

Transcript: The Family Centre project podcast

Sharon Lee

Welcome to Brotherhood Talks.

Professor Shelley Mallet

A staggering one in six children in Australia are experiencing poverty. It suffices to say that it translates into huge, unrealised potential and poorer outcomes in early childhood at school, at work, in life and for the children of these children.

Sharon Lee

Professor Shelley Mallet, Director of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence Research and Policy Centre. In this Brotherhood Talk, she leads a panel discussion on the persistent challenge of poverty experienced by children and their families in Australia and one particular approach to dealing with it, the historic Family Centre project. But before the panel begins, Toni Wren, Director of Anti-Poverty Week, gives an overview of some of the latest research into how much the community at large cares about poverty.

Toni Wren

I started looking at the reports on poverty, and as Shelley mentioned, it was a little bit depressing actually to see that we were stuck in the place and we've continued to produce amazing research reports and actually, we do know what works. We have the solutions, but we don't seem to be cutting through and we're certainly not getting the policies implemented, as many, certainly, as we need, both around child poverty, even though we've got a huge amount that we know about the investment approach that we need to invest in children, and it makes economic sense. So I was fortunate, when I came into the role this year, to have the advantage of Anglicare Australia's research that came out last year and I'd recommend that to you. It was the State of the Family report where they had a similar thought, and they did some polling and they did some talking to people.

And the key message that came out is that Australians do care about poverty, but they sometimes need to be reminded of that and certainly our politicians need to be reminded of it. And so just asserting that point, Australians care about poverty, more than 90% of us don't think that poverty should exist, and that people shouldn't have struggle for food, shelter and important basic things. So that was really important in some of the way they talked about poverty. Then I also had the benefit – The Joseph Rowntree Trust, which I know is also a good friend of the Brotherhood from the UK, they had commissioned some really ground-breaking work because they were in the same position in the UK, probably worse with the austerity measures that have been going on for many years, where they also knew what was working, but they could see that poverty was getting worse and they weren't cutting through.

They commissioned this incredible research from the FrameWorks Institute in the US. They've been doing it for 20 years and it really found some quite disturbing things. When they said, "People choose between heating and eating," what people in the community heard was, "They just need to budget better." So actually, a lot of the messages and the things they were saying was actually not working and it was

counterproductive. So for those of you who are around later in the year, Abigail's got – Paul is coming out from the UK from The Joseph Rowntree Trust and we'll talk a lot more about that and what they've done to really change the conversation. So, we didn't have that research.

We'd really love to have that research in Australia, and that's phase two of our strategy, is to work with the Brotherhood and others to try and bring that research to Australia. But what I did, as all of us who work in this sector know what you do, you work with what you've got, so I got the Anglicare work and I got The Joseph Rowntree and I mushed it together and so how can we make this work? Kasey Chambers actually, who's on my national facilitating group there, CEO of Anglicare Australia, she actually came up with this fantastic key message that we've used all year, well, particularly this week. So, it says: Poverty exists, and it's reminding people because one of the key things we know in Australia is people think Australia is a great country and actually poverty doesn't really exist, or it's very, very minor.

So poverty exists. Poverty hurts us all, and that's very important, and we can all do something about it. And that also came into the research we did about how we needed to rethink about Anti-Poverty Week. There was a lot more focus on action. So, our actual subheading is now: Act On Poverty, as well, which came out of that. The use of the word all is really important. It's about all of us. It's not about them and us, and that's been absolutely critical in how we talk about poverty and how others now have actually picked this up. I had the really great privilege of being at Government House on Tuesday as part of Anti-Poverty Week and our governor general said all these words in his speech. And the middle one, he actually reflected, yes, it hurts us all very much and it takes away from our country and it takes away from us all when we have high levels of poverty, like five out of every 30 kids in a classroom in Australia, on average, living in poverty. That's what the one in six translates to.

