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Full transcript of
an interview with:

David Pearson

Conducted on:

22 March 2019

Interviewer:

Allison Murchie

Transcribed by:

Deborah Gard

For:

The **Don Dunstan Foundation**
20th Anniversary Oral History Project

1999–2019 celebrating 20 years of action for a fairer world



DON DUNSTAN FOUNDATION 20th Anniversary **ORAL HISTORY** PROJECT

NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT

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Abbreviations: The interviewee's alterations may be identified by their initials in insertions in the transcript.

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A series of dots, indicates an untranscribable word or phrase.

A dash, – indicates a pause or a digression as occurs in informal conversation.

Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, - - -

Spelling: Wherever possible the spelling of proper names and unusual terms has been verified. A parenthesised question mark (?) indicates a word that has not been possible to verify to date.

Typeface: The interviewer's questions are shown in **bold print**.

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This is Allison Murchie interviewing David Pearson at the State Library on 22nd March 2019. This is the 20th anniversary project of the Don Dunstan Foundation. I thank you very much for coming along and being part of this very exciting project. I'll just get a few details. What is your full name David?

David Christopher Pearson.

And when and where were you born?

In Adelaide on 15.12.1982.

Quite clearly from your age you weren't a cohort of Don's or lucky enough to have worked with him.

No, from what I can tell I am the first executive director of the Don Dunstan Foundation to never have met Don, which I guess means it's a start of a new era of making the Dunstan legacy relevant to a new generation.

It has to be, yes.

I see that as part of my job.

That's a huge challenge.

Yes.

OK, simply because you didn't know Don personally – obviously you would be aware of his history, what I'd like to start with in this interview today is talking a little bit of your history. I don't particularly want to go through all of your childhood – perhaps if we could start at university because it's quite clear from the short resume that I found online that you are a political animal from fairly early on. Would that be an accurate statement?

Yes.

So you went to Adelaide Uni?

Yes, I won't start through the whole childhood but I think it's interesting to know. My parents migrated from the UK and they first moved to Sydney. They decided if they were going to stay in Australia, they rethought what they were going to do. I only knew this story after I took on this job but my dad tells me that Mum and Dad decided to move to Adelaide because of what Don Dunstan's Government was doing, which was very interesting.

And that's a fabulous story that I've actually heard several times.

Many times before – I have heard that story from many others - - -

But not about your own parents.

No, I didn't know that from my parents, that it was one of the reasons they moved to South Australia because of the lifestyle, the food, the wine, the culture and how that was all being emphasised by Don when he was the Premier in that era. So they moved over because there was this interesting guy doing all this stuff in South Australia. That meant my upbringing was in South Australia. I was born here but then we moved away and lived overseas internationally - - -

Where did you go?

We lived in Papua New Guinea a few times - - -

Because of your parents' work?

Yes, Dad was a teacher so we moved around a bit and that – international experiences and then we ended up settling down and doing most of my high schooling in Alice Springs. Both the international experience and the Alice Springs experience gave me a strong sense of social justice because I saw the inequality that existed in the world.

Certainly in those two places.

Yes, Papua New Guinea is one of the poorest countries in the world, and Alice Springs with all the challenges it has with all the Aboriginal issues up there – poverty, racism and other things. Anyway, all of that gave me a very front-seat row of issues of discrimination and inequality.

So you fitted right into the ethos of what Don was about, particularly in the disadvantaged and the Aboriginal people. They were some of his very strong motivations.

Yes. So I went to the University of Adelaide and then I came across - - -

What did you study there?

I did International Relations and Media and I came across the Dunstan Foundation just by coincidence because it was part of the University of Adelaide and I volunteered through some events when I was a student. I think just because of one of the people who worked at the foundation – she was just friendly and I came across her. So I did that.

What did you volunteer in?

There was an event on the lawns of Adelaide Uni in front of the Elder Hall. I don't remember what it was for but I just served wine - - -

But you knew it was about the Don Dunstan Foundation.

Well, I wanted to get involved in the foundation because what its mission was was interesting to me. I've always sort of had a real interest in – did my undergraduate and then I did my honours thesis and - - -

What was that on?

The future of social democratic politics. The basis of my thesis was that it's all well and good to win particular arguments and to win particular elections but we need to change the way in which politics happens to make long-term change. In order to do that you need what the research calls progressive infrastructure and I see the Dunstan Foundation as an incredibly important piece of progressive infrastructure for South Australia.

It's a good phrase.

So that was part of my thinking about getting involved with the foundation as a volunteer back when I was at uni. When I finished my degree and did my honours degree I got offered a position in Penny Wong's office and my career took off.

That's a pretty good place to start. Let's talk through some of the most – I've read the names and they're all friends. I know what sort of people they are. You were picked and worked in some very progressive politicians' offices, who would probably understand where you were coming from. How did you get the job working for Penny – that was as an advisor?

Yes, like all things, you just fall into these things sometimes. I got involved and interested in politics when I was at uni. I ran and became the student union president, the president of the Students' Association. The Voluntary Student Unionism Bill was being put to the federal parliament at the time, so I was quite active in the campaign to oppose that. We unfortunately lost by one vote in the Senate so voluntary student unionism came in but in the process of campaigning on that I met Penny. She had a position come up in her office. I actually hadn't finished my honours degree so I went and worked for Penny almost full-time and finished my honours off part-time.

As an advisor?

Working in her electorate office but working on her shadow ministerial portfolio.

All of it!

At the time she had Corporate Social Responsibility – the interest I have in that continues to this day. It's a big part of the work that we do at the Dunstan Foundation now. She had Workforce Participation and Corporate Social responsibility – they were the two portfolios.

So you would be pretty impressed with the award that she just won this week.¹

Definitely, yes.

This is irrelevant to this interview but it just says who Penny is, and that couldn't have been a better place to start your political career.

Yes, absolutely. When I talk to the staff at the foundation these days I often tell them stories of the things that I learnt and the lessons of the pressure that the high standards and the really high level at which Penny operates are incredible. She operates at a high level.

