



Janet Meagher AM honoured as joint Recipient of the 2017 Australian Mental Health Prize

By Warren Heggarty

In November 2017 Flourish Australia's former General Manager, Inclusion Janet Meagher received a well deserved award along with Professor Alan Fels AO- the 2017 Australian Mental Health Prize. Both have been part of the National Mental Health Commission.

Janet has often told the story of how she was 'locked up' in Gladesville Hospital with a diagnosis of Paranoid Schizophrenia. In those days there seemed to be no hope of her leaving the hospital let alone taking her human rights message to the highest places.

This was in the days before the Richmond Report in 1983 which led to major de-institutionalisation. Janet was eventually discharged from Hospital, became a Churchill Fellow, founded and led a mental health advocacy company (which is now known as BEING) and was a Secretary of the World Federation for Mental Health.

Janet joined PRA (a forerunner of Flourish Australia) as Director of Employment where one of her many roles was to take this magazine form a humble workplace newsletter to the magazine it is today. 'Before my time, it was a small irregular newsletter for employees at the old PRA Redfern factory. Mohammed Alkhub and the then "Welfare Officer" Stephen Correy had produced three or four issues over a number of years. When I came onto the scene I took it over and revamped, redesigned and restored it, offering it as a quality magazine with informative, attractive format and aspirational content for the entire organization,

Left: L-R Ita Buttrose, Janet Meagher AM, Prof Allan Fels AO, Tanya Davies MP, Prof Phil Mitchell

reflecting all sites and activities undertaken by PRA. We even began a subscriptions list - resulting in a wide circulation.'

Janet also authored a book (later translated into Japanese) called Partnership or Pretence which outlined the difference between real progress in the mental health service consumer movement and mere tokenism.

"...not only have you managed your own voices, but you have advocated for people who are voiceless."
-Jessica Rowe

Later, her title became General Manager, Inclusion until her retirement in 2013. She was also at that time one of the National Mental Health Commissioners. In 2013 the NMHC released a 'report card' on mental health in our society called 'A Contributing Life.' Janet often spoke about the importance of a contributing life for all people.

After receiving the award, Janet joined a panel on the STUDIO 10 TV program. (Meagher, 2017) She spoke about how she dealt with the experience of hearing and speaking to voices. Panellist Jessica Rowe observed that 'not only have you managed your own voices but you have advocated for people who are voiceless.'

Janet described the difficulties with

basic living that face people with serious mental health issues. 'Who would give them a job? Who would give them an opportunity to marry their son or daughter?'

One of the causes that Janet has championed is physical health. She pointed out that people with a diagnosis of serious mental health issues also have debilitating physical health problems, not just because of their issues, but often because of medication.

While with PRA she convened an important forum on iatrogenic health problems (that is, health problems caused by medicine) among people with mental health issues. Speakers covered all manner of topics from Constipation to Alcohol and Other Drugs to General Practice to the need for a 'no wrong door policy' in health systems. ccCHIP at Concord Hospital is an example of a health service that takes this badly needed approach to the physical health of people with mental health issues. Homelessness was another issue covered. PRA/Flourish Australia established the Back On Track Health Program in recognition of the importance of dealing with 'metabolic syndrome,' illnesses like obesity and diabetes.

Those who know Janet realise that for all her work trying to fix the system, her greatest influence has been upon the many individuals whose lives she has touched and changed forever. Those people form a giant grapevine along which the message of hope spreads. They have a voice.

On Studio 10, although Janet mentioned shock treatments and medications that 'turn your brain to pulp', she actually credited the beginning of her own recovery journey to 'a most excellent psychiatrist.' He spoke to her strengths, which enabled her to create a future for herself, a reason to recover.

She told the STUDIO 10 panel that one of the best things that could happen is if employers took on an employee with a serious mental health issue and encouraged them. That would give people 'a reason to get better.' Once you have that reason the road to recovery opens up.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_DIZfC-kSrM