Sharon Lee

Toni Wren. In the 1970s, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence ran a program called the Family Centre project, which sought to empower families in hardship to find their own ways to improve their lives. Two of those who worked on the project back then were Professor Hayden Raysmith and Dr Michael Liffman. In this talk, they reflect on its multi-faceted approach, along with David Tennant, CEO of FamilyCare, which now services Shepparton in regional Victoria. Professor Shelley Mallet leads the discussion, which opens here with Michael Liffman.

Dr. Michael Liffman

Look, I think essentially, in a nutshell, the thinking behind the Family Centre project was to look at a different way of working with families who had been in long-term relationship with the Brotherhood, long-term experience of disadvantage, that the Brotherhood services at that time were scattered, were very much based on the professional involved in, I guess, what one would now call counselling a family that was significantly disadvantaged, spreading resources too thinly, having what seemed to be a very unequal relationship and not having very much obvious success.

The Family Centre project was an effort to do things differently, to work very closely with a much smaller number of families so that resources were made available, not only the human resources that until then had been professionals talking to clients, but also financial resources through the income supplement scheme, and to try and

generate a completely new and different way in which disadvantaged families could be provided opportunities on their own terms, rather than in terms of what was believed to be the wisdom of the professional staff.

I guess if there were any – well, there are a number of theoretical notions underlying that, but I guess one was to challenge the idea that poverty and disadvantage was a result of, what was then in some places called, a culture of poverty or a dysfunctional way of operating that poor people operated. And this was a challenge to that because it looked at the provision of resources and that without providing resources to people and acknowledging that the difficulties they faced were due to a lack of resources, one was just going to perpetuate a cycle of disadvantage and a cycle of a fairly unhelpful relationship between professionals and clients. There was a theoretical underpinning to it, and [Connie Benn] 00:08:34 who was the CEO at the time, formulated – I hope I can remember these.

She said that there were four sorts of power that families in this situation lacked: relationships, resources, information and decision making, I think. And the basis of that was, as I said, bringing families into a different relationship with staff and supplementing that, or maybe not only supplementing, but the foundations of that were providing income. And it has to be said that this initiative took place at a time when there was a great deal of support. The thinking behind this project and the thinking of the Commonwealth government at the time were in the same place. So, there was a [side cast] 00:09:19, if you like, which meant that we were working in accordance with a government that was willing to challenge and support and try new directions.

And I have to say that that seems very different from the current environment, and it's great that we have Brian here, by the way, in that context. But one of the concrete results of what was described, rightly, as a very close collaboration between Professor Ronald Henderson and the Brotherhood was that some of the work, which Henderson's Poverty Inquiry was undertaking, was able to fund, what we called at the time, an income supplement scheme, which meant that for three years, all the families were entitled to an additional supplement to the income that they got from their pensions or whatever, worked out in accordance with a very systematic formula, and funded through the Henderson Poverty Inquiry. And so the provision of financial resources was a very important underpinning of the whole initiative.

Professor Shelley Mallet

So thanks, Michael, and now to Hayden. So, we had the Family Centre project and then after three years or so, it morphed into the Action Resource Centre. What were the main features of the Action Resource Centre, Hayden?

Professor Hayden Raysmith

It was the implementation, in practice, of what the theory was saying. And that was that low-income people should be given more control over their own lives and should have more power and control to enable them to manage their lives and lift them out of chronic disadvantage and chronic poverty. And so the major change that occurred was that most of the professional staff left, the social workers and other staff that had been employed during the Family Centre. A management committee of the families themselves was established and formally constituted and there were a group of support workers that were there to provide basic services. Joan Benjamin who's here,

was one of those, and in all, there were five support workers, and Rob Hudson was there as the youth worker.

The families were then allowed to choose their own coordinator to run the centre. I had just finished on the Poverty Inquiry and thought that it was time for me to get my hands dirty and to actually work at the coalface a bit more than the esoteric levels of the Poverty Inquiry. So I applied for that job and I was successful. I was interviewed by the families and I liked them. They liked me and so I was there for three years. The other changes that occurred were there was no income supplement, so income security was a major focus. And there were a group of family members who were employed as the workers. So we had a worker that worked on income, security and legal issues. We had people employed in the childcare centre that was operated. And I've forgotten how many jobs, but let's say there was something like 10 jobs. The men tended to work in the employment program, the SWOP or Support Work Opportunity Program, that operated in the centre.