I'm also quite overwhelmed by the breadth of her knowledge, not just the way that she presents herself but when she is put on the spot she's impeccable.

Yes.

I don't know how much time she must spend keeping herself at that level.

Well, one of my jobs when I worked for her was to brief her before Question Time. I would spend the better part of the morning getting all the information together, making sure I knew the ins and outs of this issue and then you'd get a half hour to brief her before Question Time and she would just rip it apart. She'd say, 'I understand that but what about this?' I've been thinking about this issue for two hours trying to get my head across it! I've been talking to all the experts and she's figured it out in 10 seconds and she's figured out the one thing that I hadn't thought of. That would happen day after day but that forensic nature of her brain and that clear-sightedness, working with political leaders like that, that's what I imagined it would have been like for a lot of people working for Don and they are the stories they tell me.

Very similar to what I've heard as well.

Yes, exactly. I feel like whilst I never met Don, I have worked with a number of really impressive political leaders like Penny Wong and Jay Weatherill, Mike Rann, Mark Butler. I learned so much from all of them.

And they are all in that high, intellectual, fast-thinking area.

¹ Penny Wong was named the 2018 McKinnon Political Leader of the Year. She received the award for her leadership and advocacy in promoting tolerance and inclusiveness in Australia, and for playing a significant role in shaping Australia's foreign policy dialogue. The award also came after her leading role as an advocate for marriage equality during the 2017 postal survey. (source: Women's Agenda)

Progressive, talented, hard-working - - -

You could have got some duds, and you didn't. Let's talk through – how long were you with Penny?

I think it was about four years or so. I worked with her while we were in Opposition, then when in 2007 we won the federal election she got the Ministry for Climate Change and Water, which was a big change from what we were doing in some sense, and a big step up in portfolio. I became her parliamentary advisor for that – helped [guide the passage of] the Federal Water Act, did a lot of the work in the lead-up to the introduction of the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme [PRS] that was ultimately and unfortunately unsuccessful.

You would have had quite a change once they were in government because you would have been travelling a lot more to Canberra than previously or - - -

I was still travelling a lot because I went to all the parliamentary sitting weeks when we were in Opposition and dealt with a lot of the Senate type stuff, so I worked really closely in the Senate with all the Senate procedure and all those sorts of things. I worked closely with all the different Caucus members in relation to consulting on water changes. At the time, the Coorong, the Lower Lakes were drying up, turtles were dying – there was a massive problem with the Murray and we came up with a national plan out of it all. To come up with a plan to fix the Murray and to come up with a plan to address climate change, all done in those sort of heady days of the early government, were very formative in my professional development.

I'm not surprised. How did you cope with Canberra? You were young and single at that stage, I take it.

No, I wasn't single. My current wife and I were together then.

That's a challenge with that sort of travelling.

That is probably the single biggest reason why after however many years I did in Penny's office I decided that I needed to spend some more time in Adelaide.

Yes, that's very hard on a relationship.

Yes.

So that was a good time with Penny but you needed to look at a local base – understood.

Yes, work/life balance, so I took an opportunity – an outlet came up to become Mike Rann's social inclusion advisor, and I worked there - - -

How did you get that one? Was it just offered to you more or less?

A friend of mine raised the fact that Mike was looking for the role, and it had been advertised, and said that I should apply. I spoke to a few other people and they strongly encouraged me to do it. I did an interview and then I got the job basically.

What was the interview like? Who did that?

At the time it was Jill Bottrill, who was the Deputy Chief there, Nick Alexandrides, the Chief of Staff, and Rowan Roberts, who was the chief economic advisor for Mike.

Any idea what you were going to be like – you'd been at the top level with Penny so you had a fair idea of how these things would work. How did it work with Mike – was it the same sort of pace?

No, it was very different – state government is very different to federal government and it's a very different level of engagement you have in the issues as well. At the federal government level it's really big picture stuff, and I wasn't doing policy work for Penny. I was doing parliamentary, political, Caucus liaison, all that sort of stuff. I really did want to do policy – policy has been at the heart of my interest in politics.

That would relate back to your studies as well. You really wanted to get things done, didn't you?

Yes, so it was a policy opportunity. It was in social policy, which at that point I had never worked in and hadn't really studied because all my studies were on international relations and media and then political theory. Social policy got in my blood and it's in there now and it's never coming out, I reckon!

How did it get in your blood?

I was the social inclusion advisor for Mike so they were doing some rather - - -

What were some of the things they were doing?

Mental health, homelessness, young offending, education pathways, employment, inequality and all the stuff that, basically, we work on now at the Dunstan Foundation.

I was going to say, that sounds like a list of the foundation things.

Exactly, it almost overlaps entirely. I worked in Mike's office for a while doing all of that.

What was he like to work for?

I worked for Mike sort of towards the end of his time as Premier. I left just before he finished up as Premier. He was an incredible campaigner, an incredibly good communicator and had some fantastic ideas early on in his Premiership. When I arrived I got to help implement a lot

of what was going on. They'd come up with this framework for social inclusion and I worked very closely with the Commissioner for Social Inclusion, who was Monsignor David Cappo. I worked almost equal parts for the Commissioner as I did for the Premier. Working for Mike was an incredible opportunity to work on those things and to try and drive some change and have incredible freedom from Mike to pursue that, working closely with the Commissioner. Any time you'd go to Mike with an idea he would try to help make it happen. It was a great privilege to work in that kind of environment. That said, he was coming towards the end of his time as Premier so I think fair commentators would admit that he was running a little bit out of steam towards the end.

I think he'd had his time – that's a fair way of probably putting it, isn't it?

Yes, so when the opportunity came up to go to the federal government again, I did jump at that chance. As I was saying, I got social policy into my blood and at the time we'd just had the election where Julia Gillard had scraped back in with a minority government. Tony Abbott was the Opposition Leader. He'd run a campaign saying – he didn't have a health policy but did have a mental health policy and so it looked like the Labor Party hadn't done much on mental health in the campaign and it looked like there was a need to do a lot more on mental health. That was recognised by Julia, and she appointed Australia's first dedicated Mental Health Minister, and Mark [Butler] asked me if I would come and be his senior advisor for mental health, which in some ways made me Australia's first dedicated Mental Health Minister's dedicated mental health advisor!

