

Speaking a Future in the Past

In 2004, the township of Dunkeld, in the Hamilton region, held a weekend celebration to mark the 150th anniversary of a change of name for the town from Mt Sturgeon to Dunkeld. Keith Warne was one of the people who initiated the celebration and acted as president of the organizing committee. In this interview with Martin Mulligan and Yaso Nadarajah of the Globalism Institute he talks about why the celebration was even more successful than he had anticipated.

MM: How and why did you get involved in this 150-year celebration? Why did you choose to put your time and energy into that, particularly in a role as president of the organizing committee?

KW: I guess it was pride in what we already have and optimism for the future of Dunkeld and district and what we could do together. People always associated this area with Mt Sturgeon. After the pastoralists came in, it was called Mt Sturgeon. Then they decided to change the name. And because of the settlement of the Scots, it became important to change the name. So it became a Scottish settlement, surrounded by a German settlement at Tarrington, and an Irish settlement at Kilarney. So this particular history became important to the local people, especially the older ones. Whilst it started off as a small idea to celebrate the name change¹, we also decided to reclaim the original cemetery which was closed in 1900. This helped us to open up the story of the town. Dunkeld is a vibrant small community, and continues to thrive.

MM: So learning more about the history is good for the current community?

KW: Part of our success is that we brought in people who we knew had some interest in their ancestors. The old cemetery became an important connecting point. We had people who had been in farming here for many years and they were interested to know the background of their own families. We were lucky to be able to get people involved in things that they were interested in. To me that was half the secret of our success.

MM: How is the Scottish influence important to the identity of Dunkeld today?

KW: It was probably important to a lot of the early families who settled here. At

the beginning of the year, we did have a Scottish night. It was actually a trial to gauge people's interest in the 150th celebration. We didn't rush in and say we were celebrating the 150th centenary. So we had a Scottish night and we had a Robbie Burns night. And that sparked a lot of interest.

YN: It's interesting that it was the Scottish identity that was highlighted.

MM: Is that because it made Dunkeld distinctive?

KW: In a way it did, yes. But it doesn't take away the fact that the Djab Wurrung people lived here for over 4,000 years prior to the arrival of the Europeans. However, sadly, within sixty years of [Thomas] Mitchell discovering of 'Australia Felix', not one member of the tribe remained alive in this amazing territory.

MM: Can you cast your mind back to when you first got involved and remember what you were hoping to achieve?

KW: Everyone started talking about a 'back to' event. But we didn't want that. We were thinking of speakers on a twenty-five year cycle; going from the past, through to the allocation of land, and then the soldier settlements. So, it was a progression of the different parts; of how the woodcutters came in first. This area has a very interesting history. People always think of the western districts as living on the sheep's back, but for the first forty or fifty years, they were mostly woodcutters seeking out an existence. The influence of the soldier-settler generation was very impressive because the school numbers jumped, doubled in fact. So we had a lot of people in these little towns. Now we've seen a decline. Two generations have gone, the parents and the children. So it was important to celebrate all those changes and how we have moved on.

MM: Was this about keeping small towns viable?

KW: I think you've got to be careful when you talk about keeping small towns viable. There is no doubt that some places will never be viable. It's true also that some may survive. But looking down the track, in another forty or fifty years, I'm not sure that some of these places of 800 to 900 people will survive.

YN: You yourself are fairly new to this region, having come from the Mallee district?

KW: Relatively new. I've been here for twenty years.

YN: Did your involvement with the celebration make you feel differently about being here?

KW: Yes, it made me feel different, because we came here from a soldier-settlement area and I became more aware that this was a soldier-settlement area too. So it was good for us. We were amongst the big graziers in the Mallee, and we also bought three or four smaller soldier-settler areas, and put them together, starting to re-build farms that were not working. It was interesting, because we were in the excitement of the soldier-settlers being everywhere, and we also had a taste of the pastoral life. Remember we moved here during the wool boom, in the 1980s, when there was a lot of money. But that didn't last long, because we saw the wool price collapse within four years. I've said that the collapse was one of the greatest things that has happened to the western districts, because it made

everyone realize that we are all vulnerable. You can be at the top of the tree, and then suddenly not. It's been a great leveler. I've seen that as an outsider. I've noticed it very much.

YN: So, back to the 150th celebration. When you started off, you had certain hopes and expectations. What was achieved? Were most of your hopes achieved? Did unexpected things happen that you hadn't planned for?