So you've got this transition of the control of the centre really being handed over to the families that had been part of the first three years, but also that the membership of the Action Resource Centre was opened up to further families. So there were 60 families involved in the first three years. Then it was opened up to others and so we had an influx of new members that came in as part of the next phase of development. And we also added two more parts to the empowerment principle. Michael said control or empowering low-income people to have control over decision making, relationships, resources and information. We added skills and knowledge so that we then ended up with six because we found there was a great deal of work going on to build the skills and to contribute to the ongoing knowledge of those family members.

So they were the fundamental shifts that occurred and we then endeavoured to build more relationships with the wider community, wider programs and other agencies. So in a way, the Action Resource Centre was more outward looking than what the Family Centre had been as well.

Professor Shelley Mallet

So can I ask you both where did the money come from to actually resource both the Family Centre project and the income supplement, as well as then its later iteration, the Action Research Centre?

Professor Hayden Raysmith

Very briefly, the money to set up the Family Centre and continue on for the second three years, for the Action Resource Centre for low-income families were funds that the Brotherhood contributed. The income supplement, as Michael indicated, was directed through Poverty Inquiry, the Commonwealth Commission of Inquiry into Poverty. We were able to run that as an experiment in providing a guaranteed income, as we called it, to demonstrate that a guaranteed income scheme would have wider beneficial effects in stabilizing the lives of low-income people and enable them to lift themselves out of chronic poverty.

Dr. Michael Liffman

Just on where the money came from, I think a lot credit has to go to the Brotherhood, at that time, for acknowledging that there was a need or an opportunity to rethink and

also, it's a difficult decision to put – it's a decision which, on the face of it, some might criticize putting so much money into a fairly small group of people.

Conny Lenneberg

I'm Conny Lenneberg, Executive Director of the National Social Justice Group, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence. I hope you're enjoying this episode of Brotherhood Talks. If you'd like to learn more about our work to find solutions to the complex challenges presented by poverty in our prosperous country, have a look at BSL.org.au.

Professor Shelley Mallet

I'll just pick up into some of the themes that were within the Family Centre project and the Action Resource Centre project and look at their contemporary relevance actually. So Hayden, you've just mentioned, and Michael elaborated, on the income supplement. And just recently, Brian Howe and myself and several other people in this room have been involved in really looking at what's the utility of an income supplement through either a basic income or a targeted basic income. And what we have in the Family Centre project was actually the first and the only trial of a basic income, in Australia, targeted at a core group of people and families and households. Just wondering what you think might be some of the contemporary relevance of that trial way back then to now.

Professor Hayden Raysmith

I'll make one brief comment and I think it's better if Michael then perhaps comments on that matter. What we're talking about is not rocket science, by any means, and I think the message is terribly important. And I think what was endeavoured to be done through both the Family Centre project and the Action Resource Centre was, firstly, to stabilize the lives of low-income people so they didn't have to keep moving from one house to another house, often have their children go into care, re-establish the family, and in the course of that, become very socially isolated because they weren't ever able to establish continuing relationships, except for the Coolibah club I might say, Pat, which was often the meeting point for people that were very disconnected in that way.

So the mere fact that you could enable people to stay in the one house, pay their rent, the kids could go to school and the family could stay together, was an enormous advantage and plus because then you could build other things on top of that. The other part, which I've alluded to, is that – the second part was to make sure that they weren't socially isolated, that they had a friendship or a network of people that they felt comfortable relating to, but they also could build relationships with professional people, be they doctors or be they social workers or be they the teacher at school. And the third component of that is to try and move both their thinking and everybody else's thinking away from blaming the victim because they self-blamed, as much as other people blamed them, because that had been driven into the way they saw themselves for such a long time.