It's pretty impressive.

That's a bit of a long bow though because there were mental health advisors before that.

Yes, but this was the first time it was in a ministry.

Yes, dedicated ministry. Anyway, I went to work for Mark and we put together a \$10 billion mental health package over the next 18 months.

\$10 billion.

Yes. I'm terrible with numbers, dyslexic; it might be four. No, it was 10.

A lot! – we can check those details.

I think it was 10.² Anyway, we put that together and that was a phenomenal experience to go around the country consulting with mental health consumers, activists, experts, clinicians,

² Post-interview: confirmed by DP that the package amount was \$10 billion.

and figuring it out what it is we could do to transform the mental health system. I think we did a huge amount of really good work and I think it was really helpful what we did.

I remember when the consultations were in Adelaide, just for the general public, and I went along. I knew Mark from South Australian unions and I was so impressed how quickly he had got his head around the ministry, but also the scope of what you were planning was outstanding. Phenomenal probably is the right word.

Yes, and Mark was super smart but also understands the Labor Party and how it works, and the government, and was able to make sure the government – he rallied the government to put a really strong package behind this. So it was fantastic. We took a really great step forward in mental health reform in Australia. I guess the big take-out for me was even with the phenomenal amount we put into the system we barely touched the sides.

Well, that's clear now.

Yes, so that was one of the big lessons for me about the importance of system change, not just doing more good work and getting some reforms on the way through to enable that to be funded, and all those sorts of things, but the important thing is you need to change the way systems operate if we are to have sustainable long-term change at scale. That was a really big lesson for me. Shortly after that Jay Weatherill got the Premiership and I got a call and they said, 'Would you be interested – we've got a position vacant in Jay's office?' The whole Canberra travelling thing is not fantastic so it was a very great opportunity, and I'd been a big admirer of the way that Jay sought to do politics. If you think back to what I was saying in my thesis about we need to change the way we do politics, Jay's ambitions around involving people in decision making and reforming the democratic process was very appealing to me. So, yep, went to work for Jay, basically did all the same social policy stuff I'd done for Mike but - - -

What was your title there?

I was senior policy advisor for Jay.

That's a fairly big title.

Yes, it was the same title I had for Mark Butler.

I'm thinking of the role – you're moving from a federal minister to a state premier's office. That's a pretty big deal.

The role at the time, I should say, I was never off.

I was just about to ask, what sort of hours do you put in in a job like that?

It goes up and down – at election times there are a lot of hours, when there is a crisis, when there's a royal commission – there are very long hours. At other times you can get a bit more flexibility.

You just take that with the job, don't you? Do you get overtime or is it just a set salary with an expectation you would do everything?

Yes.

Fair enough.

So I was working in Jay's office and one of the things that we worked on – I worked on a whole range of things: public sector reform was a new area, I did a lot more in the Arts. I had done a little bit with the Thinkers program when I was in Mike's office but somebody else looked after it most of the time. I did a lot more of that when I was working for Jay and then that gets us into the history of the Thinkers program and how it attached to the Dunstan Foundation.

We'll certainly go into a bit of detail on that as well. OK, you're in a pretty impressive work environment doing exactly what you want to do with your life, from university, so you must have been in heaven work-wise but you made a change and you moved on. Before we move on, did you ever consider a political career for yourself? You'd worked with the cream of the crop.

Yes, and I had been involved in the political process since I'd left university. I think it's really important that people who run for parliament have experiences that represent a broader perspective on life. I'm not saying I wouldn't ever want to be a politician – I don't want to be one now. I love what I'm doing.

You're still young and you've got a young family.

Yes, and I had done 10 years plus in politics, so as an advisor at senior levels and my interest in politics had always been the impact that policy can have on people's lives. I am interested in the political process and campaigning and those sorts of things but it's not the thing that gets me out of bed in the morning. I don't want to be a political campaigner; I want to be somebody who – the thing that interests me is policy. I get really excited when governments announce policies and looking at it and seeing what it is and what impact that change might have, and those sorts of things. So if that is my interest I've kind of risen to the top of the way in which I could influence that. If I was to go into politics I'd have to find a seat, run for parliament, do all the community campaigning, spend my time as a backbencher, all that kind of stuff, and I'd rather have the influence on policy and there are other ways you can do it.

It could take you 10 years in politics to get to the position of influence that you left in, wouldn't it? So I can understand the reason for moving on.

Yes, and then there is also the desire to have an impact on a longer timeframe. Politics is very short-term sometimes, by necessity and the way the political process works, but the great thing about moving into the Dunstan Foundation and being able to do policy over a longer period is that, right we can set a goal, so how do we deal with the problem of homelessness over a 10-year period rather than what happens in the next 12 months, or six months?

Which is as far as politics can - - -

Or how do we get announcements in the next two weeks, kind of thing? It allows you to jump into more detail. The great thing I got was I got a massive opportunity, particularly in South Australia to have a look at everything that was going on in a policy sense from 50,000 feet. I have two kilometres wide knowledge but two inches deep and the opportunity I've got now is to go two kilometres deep but keep all that broader knowledge that I had from previously.

That's a really good way of summing it up. How did you get the job?

We were thinking at the time when I was in the Premier's office about the Thinkers in Residence program. We were trying to push ahead this idea of how do we grow the economy through social policy? Holdens was about to close and we had all those challenges. We were thinking, how do we use every lever of our ability to help grow the economy and make sure everyday people benefit? The government commissioned at the time a royal commission into the nuclear fuel cycle, to look into that. I was kind of arguing, let's have another royal commission into how do we use social policy to grow the economy? This is our biggest job creator – like health, care, education, disability – these are the biggest job creators in South Australia. The Arts and creative sectors certainly employ more people than the mining industry does but we don't look at that as an economic driver.

