Origins of the Local-Global Project in the Hamilton Region

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A Guiding Spirit

A splash of orange, moving ever so quickly. You turn around and there is Helen Handbury, with her bright orange jacket, a brilliant smile on her face and a quizzical look in her eyes; asking you how you are. How is everything going? And then she would be gone, just as quickly. But you knew that in a day or two, the phone would ring and Helen would be on the other end wanting more details, quizzing you in a manner that left no details unturned. This would be followed by an invitation for a meal or a drink with her, making time to catch up and talk and to discuss the next steps. Helen was a person who could make projects happen yet conversations with her were more often about care and curiosity than about the details of getting things done. They were underpinned by her unfailing determination to help make a world where everyone would get a ‘fair go’. That’s the Helen that I knew.

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of Eye –
And for an Everlasting Roof –
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands –
To gather Paradise –

Emily Dickinson
I want to pay tribute to Helen Handbury at the beginning of my account of how the local-global project began in the Hamilton region because, as you will see, she played a pivotal role and, of course, she is now no longer physically with us. Much of what we are doing now has been made possible by a generous grant from the Helen and Geoff Handbury Trust. And, what has been even more important is that Helen and Geoff were so quick to see the potential in this ambitious project and she entered into the spirit of it very deeply. I was fortunate to have had encounters with Helen in the course of this project that will stay with me forever. And I must continue the work to honour the trust she gave me.

I first met Helen and Geoff Handbury at the home of Judy and Keith Warne in the Woodhouse area about seven years ago. Judy knew Helen through a family connection. I knew that the Handburys were well loved in the district as champions of innovative change and of ideas that would make a difference to communities in their region and beyond. So I took the opportunity to hand them a copy of a report on a project I was working on at the time called the RMIT International Community Exchange (RICE) Program and asked if they would consider becoming its patrons. Helen smiled. More would follow, but let me fill in the background first.

**International Students Take the Initiative**

In 1994 I was working as an international student advisor at RMIT when we began organizing visits by international students to the western districts of Victoria. This initiative began because the students had expressed a desire to learn more about Australia than the experience of being a student in a large university. The students wanted to meet people they would not otherwise meet and get a better understanding of some aspects of Australian life. At the same time, a group of wool growers from the Woodhouse-Nareeb region wanted to promote ‘wool awareness’ to the international community and had initiated the idea of hosting students in the rural community. For me, it was a chance to give the students at the University a meaningful intercultural experience and to build their respect and imagination for an interconnected world striving for sustainability. However, little did I expect that it would eventually give some 1000 international students from over 30 different countries the opportunity to spend time in rural Victorian communities.

Now, when the idea of a partnership between the university and a rural community was mooted, as we sat around a fire-place in a house at Woodhouse West, no-one really thought it possible. How would a small rural community, an international student advisor and her mob of international students ever pull such a thing together? And sitting underneath that question was a deeper one about what mutual engagement involves. We didn’t just talk about it but also shared lived experiences as we began to build the kind of relationship that would make it possible. We went on to meet with John and Cicely Fenton who had worked with Professor Jim Sinatra and his students at RMIT University for over 10 years. We had also started to work more closely with the Southern Grampians Shire Council and the successive Mayors. With their encouragement and with the (then) RMIT Vice-Chancellor David Beanland as a proactive and
supportive patron, and a number of lecturers and senior management staff at the university who saw in this new opportunities for teaching, learning and research, we forged ahead. And so, by 1996, the RICE program was officially launched.

The starting vision, then, was to bring together a local-global network of researchers, scholars and engaged community activists, working together to better understand and affect the nature of community and its social transformation through exchanges of information and ideas and comparative research programs. By 2000 I was amazed at far all this had come. People asked me if it was a student exchange or a concert; rural visits or an exchange of food? Or did we have a secret agenda to turn the western districts paddocks into rice fields! RICE is simply a philosophy of partnership and strategy. It is a framework for the way we respect and listen to each other, regardless of background, cultural and epistemological differences or the places we might come from. This framework holds the tension between what is local and global; it challenges us to move forward strategically and practically without letting go of shared, collective purposes. It is about creating a space for mutual respect and care, holding on to an audacious hope for a world in which people can live and feel nurtured, sustained, involved and stimulated; beginning with the people and places where we live and work.