Those three things really drove the whole momentum to try and build something of a longer-term nature. But I'll hand to Michael on the income supplement.

Dr. Michael Liffman

Thanks. Well, I absolutely agree with what Hayden said. I mean I think the debate

then and, indeed, the debate now – because there are proposals around the place, particularly overseas, to create a national income supplement scheme, but those debates rest – those initiatives rest on a debate or a controversy which I think is always with us. And it is somewhat described as the debate about the culture of poverty versus self-help, and others would simply say, "If you provide everyone with an income, is that going to tap work incentives and all that?" That debate is always going to be there, and it shapes the controversy around income supplementation. I think to be – well, what has the result of that been? I don't know. I mean in this whole discussion, I'm mindful of, I think it was a Chinese statesman who was asked what the effect of the French Revolution had been, and he said it was too soon to tell.

And I think, in a sense, that's true of lots of attempts to evaluate any social policy reform it takes on. But I think it's true to say that the income supplement scheme and indeed, the Family Centre project, it didn't magically create a Camelot. It didn't create a utopia where everyone was living wonderfully happy, fulfilled, unstressed lives. It's not like that. And in the last impenetrable, I now realize, chapter of this book, I tried to talk about how those things interacted. And I think the conclusion I tried to come to was that, yes, human beings and the way they function as individuals and families and communities are very complex and all sorts of things are acting on them.

And it's not easy to find a formula to happiness for everyone. An income supplementation didn't immediately solve everything, but it surely an underlying requirement. Other things may still complicate people's lives, but unless there is a degree of financial security and financial stability and capacity to not only meet crises, but also provide some ongoing stability, unless there's that, you can't expect all the other things that may still be at play to work themselves out. So I think the argument there is income supplementation is always a necessary, if not always a sufficient, condition for the sorts of community and family functioning we're hoping for.

Professor Shelley Mallet

So I'm wondering, David, whether you might weigh into this aspect and some other parts of it, but just to take the income supplement, as well as the broader debate around social security that we're having across Australia at the moment in relation to Newstart, the Newstart payment, and it's keeping people in poverty. Just wondering whether you've got some comments about this aspect of the design of the Family Centre project and whether or not it has some contemporary relevance.

David Tennant

Thanks, Shelley. I'm feeling deeply envious sitting here listening to Hayden and Michael reflect on the Family Centre project, which I would have loved, personally, to have been involved in, except I was rather busy in grade two at Sorell Primary, Tasmania. But it's remarkable, hearing those reflections, having projected forward in time and supposedly become so much more sophisticated, how many important lessons that you knew at the time, and wrote about, and, I guess, lived with the people who were involved in those projects, had been forgotten by policy-makers today. And the question around income supplements, when you look at the crazy, low rate of Newstart, the fact that it hasn't been increased in real terms since 1994.

Before we can get to a conversation about appropriate income supplements now, we have to have a reflect, as a community, on what a rate of basic benefit is that doesn't trap people in poverty and turn their lives into a revolving disaster, and indeed, making choices like moving single parents from Parenting Payment, which is a much better rate of payment, to Newstart when their youngest child turns 8; when the stark reality, especially in a regional area like the one that I live in; is that there aren't very many job opportunities for, particularly, single mums that comfortably fit into a primary school day. They just aren't there. The jobs that do exist, which are largely shift work positions in abattoirs, they don't comfortably fit single mums who are looking for jobs that also fit their caring responsibilities.

And on top of that, we've built these other layers of things that are not just about the financial traps, but they trap people in endless reporting because of the conditionality that goes with receipt of welfare these days. And I believe, today, special rapporteur, Philip Alston, is releasing a report on the new implications of our digital transitions. And I wrote down, while I was having a coffee this morning, because it's always great to be really depressed before 10am, one of the things that he's noting: As humankind moves, perhaps inexorably, toward the digital welfare future, it needs to alter course significantly and rapidly to avoid stumbling zombie-like into a digital welfare dystopia.