So I was saying, could we do a royal commission? That wasn't the way we decided to go but the way we decided to go was let's do a Thinkers in Residence program. Let's restart it up and let's focus it on this issue. Then we said, Thinkers program for all its benefits had a few flaws and that's why in the end it got wound up. What we decided was to try and encourage the Dunstan Foundation or someone like that to run it because the Dunstan Foundation had run a previous Thinkers in Residence before. So I had a chat to the foundation and they were going through a strategic planning process and said, 'We're thinking about making some changes; this is quite good timing. Let's get back to you.' They got back to me and said, 'Yes, we are making changes and if you're interested there is a vacancy in the executive director role. Would you be interested in applying?'

Who was the previous director?

The previous director was Donna Harden. The chair of the committee of management, Cathie [King], said to me, 'Would you be interested in applying?' I said, 'Absolutely.' I went and did a job interview and eventually, long story short, got the job.

When was that?

When I left Jay's office it was August 2016 so I started in September 2016.

Now, you've gone from politics where you've got every resource available, staffing, transport, everything you need technology-wise – the foundation didn't quite have the same structure. Tell me about the office where you started.

When I first started there were three staff members, all part-time. One had gone on sick leave and eventually never came back so I never met that person. The other two were part-time and were away I think for a little while so my first week at the Dunstan Foundation was just me and Cathie King. She came in and helped me out and it was just me and Cathie for the first little while. As you say, I went from having a ministerial liaison officer, an admin assistant for diary matters – all these people in the Premier's office were shared, of course – a parliamentary officer, a Cabinet officer, a press secretary that would do all those things. So I would go and talk to him and say we've got an announcement coming up at work or a piece of legislation, or whatever. You went to the Dunstan Foundation and I think there were about four computers that actually worked!

This was over in North Terrace, was it?

No, they'd moved into the Grenfell Street office. One of the first things I did, I called the office manager in the Premier's office and said, 'You know my laptop that I had when I was in the Premier's office, what are you doing with it?' She said, 'We're in the process of decommissioning it.' I said, 'What does that mean?' To make a long story short, he said, 'You can have the laptop.'

So they just take all the parliamentary stuff off.

Yes, they wipe everything, of course, but then they just gave me the laptop and decommissioned it, so I got to take the laptop with me so the computers at the Dunstan Foundation went from three to four working computers. Anyway, things like that.

How was the foundation funded?

At the time, as of now, and for a long time, the executive director is funded by the Department of Premier and Cabinet, so they second somebody. It was quite funny when I left the Premier's office - - -

You got seconded before you left.

Well, I wasn't a public servant. I was employed under a different part of the Act.

You were a political appointment, not a public servant.

Yes, so now I'm a public servant seconded to the Dunstan Foundation and that has been a long-standing thing for the Dunstan Foundation to have that. The two staff members that we had job-shared a position which is funded by Adelaide Uni, and that was it. The office is provided by Adelaide Uni.

And that's at no charge, isn't it?

Yes, so that's how we were funded. The year I arrived I think the budget was sort of operating in a deficit and we didn't have approved budgets by the committee [of management]. What they would do, they would largely do events, and relatively small events. They experimented with a rather large event with Stephen Fry that you might have heard about. That was fantastic and the Homelessness Conference is a big thing they did. One of the first things that happened when I arrived was the cancellation of the Hugo Migration Update Conference. We'd been running that for a number of years but it sort of lost its way a little bit once Graeme Hugo had passed away – what was its intention and purpose? That was one of the first things we - - -

So you were there for the first week with your desk and no staff. What sort of brief were you given? Did you know what your role was? Who did you report to? – all of that sort of thing.

Cathie was the chair of the committee of management and they had just done a new strategic plan so it was a very clear brief. It was very clearly articulated what the priorities were as part of that plan. Cathie had sort of indicated, yes we were keen to take on the Thinkers project as well. After I'd left the Premier's office I was able to re-engage with seeking the government's support to do that and shortly after that we were able to deliver on that.

For people that are from interstate sitting listening to this interview, explain what your projects were like. Any Adelaide person knows what the Thinkers program is; they know what the Zero program is. Talk through and explain in terms to a non-South Australian what your main programs were. You have changed from little events to massive projects. Let's start with the Thinkers one.

As I was saying before, when I was in the Premier's office we were trying to use social policy to grow the economy. That was the issue we decided to focus the Thinkers program on when we restarted it, but the Thinkers in Residence program was started by Mike Rann. It was a world-leading innovation where you bring experts from around the world to come to South Australia to spend an extended period of time here to understand the local context but to bring their knowledge and expertise and to put it into effect. So that's what the Thinkers program does. It led to broad-ranging change across South Australia; it led to hundreds of millions of dollars worth of investment in the recommendations that came out of the Thinkers' reports – they would do a report at the end of the visit. Yes, that's what the Thinkers program was.

Can you talk about some of the people that came out?

For example, Rosanne Haggerty was a Thinker in Residence on homelessness.

She was amazing.

Yes, and she came out and said, 'We need to change the way we provide support and housing to homeless people.' She pioneered the Common Ground model where you don't just provide a house but you also provide support workers in there. You provide food, you provide dental care, case management, all those sorts of services that a lot of the time were being provided on the street. So it was like, hang on, we're trying to help end homelessness – we need to stop servicing people *in* their poverty, and help them out of it. The Common Ground model was a really revolutionary way of changing that.

She was from New York, was she?

Yes.

She talked about the model that she had in New York with exactly that.

Yes, she pioneered that and it spread all across Australia and there are Common Ground models all over the place now. We've got four or five facilities in South Australia that they announced – a phenomenal success story. So that came out of the Thinkers program and that was based on Rosanne's time here.

How long were they here?

Every thinker was different - - -

Depending on what they were doing.