By the time Helen and Geoff Handbury joined us, the program had a pulse. It resonated. Many times when I have sat with Helen over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine, she would be beaming at the energy she could feel from it. This was not something I had to tell her. RICE became quite a complex program, but at the heart of it was the fact that people were having great fun building partnerships that could help us think about practical responses to the processes of globalization. Small rural communities working with a large, urban university – cutting across different forms of cultural practice – with international students coming from backgrounds as diverse as tribal/traditional Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Mongolia and Malawi to societies that are more comprehensively integrated into global networks of production, exchange and communities, such as India, Singapore, Malaysia and the USA.

**Growing Possibilities and Limited Resources**

Within the RICE program we talked openly about identity and culture; violence, conflict and the prospects for peace; the impact of the economic rationalization on political processes; the undervaluing of local and traditional knowledge; and the loss of social bonds that had created many of the taken-for-granted aspects of ‘community’ – the idea of a life lived in common with others within a more or less stable narrative that has been so comprehensively disrupted. Some of our discussions turned into new subjects offered through RMIT University and they also resulted in us building links with the local schools and with leaders of the local koori community. Around 300 RMIT students came into the region each year for visits and research; often taking away ideas that they would present at international youth conferences.

Then we reached the crossroads again. There had been funding cuts across education and our resources were very limited. However, there was a new
opportunity in that the university had developed a Regional Engagement Strategy designed to deepen its relationships with diverse regional communities and this resonated with what we had been doing. I could hardly contain my excitement as I sat down to write a note to Helen and Geoff Handbury to tell them about the possibilities. Driven by the conviction that a committed group of people who are well informed and motivated by a common purpose can make a difference in the world today by empowering communities who might otherwise feel marginalized, I boldly asked for $2 million to take our work into a new phase.

When I recently met Geoff he told me that it was the very boldness, vision and commitment of the request that caught their attention. To my surprise and delight, after a week, Helen called to say that she and Geoff had considered the request and Helen wanted to have lunch with me. We met and shared a bottle of red – a Peter Lehmann Cabernet Sauvignon 1996. We had an extraordinary lunch as we shared a common dream of an interconnected world community, working together for a sustainable future. Six weeks later, a little envelope arrived at my office with a 45 cents stamp attached to its tiny surface. In this letter was a generous and loving letter from Helen and Geoff … and a cheque for a quarter of a million dollars!! There was also a note to say that the other amounts would follow regularly. I closed my office door and went out and sat under a bench in the park nearby.

Of course, this is not just about an exchange between individuals. It’s not even about one region. It’s about how people can connect with others in a generous, inquiring and spectacular way to dream of what could be rather than to simply grumble about what is. We need to be generous in our listening and in responding to others but also have the courage to take risks, build momentum and make a difference. Above all, we have to build trust in each other.

I was fortunate to have a few brief moments with Helen four days before she passed away and her words of love and care reminded me of what lay at the heart of our success with the RICE program. It’s not money that builds empowerment but rather the nurturing of trust, care and love; an embodiment of the ethics we proclaim. Funding from the Handburys enabled us to move forward in the Hamilton region in both big and small ways. As the project got bigger it lumbered into a space of endless opportunities and big dreams, sometimes undermined by practices that lost sight of our starting ethics. What began as a hospitality program for international students has grown into a complex partnership between a local regional Council, its community and a large university. But what I learnt from Helen is that you have to remain ever-vigilant to the pulse that gave an idea its life.

Enter the Globalism Institute

In early 2004 I was invited to join the research community in RMIT University’s Globalism Institute. This invitation was both exciting and timely because it put our work in Hamilton into a broader context and opened the possibilities for direct local-to-local links between Hamilton and other communities all around the world. The Institute had already identified ‘community sustainability’ as
a major research focus and was already building research relationships with community activists, other researchers, other universities, non-government and government organizations in places such as East Timor, Sarajevo, Rhodes (in Greece), Hawaii. And soon we were adding communities in Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, southern India, and other communities in Victoria such as Daylesford and Broadmeadows.