KW: The unexpected thing was that people came out of the woodwork and offered to do things, which was quite surprising. That was because we had some controversial public meetings at the start, and then as they got the feel of what we wanted to do, they all came in behind it.

MM: What was the nature of the controversy?

KW: Oh, things like 'How do you do it?'; or 'We want a "back-to" event'; or 'We don't want to celebrate the name-change'. In the end we had a re-enactment and that was important for a lot of people. It was surprising, the people were fantastic, and the support was beyond our expectations. We were very lucky too, because a local leader in the town offered to pay the wage of a full-time secretary. That made all the difference, because it took the weight off people like me, and other volunteers. It made it so much easier. After that experience, I think that if we hadn't raised the money to pay the secretary, the idea would still be a proposition only. You can't expect volunteers to give up everything. That was one of the successes. The way we got the money was incidental to the fact that you should pay someone to do those sorts of things.

MM: Beside the money issue, were there things that went particularly well?

KW: I think everything went particularly well, because when we started, we had to raise an amount of dollars, knowing our expenses would be high. So we ran a few things in the town, like an Art Show, and a dinner, and the response was terrific. This got things rolling. And we never looked back.

MM: Were there any particular disappointments?

KW: There are always some disappointments in these sorts of things. We thought that we might have got more funding from different bodies, which we didn't. We had to be self-sufficient. But we were so grateful that we already had a generous donor to keep us going.

MM: It would have been hard to do it without that donor?

KW: Yes, very hard, because people get burn-out. We had meetings every week, and towards the end we were having meetings twice a week. So it was demanding on people with families. But the celebrations went beyond expectations. People couldn't believe that it was happening so well. We had a very good committee. You always go to the people who are the busiest for these sorts of things. They are always the best.

MM: So you were careful about choosing your committee?

KW: Yes, we handpicked the committee, which is not quite right, but you've nearly got to, especially in a small town, because we all know our frailties.

MM: People who organize these sorts of things sometimes say their vision gets

changed by outside people, or funders, or other commercial interests. Did that happen to you?

KW: Well, that was the plus of being privately funded. So there was no control over what we did. We wanted to do really well, and it was also very hard work. When people with past associations come back to the town, even if they have still got some connections, they like to talk to someone connected to the organization of the event. So you need the space, and you need the personnel to do that. That's important for any of these things in small towns – people want the hospitality, and they want to hear the stories. That's what they come for; to re-live the past. That's their enjoyment. They want to re-live what happened, and what it was like when they were here. Not everyone is interesting in all the stories, but you've got to listen.

MM: Is it important for the participants to tell their stories as much as to hear speakers, etc?

KW: Yes, they love to tell a story, particularly as people get older. You know, they feel so much a part of the town and its history.

YN: So in fact the community is not only just the people who are living here now, but also those who have lived here in the past?

KW: Yes, they make it richer. It's the people who came back, who haven't been back for thirty years, or a generation, or even two generations.

MM: This is certainly a broader notion of what a community is.

YN: Why do you think people came and wanted to be engaged? What drew them to it?

KW: You've got to get people psyched up so they understand that it's something special. You build it up. In our case, the footpaths were done up, the streets were done up, the gardens were changing. People could see that things were changing. They were proud to bring people back and show them what had happened over the past few years. You've got to dress things up a bit. You've got to have this incentive to do things. I'm a JIT person – Just In Time. You just get it finished in time. But you've got to handpick about a dozen people to work with that you know are going to be fantastic. That is very important.

MM: Gilly [Tony McGillvray] talked about that with the Top of the Town event³. He said it is a joy to work with people who have different skills, and who all want to do the best in what they can offer. But you've got to make sure you've got the skills and the camaraderie in the group. Do you find that too?

KW: Yes, I agree with Gilly there. There would then be something drastically wrong if this team didn't perform like you know they can. You pick the people. One of the main gifts they've got is that they get on with people. It's one of their talents. And they love it.

MM: Any comment on the role of local government in events such as this?

KW: I think it's very difficult in these smaller communities where you've got one central business centre in the region, and small outlying towns, and they are all jostling for position to get this or get that. I would hate to be in council now⁴

and asking 'how do we equally share the resources?' We get the advantage of the things that are in the major centres, such as Hamilton. And we've got the disadvantage of trying to get there.

MM: So at the 150th, what were the opportunities for participation? What were the things that ordinary people could do, could contribute, to participate?

KW: Yes, we made sure there were opportunities for people to participate. For example, I've been here for twenty years, but some of the families have been here forever, so they were chasing family members and we had to make it easy for people to find each other. A lot of the participation was just in helping people to meet and talk to other people.

