangerous and sometimes uncharted waters - somewhat analogous to the coach. You go with others to a better place. Then there is the shepherd who is quiet and goes about making sure his sheep are fed and sheltered often ahead of himself. You ensure others get to a better place before you do. Wise leadership is about knowing when to be a king, captain or shepherd. I am a leader of sorts because I have visions of things being possible and then somehow manage to assemble a team of people to turn those visions into reality - often much better than I had originally envisaged. I would be a much better leader if I had more humility and thought more of others than myself. And didn't take myself so seriously.

Whilst acknowledging that the Internet has been of enormous benefit in reaching out to youth through the Inspire Foundation website and in reaching out to men through the Manhood Online website, have you discovered any limitations of the use of this technology?

It's important that the technology is never seen as an end in itself. We use the technology because that's the best way we know to engage young people (and more generally men) especially those who are feel unsure about what they're going through or are reluctant to speak with others about problems they are facing. We make sure our programs all involve a strong face-to-face component. We want people to be engaging more with their community, their family and their friends as a result of their involvement in our Internet-related initiatives. We do not want to prolong an online experience any further than is absolutely necessary. To that end, it's important that you don't just do things because their technology is available to do something that might be cool or interesting. Technology is only a tool and you should never forget that. I remember a key moment in the Inspire story back in 1995. We had done all this work with Keating in 1994 around multimedia. The Internet was very much at that time about bombs, pornography and making money. I had the good fortune to join around 30 others around the world in an online chat session to ask Deepak Chopra about whether he thought the technology for good and he said absolutely. That really got me excited about what we could do with the technology. As in all issues related to technology they will deliver benefit when used with right wisdom and right motivation.

What would you say has been the driving Force for your involvement in Manhood Online, Network 2121 and the Inspire Foundation?

I don't really know - maybe it's a karmic thing. When I manage to keep my big fat ego out of the way I have moments of wanting to be of real benefit to the world, to relieve the suffering of others and to leave the world a significantly better place because of my time here. I should however own up to moments of grandiosity - part of the 2121 Network driver and my

time in political life was about trying to somehow save Australia because that was easier than facing up to a few personal issues of my own. Working in the non-profit sector you often receive flattering comments which can so easily fuel one's pride. And for many years I've carried an escapist fantasy of being a monk in a cave, but I recently got that monkey off my back. I guess I constantly find that when you join with people to do things for the benefit of others that good things flow. As I need to constantly remind myself, altruism works.

I have two kids whom I want to grow up being proud of their Dad for what I have done for and with them as well as for others. I have found a partner in my wife Catherine, who while completely different from me in so many respects, has had a faith in me that has been so reassuring and constant. I think the first time I ever really felt good about myself was back in 94 or 95 when she said, "you're a good man Jack Heath". I have found in Tibetan Buddhism a compassion and wisdom that knows no bounds. I have had the immense good fortune to spend time with the Dalai Lama, my own special teacher Sakya Trizin, my local teacher Khenpo and many other great masters who constantly reaffirm to me that enlightenment is attainable and that if I can keep walking the path that I can be of benefit countless sentient beings. Of course, whether I do, and how many lifetimes it takes, is entirely up to me. I do however feel like the blind man who has somehow stumbled across a diamond in pile of rubbish.