The community sustainability project seeks to better understand the nature of community from the local to the global. Its principle work lies in seeking to understand how forms of wellbeing and social connectedness can be sustained over time; how communities can cohere and change at the same time. But words like ‘sustainability’ are often abused and we need a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what can strengthen community life, not dominated by instrumental concerns about economic development. What kinds of cultural practices should be acknowledged, enhanced and shared among communities struggling with similar challenges.

The Handburys made a big investment in this project and I continue to feel humbled by their generosity. The Globalism Institute has broadened the possibilities and that makes me feel excited and nervous at the same time. However, I am reminded of the way we began all this back in that house in Woodhouse West, talking about the places and people that matter most to us. I think the philosopher Jess Malpas put this rather well in reflecting on something the poet Seamus Heaney had written about places being both ‘humanized and humanizing’ at the same time. As Malpas put it: ‘…the value and significance of life … can be defined by the experience of both the wonder and fragility of place – by the experience of places lost and regained, by the experience of place as indeed “humanized and humanizing”’.

In June 2004, we began the process of making sites within the Hamilton region part of the Globalism Institute’s broader study of community sustainability. Helen Handbury joined our Critical Reference Group and participated in the early discussions. Once again it was reassuring to me personally to see her broad grin from across the table as we rekindled the fire, the imagination and an ever-growing support about how we can connect the Hamilton region into a global project of research and community activism. We have chosen to make Lake Condah one of the local sites of interest to our research in the region and Helen joined us on a visit to the old mission and important archeological sites around Lake Condah. Helen was a bit unsteady on her feet that day and as we stumbled across rocky ground I remember her saying to me that her contribution to our work could be to ‘ask the questions that matter’.

The Challenges we Face

We certainly need wise heads such as Helen who will ask the questions that matter because we are facing big challenges. That day as we walked around Lake Condah I thought we are really struggling towards a meaningful reconciliation between white and black, while, at the same time, needing to understand Australia as part of a wider world without eschewing the glibly named ‘multicultural’ as the connecting fabric. We are coming to terms with new
technologies transforming not just how we imagine the world, but also crafting our very understanding of who we are in relationship to other people. We are reminded more constantly now of the forms of exploitation and corruption that not only make life miserable for so many people but bring the threat of environmental disasters ever closer. Such challenges not only demonstrate the need for deeper research about meaningful responses, they also demand more critical dialogue and debate about the options we have, and asking questions that matter makes all this possible.

Connecting with those who are so different from us in our thinking and our ways of being helps us to new ways of describing, imagining and understanding. This is not only a cultural project, but also a commitment to the highest standards of working and tugging at the tensions between the local and the global. As Zygmunt Bauman has said that if there is to be a community in the world of individuals, it can only be (and it needs to be) a community woven together from sharing and mutual care; a community of concern and responsibility for the equal right to be human and the equal ability to act on that right.³

With her deep thinking and global curiosity about the way communities are able to transform themselves; Helen Handbury sought the input of both thinkers and practitioners. She herself was a pragmatist and in thinking about her now I am reminded of Mel King’s comment that we complain about the dirt with a broom in our hand.³ Helen was deeply embedded in the communities in which she lived and she applied her sharp wit and questioning mind to make others think. She was able to put brooms in our hands by giving money where it was needed, and by giving us the trust and encouragement to keep working. But, of course, she was one of the first to pick up the broom when there was work to be done.

Helen and I both loved a poem by Tagore that we read together on a number of occasions and it seems a fitting end to this account of how a particular story began:


Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come from the depths of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action –
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.⁴

I have no doubt that we too hold on to a land that is free and just, compassionate and wise. I also have no doubt that as we continue to embrace courage and truth; compassion and knowledge, we too will continue to make a difference in our interconnected lands across the world.
Helen remains by my side, and by the side of all those who share her quest.

Endnotes


4 From the collected works and poems of Rabindranath Tagore 1936

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