YN: I attended the celebration and I thought the choice of events was interesting, because different age groups participated in different kinds of events.

KW: Yes, although in hindsight we probably overloaded the days. The Saturday was probably too hectic.

MM: History is often thought to be only for history buffs, but with the 150th it seemed as if you were trying to make the point that everyone can enjoy history and all the stories that are often not told.

KW: Yes, we can all enjoy history. I'm afraid that too many people are trying to preserve all these old museums. But they are dead; they've got no life. People would rather walk or go and have a look at things outside. Not too many people are interested static displays these days -unless the kids can press buttons and all that sort of thing. I think there is going to be a big change in how people spend their recreation time. They are not going to sit back and be hand fed.

MM: There's a lot of choice too now, isn't there?

KW: There is, but people want to do things, they don't want to be pampered. They want to get out and walk.

MM: Did you get a sense that if divisions are brought up in a community through a celebration, they can be worked out rather than glossed over?

KW: You've certainly got to listen to everyone and take account of what they are saying. But usually if the majority of your committee is level-headed, especially if you've got a committee that is unanimous in what it wants to do, then you can work through many of these issues. It's a matter of building that unanimity and that takes a long time. Someone bailed me up the other day and said 'You are spoiling the town; it looks too neat, too manicured.' And that's a fair point. So you've got to get the balance right. I guess some people will always be unhappy about something. You've got to get enough enthusiasm from within the committee to carry you through. You can't work with everybody.

MM: Yet you tried to make the celebration as inclusive as you could, even though there might be a limit to that, if people don't really want to get involved?

KW: Yes, we did. But it was sort of infectious here. At one stage, the health crowd came out and said we had to have crowd control. What if the crowd decided to march in the garden? But people were quite co-operative. In fact, the police said it was the best-controlled crowd they'd ever seen. I can understand

there are liabilities and all that but you can also get lost in the red tape.

YN: Is it possible to make everybody feel as though they are appreciated and valued members of a community through a celebration?

KW: Well not everybody, but maybe ninety-eight per cent. Everybody is a valued member. It was just surprising. For example, we wanted a thousand yoyos made, and it was surprising when people you'd never seen came out and said 'we'll make a hundred'. So that's how it became infectious.

YN: Do you see celebrations such as this being a sustainable part of community life? Do they have to have a commercial capacity to be sustainable?

KW: I think it gets back to the community itself. It's important that people don't get burnt out. I could go to ten people tomorrow, probably the same people on the last committee, and they'd get up and do it again. But you've got to have someone kicking a few dollars in to get it going. And you've got to have a team that is going to pull together. It's pretty hard to start from scratch. But I'm a great believer in the community. Once they get started, they get hooked on it. There are a lot of people about who are in my age-group, who are semi-retired, who would hop in and get going straight away.

YN: So, how did you work with the shire council for the celebration?

KW: I was in the local council for a long time, and I know them all. I would know everybody in the system, and they all know me. So there's a relationship, and that's a big help. I know what they are responsible for, and what is expected of them. But again, we are lucky in Dunkeld because we have Alan Myers committing a lot of resources into this town.

MM: So that gives you a bit of independence. You're not too dependent on Hamilton money?

KW: Well, it makes some difference, but we are still very dependent on local council for a whole range of reasons. You can't get funding from any of the arts councils and sports bodies unless local government recommends it. So you've got to do your homework, and you've got to put a good case. Joy Derrick and I represent this area at planning meetings in Hamilton so we go in there every couple of months and put our case. Our objective for the next couple of years is to put better footpaths through the town. But that's just being part of the community and working with local authorities. I just love it. It's a great community. Always you will have some people who are aggressive and nasty at times. But then there are many, many others who are just so keen to get in and work together for the town. And once you've started, you've got to keep going. You can't stop.

Endnotes

¹ The change of name took effect on 1 January, 2004.

² Explorer Thomas Mitchell passed through the district in 1836 and used the term 'Australia Felix' to describe an area that he thought would be ideal for European settlement.

³ The Western Health Services 'Top of the Town' Charity Ball was also held in 2004 on a site overlooking Hamilton. It also exceeded expectations, raising \$200,000 for the local hospital (an outstanding effort from a town with a population of 9,700). The ball was organized by a committee of community leaders; principal amongst them being Tony McGillivray (fondly known as Gilly), the owner of the local Gilly's Cafe. Martin and Yaso also interviewed Gilly about why the Top of the Town ball also exceeded expectations.

⁴ Keith was an elected councillor in the past.