So if ever we needed to remember and reflect on the lessons that you learned all those years ago, it's right now. And just perhaps to tie that together, the work that lured me away from the venal profession of being a lawyer in private practise, was to work with financial counsellors. And, in fact, the activities that you undertook at the time with the Brotherhood, were the seeds of things like financial counselling, the reality and recognition that the main causes of poverty are structural, and that you have to marry advocacy for changing those structures with helping people in the circumstance that they actually find themselves in.

And at the moment, our sector has to push back very hard against governments that say, "No, just get on and spend money as we would have you spend it." "No government, you've got no clue about what disadvantage looks like and you actually need to listen to people, particularly those who are living with that disadvantage."

Professor Shelley Mallet

So thanks, David. I'd like to pick up another thing that's really at the heart of the Family Centre project, but particularly the Action Resource Centre phase of the project, which is really about giving voice, choice and control to participants in the endeavour and empowering people to make decisions on their own and their families' behalf. And I'm wanting to hear from all three of you actually, but in the first instance, from Hayden and Michael, about the experience of that in the project, what worked and what was difficult about that?

Professor Hayden Raysmith

It operated at different levels, so [Joan Benjamin] in the front row was the person that was helping to both advise and coach the families in terms of being advocates, and it was at two levels. One was an advocate for why children shouldn't be taken away from you today, or why you should get a better – be treated better when you go to hospital than what you might be otherwise treated. So at a personal level, there was a level of personal advocacy that, I think, was encouraged and that was part of the skill

learning that was undertaken in that phase. Then, at the policy level, it was an era that was more receptive to hearing the voice of what we would call consumer or victims, recipients of services.

So you've got the growth of – the influx of the war on poverty in the US. You've got the Rowntree experiments occurring in the UK. You've got the Canadian reports on poverty that preceded ours. And there's a groundswell occurring here. Brian was associated with the Ecumenical Migration Centre, which had been a great advocate for enabling people to voice their own circumstances. And so as part of that groundswell, we were able to really work with the families and add their voice to a fairly rich range of other public advocates. So we could piggyback on top of what the Poverty Inquiry was saying or Hugh Stretton was saying or somebody else was saying and there was a receptivity. And it added an authenticity to the sort of recommendations that a Poverty Inquiry might come up with.

And I think we saw the power of that quite strongly with single mothers when the Council for the Single Mother and her Child really became a very great force and powerful voice for single parents. But you also started to see it through the tenancy movement, through Mike Salvaris in the Residential Tenancies Act, but also the tenants of high-rise, which the Brotherhood engaged with here to help form the Public Tenants group that operated out of the fourth floor of the Brotherhood. So the context and the environment was a very rich and supportive one, but nonetheless, the families that had participated in the Brotherhood's program were wonderful advocates. They knew how to confidently represent their position, and they were able to do what a lot of the third world advocates were using, this notion of you start with very basic concepts with disadvantaged groups and you teach them to see their disadvantage in a bigger and bigger context.

And so they're more and more able to not only talk about personal circumstances, but why they're in those circumstances and what's wrong at a more structural level. Paulo Freire, for example, did a lot of work around that with South American and other Asian cultures. But we used those techniques, and Joan was very central to that, and I think it was very powerful. And I've got to say that those voices of advocacy had been sidelined in the current political context, and I long for the day when we'll hear those voices once more.

Dr. Michael Liffman

Just picking up a bit more on, I think, your comment about relationships, one of the things we haven't quite talked about – well, lots of things we haven't talked about, but when the Family Centre project was created, it folded into that project and the Brotherhood's youth work activities, and Graham Bull was a very important part of that. Now what that did was – that was a very well-resourced program, and it involved taking families with all sorts of unconventional, for that sort of professional client situation, activities. We had Land Rovers and canoes and I remember when I got the job – as a recent graduate, I got the job here as a research worker and I thought, "This is going to be great. I can sit around in an office and talk to people and write stuff."