Yes, in the Thinkers program usually they'd come three or four times and they would come for maybe one to two months at a time – that's when the government ran it. When the Dunstan Foundation took it over – we've got very limited resources by comparison and so rather than them coming for two months or so three or four times, we made a few changes to things. One was, rather than having one thinker and one issue and then cycling through lots of thinkers – homelessness, transport, design, and different things all the time, we said, we're just going to focus the Thinkers program on one issue. How do we do that social and economic development together? – what we eventually started calling the purpose economy. We said, we won't just have one thinker, we'll have multiple, and they'll all help tie together their different ideas and expertise to help us with that challenge because the full breadth of that challenge wasn't replicable in one person, so that's what we did. Rather than putting a report out at the end of the process which would go to government, government would accept all 50 or 60 recommendations in principle but, in practice, maybe just accept one or two and do those. What we would do is we would put out the recommendations as we go and we would make the recommendations relevant to all members of the South Australian community, and the partners in the process, and ask everyone to take collective responsibility for implementing what these thinkers thought, rather than just solely government. That's what we have been doing for the last three years.

Is it working well?

Yes, it has had its challenges. We've got some phenomenal success stories that have come out of it. We are constantly changing the way the Thinker's process works, and learning, and those sorts of things. Yes, it's going really well and there's lots of information - - -

Is funding still a big issue for that though?

Funding is always a challenge for everything we do. I think what we did with the Thinkers program is we started with a grant from the government. That helped us get going and then we were able to raise funds from a whole range of places. I think there's an open question at the moment of how sustainable that is for us without another injection of government funding, and it looks unlikely that we'll get it.

Not with this government.

A significant injection of funding – we might get small amounts here and there and we may be able to make the Thinkers model keep working but it is a challenge.

One of the differences with interstate organisations is the philanthropic attitude there compared to here. We don't have it to the same degree in South Australia – you get the \$50 and \$100 donations. You don't get the half million

ones which you would need to set up big programs. Have you ever worked out why that is – South Australia compared to the eastern states?

I think we do have some philanthropic organisations, and the ones we have are incredibly supportive of what we're doing. There's only so much they can do. We are a small state with high levels of disadvantaged and a lot of the philanthropy comes from high net worth individuals. The ones that we do have in South Australia, rightly or wrongly, prioritise the Arts – in Arts it's a qualitative creative place.

You're right and that's also a Dunstan legacy.

Yes, it is. It's not necessarily a bad thing in that - - -

Yes, it's all good.

Yes, but we also don't have a culture of philanthropy in Australia like in many other countries. In some sense, that's not a bad thing because it is the responsibility of government to create equality of opportunity, but there is a very strong role for philanthropy I think in innovation in a way that government can't always do. I think that's what we are working on through the Thinkers program in supporting the philanthropic sector to be able to support greater innovation in a way which creates social change.

Let's talk about another one of your big programs and then we can talk about some of the smaller functions later if we have time. Zero?

Yes, if you think back to when you were asking me about when I first started at the foundation and what things were going on, one of the things I did early on was call a meeting about the Homelessness Conference. We had just finished the Homelessness Conference and when the staff that we had came back from the leave they were on and were back in the office we said, right, we've got to start planning for the Homelessness Conference next year. I said all right, so we'd just had this inspirational speech by, coincidentally, a former Thinker in Residence, Rosanne Haggerty, who was the keynote for the conference just before I started at the foundation. She basically said, 'Here's everything I've learnt since I've set up this Common Ground model – there is an approach to dealing with homelessness that you can use that has worked in the US in a functional sense, ending street homelessness for six communities across the US, and you should do the same thing here. Adelaide is uniquely placed to deal with this.' She said that at our conference.

Everyone was fired up and I said, 'Right, we're organising the conference for next year; we're going to get a new keynote. Who should we get to talk about everything? – but hang on, what are we going to do about what she just said – this challenge [she set] for us?' We called all the

homelessness sector organisations and I felt a bit nervous about this because I'd just come out of the Premier's office to the Dunstan Foundation. Who am I to call a meeting of all the homelessness sector? So I called the head of SACOSS [Ross Womersley] and he said, 'Go for it, it's a great idea. Absolutely do it.' That really pumped my tyres up. We called the meeting, put everyone in the room, we talked about it and they were all fired up and said we absolutely need to do something and we need to find a way to make [it work]. I said, 'This is going to take some work. I don't have the resources for it. Are people willing to chip in a little bit of funding so I can hire a project officer to work on this?' They said yes, and they all chipped in a bit. Then we went to state government and said this thing is getting bigger than Ben Hur – will you give us some funding? The Premier said yes.

Rosanne has done all the conceptual work on this, and we were able to get a grant basically to do what we called a design project – a 90-day change project – to design the project, what we were calling at the time the Zero Project, to get it off the ground. I was thinking yesterday – it was quite funny – the projects that use this approach are called Advance to Zero and the Functional Zero approach. Sorry, I skipped a bit out of the process, which was when I was in the Premier's office still with Jay. He said, 'We had a dinner with Rosanne while she was here on the sidelines of the conference. You should come to this dinner – Rosanne is talking about this Zero Project.' Jay got the wrong end of the stick – it was Functional Zero but he called it Zero Project. He said, 'Come and be part of this Zero Project conversation.' So I started referring to it as the Zero Project and that's how it got its name, just by Jay getting the wrong end of the stick from - - -

So, we are unique yet again!

Yes, most other places call this Advance to Zero or use the Functional Zero approach and we're calling it the Adelaide Zero Project. Anyway, that's kind of funny. Long story short, we had that meeting, put everyone together, hired a project officer, got some funding from state government, did a 90-day project and the whole thing has glown from there. What is at the heart of this is using the lesson that Rosanne learnt, which really quickly is, for many years she had been building Common Ground facilities, which was a really good service model and she says, hang on, service models are great but we need to change the system. That's a lesson I learnt when I was in Mark Butler's office. So she has said, how are we going to change the system? They were going to run a campaign across America to build more houses and they were going to call it the 100,000 Homes Campaign.