All of a sudden, I found myself white water rafting and having to be a sort of Hemingway, which I was not well suited to, but the experience of bringing entire families along and putting them in situations in which, often, the families were more competent than the staff and creating a situation which, whatever professional barriers

still existed, really made no sense. It was very powerful, I think, as part of that rebuilding of family relationships. And I think that the whole business of how professionals and families related was very important.

Professor Shelley Mallet

David, just on this issue of empowerment, decision making, voice, choice, control, have you got any thoughts about its contemporary relevance?

David Tennant

I think one of the things, listening to Hayden and Michael's reflections and now in the position of someone who manages, rather than doing frontline service delivery, we perhaps need to retrain our direct service staff with the idea that they walk with people and engage them about what their needs and their aspirations are. And the Child and Family Services system, in which I'm most familiar at the moment, is predominantly funded by the Victorian government and there are significant and quite generous sums that are available for brokerage, if you like, to be spent to meet the needs for families. Increasingly, that money is being directed to help fix problems that are created or made worse by the fact that benefiting comes either too low or frequently suspended.

But my reflection would be that many of our staff now believe that the main decision maker in the application of those funds is those workers, and it really shouldn't be. It should be sitting with and working with the people themselves and saying, "How would you like that money to be applied?" And that might not be easy or quick, but it will be far better and far more sustainable in terms of outcomes if people are engaged properly and given some agency in the expenditure of those funds. But if there's a positive in all of it, we do a lot of work reaching out to local high schools, in particular, kids who are thinking about where their careers might take them and transitioning from school into working life. And as baked on as many of our prejudices tend to be about people and why they are the way they are, young people still fortunately don't come with those prejudices engrained.

When I describe to them the way that our welfare system works at the moment, almost universally they say, "Well, that's nuts. How come it's like that?" We need to encourage that thinking and in the next generation of social workers and the like, we need to give them the freedom to think and to advocate.

Professor Shelley Mallet

I fear we're running out of time and we've only just begun the conversation. So I'm wondering what – before we close it up and ask for your personal overall reflections, I'm wondering what was some of the difficult things about the Family Centre project and the Action Resource Centre that followed?

Professor Hayden Raysmith

The thing that I found hardest and emotionally draining was that the families themselves had an expectation of failure. Their whole life had been one where they'd been disappointed. They'd been let down. And whenever they'd struggle to make life better, they had basically lost. And it was very difficult to keep the emotional energy pumping in to say, "You can do this," and, "We can do better," and, "Let's work together." And it extended to the point of, often, sabotaging success. So you'd get to the point where something was just about to work and the fact that it would work

would feel foreign. So there would be all sorts of little internal disputes and problems that would undermine it and ensure that it was a failure because that was the normal expectation of an outcome. I found that the most difficult thing of all. And after I left – finally left that to go on to the – because I was absolutely exhausted, and I think that was the biggest drain.

Dr. Michael Liffman

That's a very interesting comment, to which I would add, well, two things. Firstly, in any group of 60 families, 500 whatever individuals, there's going to be variation. There's going to be failures and success and not everyone is going to agree. I mean like any community, it's not going to be straightforward, and I think we have to expect that even when we're in a social mobilization mode. That's just the nature of people and how they interact. The other thing, and it partly reinforces, but partly it's a warning of what Hayden said, when people see themselves as victims, either because that's what life has thrown at them, but also when, in a sense, in our attempt to empower people, we inadvertently tell them that they're victims. That's not always right.

Now I worry a little bit about that, frankly, in the contemporary setting, that we do too much out of good intentions, telling people, "Yes, the world has treated you badly. You are a victim and that's why things aren't working out for you." The communities which, I think, overcome disadvantage and hardship most successfully, whether they're local communities, indigenous communities, refuge, whatever, are the communities which don't allow the fact that they are victims to become victimhood, to entrap them in the sense that, "Yeah, nothing is going to work for me because it's all stacked – victimhood is not a good basis for resilience.

Professor Shelley Mallet

David, what do you think that we can take forward from something like the Family Centre project, but also, what might be the next generation of activity to address these issues of family poverty?