They launched that and they said we're going to build them in four years, or whatever – they did it in three. There were 100,000 new homes and they waited for the data to come out and they're thinking, right, this is a huge success, aren't we great, built 100,000 homes,

homelessness should reduce by 100,000 people. It didn't – it reduced by about 40,000. They thought, what's wrong here? We're just building more houses and putting more people into a system that is fundamentally broken and not meeting their needs and so they are just getting churned. People were falling in and out of homelessness constantly and they were not actually reducing homelessness. She realised, we're counting the wrong way. We need to count up to an output of 100,000 houses and we need to count down to an outcome of zero people sleeping on the street. But zero is not actually achievable, not in the short-term anyway, absolute zero. If you set a goal to reduce to zero the number of people sleeping rough on the streets of a community and you say you're going to do it by next Friday, and you achieve that, Monday comes around and one more person is sleeping rough, you've failed. Everyone then says this doesn't work, so you need a measure that over time – that is effectively what Functional Zero is. They said, 'If you measure [homelessness in] the community that you're working in and you set a goal to achieve functional zero, the system needs to place more people into [housing] than are coming into the system in that same period – you will be at functional zero.' There's a bit more complexity as to how that is measured but that's essentially the guts of it.

That is what she pioneered and she said that any community that does that, you need to know every single person by their name and what's going on – a revolutionary concept, know the people we are trying to help by name, which we haven't known. Track that, share that data, make it open and encourage collaboration rather than competition between service providers. That is effectively what the project is about. We're copying how that has worked in other communities but those communities have successfully achieved it. We are on our journey to try and reduce homelessness here.

How are we going with it here?

We've achieved a huge amount of progress and milestones. We now know how many people are sleeping rough. We previously didn't know that definitively.

How many – do you know?

The other night it was about 120. We now know them all by name; we know what their issues are and what they need, and those sorts of things. We are updating that list daily and what we're doing is taking that information and showing how the system is operating. We now know that there are about 120 people sleeping rough but the bigger challenge we have is – I haven't got the numbers in front of me but there are about 21 people a month get placed into housing. Then we have a significantly larger number which is flowing into the system. So the numbers go in and out – what we do is we show on a dashboard monthly how many people

are coming in and out of the system. We are now tracking that and we've been doing that for three or four months. We are the first community in Australia to be able to publicly display that data in this way. It shows that the biggest challenge we have is not placing people into housing, it's stopping people from falling into homelessness in the first place.

Talk through some of the cases. We're quite familiar with American model, like people who have got three jobs and are still homeless. What's it like in Adelaide?

Everything that anyone can think about, it's a bit of all of those things. They are complicated and there's never any one issue. It's always a combination of what is the thing that pushes them over the edge. That's probably what we know the least about at the moment.

So that's your next challenge.

Exactly. Now that we are collecting that data and now that we know that, we can find out where are they coming from. Are they being discharged from hospital onto the street; are they being discharged from corrections onto the street? Is that what is causing street homelessness – finding some of those reasons – or where are the people who are just about to fall into homelessness and then end up on the street? What is the last point of contact government services and systems had with them and how do we improve those services to make sure that we can actually sustain them in their housing? It's madness what we do – it costs the taxpayer more to have a person sleep rough on the streets than it does to put them in a hotel room but we continue to allow that situation to persist because of policies we've set. We have a policy that says if you rock up to an emergency department we will take you. We have a policy that if you commit a crime we will put you in gaol and they will deal with all the costs of that. We don't have a policy that says if you have no house we will put you in one, and we should. As a civilised society isn't that a basic, a safety net that we ought to be able to provide? We haven't had enough evidence and data to understand what is involved in that and how we make that happen.

I know, particularly when I come into work, just along Grenfell Street there would probably be half a dozen of the same homeless people each day. I give them money or whatever occasionally, but the situation of their health – I can see some of them should be in hospital.

A lot of the time they are in and out constantly. We talk to the emergency department people and part of the challenge they've got is that they've got homeless people who use the emergency department like a pharmacy. It costs them a fortune. They are in and out – you can't keep your health if you're sleeping on the streets, and there's never just one thing going on. If you look through the data it shows that the biggest thing that's going on is physical

health; the second biggest thing that's going on is mental health; the third biggest thing that's going on is drugs and alcohol. These things are all connected. If you didn't have a mental health challenge before you found yourself sleeping on the streets, you're probably going to have one by the time you end up sleeping on the streets for a while, so it's all interconnected.

Part of their survival, isn't it?

And the drug and alcohol thing again – it's complicated and the Functional Zero model is about helping to simplify the system, but helping make sure that it changes and reforms and improves itself.

You're actually doing that and you've got the evidence to do it.

Yes, the interesting thing about what the Dunstan Foundation is doing is in some sense we're not doing any of that. What we're doing is supporting all the service providers to do that. We don't have the name list – that's run by a service called Neami. We don't go out and understand everyone by name – that is helped by Hutt Street. We don't do the housing allocation – the Housing Department provides those houses. What we're doing is providing a coordination function as a safe, independent, non-threatening entity that we are. We're not a government who is ever going to defund someone; we're not a service provider who is ever going to be up against their colleagues in a competitive tender process. We are an independent organisation who can provide advice on behalf of what is going on in the system and say, if we all agree that this is our goal to achieve Functional Zero what do we need to do that? – and constantly provide that advice to all the players in the system to say this is what you need to do, and hold them accountable to that. They have asked us to do that, we didn't ask them.

That's an amazing project. Would you say that Zero is the biggest thing?

Yes, Zero is by far the biggest project.

You certainly do very good publicity on it just through Facebook and your newsletters and stuff like that. I've always assumed that is your biggest project.

Yes, Thinkers program is the second biggest project but the Zero Project is by far the biggest. I came to the Dunstan Foundation for all the reasons we talked about, like the passion of Don's vision for South Australia, the idea of a progressive foundation that helps build that progressive infrastructure, the policy work that Thinkers programs focused on, on growing the economy through social innovation, and then the bigger thing we now do with this

homelessness project, which I never expected, but we've sort of fallen into it and it's just evolved and it is constantly evolving.

When you look back – do you just want to read out the little bit of paper I gave you earlier about Don's vision for the foundation and then, do you think that you've been achieving that? I think it's a nice little quote that I actually got from the first brochure that was put out for membership of the Don Dunstan Foundation.

Yes, and we've been using it a lot lately in terms of the 20th anniversary which was what precipitated this oral history project. Don said:

I want my death to be useful. My fervent hope is that public support will allow the Don Dunstan Foundation to become a driving force in the making of a better and fairer society for all.

That's what he wanted his foundation to do.

So 20 years down the track how do you think he would look back on what you and previous people have achieved?

I think he would say that the foundation has done a lot of really good work over many years and I think we've definitely done that. I think that he would probably be pleased with the increasing pace in which we're trying to do that in recent years. From what I know about Don – and one of the quotes that always sticks in my mind is, 'there's more to do.' He had ambition for South Australia; he had ambition for himself for change. I think that's one of the things that I've had in my mind a lot since I've been at the foundation, this idea of ambition, that we should be ambitious for South Australia, we should be ambitious to shine a light across the rest of the country like he did when he was the Premier. There was this progressive beacon that shone from South Australia and we can do that again. That was part of the rationale behind calling the Thinkers programs focus the 'Social Capital Residencies' because we think South Australia can be the social capital of Australia and that it can lead, and not be seen as the place that – we have these high levels of disadvantage and those sorts of things. We are actually leaders – that was the purpose for which this colony was founded. We have one of the only cities in the world nestled in the middle of a park land - - -

So far! We might get a few more hotels around and football ovals and stuff!

We have Australia's, by far, best festivals and we lead in so many ways. We just need to get our confidence back. Don helped us find our confidence and I think the foundation can play a role in helping reshape a future vision for what that looks like for us and to be that driving force, as he says. That's the leadership role and the ambition role. I think we're trying to do that and I think the Zero Project is. How we were asked to do it, I think, is something that says, hang on, we do have a really strong role.

Do you think the other states are seeing what we are doing?

Yes, we get a lot of queries about both the Thinkers work and the Zero Project, and how others can do that and it's an ambition of mine to sort of franchise the Thinkers model in some ways to help others use that theory of change because it is a great model for making change happen. That's definitely something we're keen to do. Then we are working with a whole bunch of organisations nationally and internationally on the Zero Project and sharing that knowledge. We have national and international partnerships on that one. The Zero Project continues to grow like a chemistry experiment. The Thinkers program is a work in progress in terms of finding a way to make that sustainable.

What about some of the smaller projects? Certainly, those two are both clearly your biggest projects.

Yes, just as a reminder, the strategic plan we have at the moment is that we will focus on five areas. Don set a vision for the foundation and then the committee of management came up with a strategic plan when I started and said we will focus on homelessness, which is the Zero Project. We focus on community development, which is where this Thinkers program and the purpose economy work kind of comes in. Then the three other areas: mental health, migration and Aboriginal economic empowerment and reconciliation. So they are the kind of other focus areas.

Through the Zero Project and Thinkers we do work on all of those three as well. Thinkers: how do we support migrant workforces through entrepreneurship and those sorts of things? How do we support peer workforce? We've recently won a grant to get a peer workforce cooperative off the ground and that is part of our mental health work. How do we support indigenous business, in particular through procurement, is also some work we're doing through Thinkers. Through Zero, obviously there are some significant issues on Aboriginal homelessness – mental health is a big part of - - -

All of those would fit into that.

Yes, so they interrelate there but we do do a few things in each of those areas as well.

So you are doing that with minimal staff and little money – how are you getting it done?

Goodwill. There is massive amounts of goodwill for Don, for the foundation that exists in his name and for the intent of what we're trying to do through those projects. We have more volunteers than we can support.

How many volunteers are you looking at?

I could give you the numbers – the numbers have increased - - -

They're huge.

Yes, when I first started we didn't have many volunteers at the foundation other than through events. We've always had some very long-standing volunteers at the foundation to support the events work that we do, and we still do. I think you might be interviewing one or two of them.

Two of them.

Viv and Vince, yes – amazing.

They've been there for 20 years, since the start.

Yes, so they are more the Dunstan Foundation than me. They've been incredible. We've had volunteers in that sense, but that was maybe 15 volunteers coming in and out – not the same people. I think we're upwards of – I won't make a number up but it's - - -

Considerable.

Yes, and the number of hours had gone into four numbers [per year]³.

So it's like a lot of organisations, they wouldn't survive without volunteers.

Yes, our volunteers are massive. The other part about how we work is the interns. We are part of the universities and one of the things that the vice-chancellors who are on the Board of Management said was that working to graded learning is important and giving students an opportunity to do internships at the foundation. We have put on an intern coordinator and we've massively increased the number of interns we've got as well.

Do you have one at a time or do you have multiple?

We rarely have less than five. We've got more internships going on all the time. We've almost always got a social work intern from Flinders; we've almost always got a media or arts intern from Adelaide Uni – humanities; we've almost always got a marketing or business student from the Business School. We take a whole range – events management interns from Flinders Uni again. There's a whole range of them so we've massively increased the interns, the volunteers - - -

And you don't pay for them.

³ Post-interview: volunteer hours increased from 140 in 2016 to 2600 hours in 2018.

No, the volunteers - - -

How long do they come for?

They're all different.

So that varies – I know lots of organisations have interns; they'll want a social worker or whatever.

The thing about the interns for us though is whilst we don't pay for them, what we do make sure we do is that they are all getting academic credit for what they're doing. This isn't a free workforce – there is a lot of exploitation of people doing internships in the workforce these days, so we're very strong about making sure that they get academic credit for what they are doing, otherwise they are volunteers, and we're very clearly about the demarcation, and we're very lucky that a lot of the interns who come and do a placement with us want to volunteer afterwards as well.

That was my next thought, that once they're hooked they'd come back.