David Tennant

I'm very taken with Michael's reflections about victimhood. And the town that I live and work in, Shepparton, is one of the lab rats of choice. Whenever any government anywhere wants to test any social policy change in Australia, Shepparton seems to be at the top of the shortlist of places that they'll do that in. And I think one of the things that we can take away from the project and a renewed enthusiasm for questioning the current social policy settings is that communities that want to do things for themselves, and have a sense that they want to be known as good places to live, that support each other, have to do that a little for themselves and express their willingness to take those challenges on and to do it regardless of the current environment. So I'll go home with a renewed enthusiasm for that type of conversation locally.

Sharon Lee

David Tennant. The discussion winds up with some comments and reflections from the audience.

Audience member

Hi, I found this very interesting. I work on an individual basis with people and in relation to the comment about being exhausted, putting energy into programs or work

and people not being able to feed off that and run with it, I just wonder whether that aspect of working in communities with – that those people are probably the people who have been through the longest, most complex stories of difficulty and obstruction in their lifespans and maybe even their parents' lifespans. And I wonder whether there's some way of taking from the counselling support world and translating some of the understandings and processes that they use when working with individuals to working in groups. I think that would be a really interesting area to explore.

Professor Shelley Mallet

Thank you. And we'll leave the final comment to Allison.

Allison

I think the point was made very strongly by the panel that income is a very important basic precondition, but not enough, and the empowerment model says that. And I think there is a continuity actually that needs to be brought out between the Brotherhood's approach in emphasizing Sen's capability approach and Connie's empowerment approach that can take us from there – from then to now because, in a way, the famous economist got the Nobel prize for dealing with poverty in the economy was about empowerment. He called it capability, but it's really about empowerment for people to live the lives they value. So it seems to me that there's a strong continuity that we can reinforce.

Professor Shelley Mallet

Yeah, I mean perfect segue actually, Allison, because in the wrap-up, we each come in – those of you who have worked at the Brotherhood are all being associated or affiliated with the Brotherhood over years. We come in and we reinvent the wheel in varying ways, sometimes knowingly, sometimes unknowingly. When Paul Smythe came into the organization, he brought to us capabilities, the capabilities approach of Amartye Sen and Nausbaum, and it's remained a really important frame to empower people to make decisions about their own lives, but most importantly, also to say that decision making power without opportunities, resources and networks, is going to be very difficult to enact.

And so we think these twin things of empowering people's capacity to have agency and act on their own behalf and make decisions about their own lives is really crucial, as well as aligning that with opportunities, resources and networks. And to that end, we've been working with our Education First Youth Foyers, our Transitions to Work program, our National Youth Employment Body on these principles. We've also been trying to really give life to these ideas through our work in the National Disability Insurance scheme and now our involvement in local area coordination and early childhood, early intervention, and to really take up these issues of choice, voice, control, power, empowerment in that context and really enliven it for people and for us to have an enabling role as opposed to a leading role.

I think we're on a journey. I think we've got many lessons to learn from way back then. I think we've only scratched the surface today, but I think what we see in this Family Centre project and the Action Resource Centre and the people that have continued to remain involved in the Brotherhood's life and work as a consequence of it is something that we can be inspired by and I want to thank each and every one of you who've been involved in that project for that contribution to our collective wisdom and may we honour it into the future, so thank you.

Sharon Lee

Professor Shelley Mallet, Brotherhood research and policy centre director, ending this talk which took place to mark Anti-Poverty Week in October 2019. There are some really great photos of the Family Centre project on our website, bsl.org.au/brotherhoodtalks Take a look. You'll also find more episodes, transcripts and other information there. Brotherhood Talks is a podcast by the Research and Policy Centre of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, working for an Australia free of poverty. Join the conversation on social media at #BSLTalks. Production by Aysha Zackariya, and me, Sharon Lee. Music by Lee Rosevere. Subscribe in your favourite podcast app for more episodes of Brotherhood Talks.