But the starting point is you come here to do an academic placement and you need to make sure you get knowledge that supports your academic learning, so it is work-integrated learning, it's not free labour. That creates some challenges for us because it needs to be supported on our end to make sure they get a meaningful educative experience, so we have put some resources into that to make sure we have a volunteer/intern coordinator, who does a great job. I think that's one of the outstanding success stories in recent years for us that is not very well-known. A lot of those students go on to get jobs from our partners.

Are they all placed in Grenfell Street in your office?

Yes.

What sort of space have you got there for them compared to your tiny little staff?

[We have] to pack everyone in. Only this week we got confirmation that the office next door to ours we can expand into. We had to get rid of our big boardroom table and put in more desks, then we had to get rid of the smaller table that we had there and then we had to get rid of the lunch-break area and put more and more desks into the office to allow us to keep taking more interns, volunteers, Zero's thinkers staff and all these things. Now we've managed to get the space next door to have a boardroom and to spread out a little bit more, and get a lunchroom back, and those sorts of things. So that's a very exciting period at the moment for us. We don't get the lease until next month but we've unofficially started squatting!

Sounds good to me. Another big one is the Lowitja O’Donoghue Oration. Where did that come from?

This is one of the longest standing things we’ve done. It’s a great event; it’s part of Reconciliation Week every year. Effectively, it is Lowitja’s Oration in her honour but also sort of directed by Lowitja, if you want to call it that way. She chooses the orator and she gives us the instructions about how she wants that event to occur and we organise it on her behalf with Reconciliation SA. I think it’s 14 years that we’ve been doing it. We’re putting a little booklet together of all the previous orations. We’re hoping to launch that at this year’s oration. I think last year [Noel Pearson, orator] was one of the biggest ones we’ve had in many years. It is a challenge with orations because in today’s society, in 2019, people can get information and intellectual stimulation from so many places. You can get it on your iPhone with podcasts and thousands of things like that, so the idea that you need to go out to a town hall and listen to people talk on a stage, people just don’t come out for that in the way that they used to.

The people that come out are people my age – it’s people who grew up without an iPhone and a computer with 24-hour access – they still value going to a function and hearing the spoken word; download it later and keep the speech.

That’s why we’ve been trying to change the ways for some of these events we’ve been doing.

Yes, you need to be able to attract younger people.

Yes, so we’re putting drinks on at the end of the event; we’re putting on art exhibitions as part of the Lowitja event, but it’s also sort of behind another event that we do called AdMental, which if you take into account the changing nature of why do people come out to events – I think people are still going to come out for set piece events like the Lowitja Oration because - - -

They’re always booked out.

It’s harder and harder to get people there to be honest. Anyway, what we did with the mental health thing is we’re thinking about what can we do in the mental health space. We didn’t want to just organise a public lecture on mental health and the importance of mental wellbeing. We were talking to the public health part of SA Health and they said, ‘We’ve got public health week coming. Will you do something on mental health as part of your priorities?’ I said, ‘I don’t want to do a public lecture. What I want to do is something that blurs the line between a public lecture and an arts event.’ The Arts and culture were a big part of Don’s legacy. I’m a big fan of the show *The Gruen Transfer*, and on *The Gruen*

Transfer they have this thing called The Pitch where you get a TV advertising agency to make a pitch about why we should invade New Zealand - - -

That's the best bit of the show.

Exactly, so we decided that we would ask the advertising industry in South Australia to do a video like The Pitch, but rather than have it on why we should invade New Zealand, or something silly like that, how do we better promote public mental health, at a public level not an individual level? We did that and we asked the advertising agencies to do it and they loved it. They took videos and we put them on stage and turned it into a creative event and one of the marketing agencies in town gave us a free branding exercise. They came up with the name AdMental, which I think is very clever and it just kind of evolved from there. Now it has a volunteer organising committee led by a wonderful volunteer called Kath Thomas. The Mental Health Commission, the Mental Health Coalition, the advertising industry – they all back it in a great way and that event keeps going from strength to strength. It's coming up in a month or so, so it's a bit front of mind for me at the moment.

We're running out of time very quickly and we could probably go on for a long time. Let's go back to you – what is your future? Are you staying with the foundation for a while?

Yes, I love what we're doing.

You've got ambition and you've got to do things, but you've changed the way things are done and the way you look at things, exactly with this AdMental, no reflection on previous directors but, as you said, you're the first one that didn't know Don. You come from a different background, you've got that energy and drive. I see you in the foundation for many years to come. Is that how you see yourself?

Yes, I think so, definitely. We've got some more things we want to do and we need to achieve the goal that we've set for ourselves as part of the Functional Zero Project, or the Zero Project. I think we've got unfinished business as a country, as a state, as a foundation in the reconciliation process with Aboriginal people. We want to do a lot more work in that space about supporting Aboriginal economic empowerment. It's not just about how do we get jobs for Aboriginal people, it's how do we put Aboriginal people in control of their own destinies? Economic empowerment is central to that and I think that is something that really resonates with Don's legacy. We're doing a lot of strategic thinking about that at the moment. I think one of the things that we've sort of not had the time or resources to do, but we're trying to do more this year, is to promote the Dunstan legacy. This is part of the 20th anniversary project this year.

You're anticipating my question!

For the 20th anniversary project this year, but next year it will just merge into what we're calling the Labour History Project, which is to promote the Dunstan legacy and raise awareness in those sorts of things. We're using this 20th anniversary as an opportunity to get our systems in place as an organisation to facilitate that. I think the other thing that Don was really well-known for was his involvement with the Arts and creativity. We haven't done a huge amount in that space – we do a few awards and a few things. We're really keen to think more deeply about how do we use art to support our social justice agenda? Right across those priorities, how can art help end homelessness, how can art help support Aboriginal economic empowerment? That's very obvious, the Aboriginal economic power one – it is one of the core capabilities that we have in South Australia around indigenous art. Anyway, there's lots more to be done.

OK. Thank you very much – that was thoroughly enjoyable.

Thanks very much.