

Foundation board and grant partners in insightful discussion

By Allison Harding



IN A FIRST for the organisation, Brian M. Davis Charitable Foundation (BMDCF) board members have heard directly from some of our grant partners in a special roundtable event in Melbourne.

The Foundation's CEO Anita Hopkins and Grants Program Manager Sarah Bartak organised the gathering to help board members better understand the partners' frontline work, and for partners to meet and share ideas.

Anita and Sarah hosted the September 12 event at a Free to Feed venue in inner Melbourne. Feed to Free, a social enterprise supported by the Foundation, creates employment opportunities for people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds.

In the powerful conversation, the eight representatives of grant partners discussed purposes and priorities, with board members appreciating the opportunity to hear first-hand about the serious challenges faced by many children and young people.

Given the Foundation's aim to improve the lives of young Australians experiencing disadvantage, the discussion largely focused on the importance of

- relationship building
- power dynamics
- intergenerational issues at home and in workplaces
- lived expertise and greater input from young people into program design, and
- philanthropy's role in the ecosystem.

Loretta Bolotin from [Free to Feed](#) said the enterprise started nearly 10 years ago as Australia's first cooking school run by refugees. While Free to Feed has its successful enterprise model for adults, the Foundation is supporting a new internship program for a younger cohort interested in digital marketing, communications, and content creation.

Imogen Thomas from [The Man Cave](#) explained to the meeting that the charity helps boys to become self-aware, respectful, emotionally mature men. The Foundation is supporting workshops in schools in low socioeconomic areas across Victoria, which focus on preventing harm and redefining traditional concepts of masculinity.

"It's a really confusing time to be a teenage boy," Imogen said. "It's very encouraging that after these workshops, 40 per cent of the boys choose to continue into an online program. We are getting great feedback."

For nearly 15 years, [STREAT](#) has been working with young people in crisis. **CEO Rebecca Scott** told the meeting that a significant concern is the lack of support for young people leaving incarceration and returning to regional areas with no support.

"We're trying to work out how we stay connected to those young people – how can we build a larger and connected ecosystem across Victoria?"

The Foundation funds STREAT's program Thyme Out, which provides interventions for young offenders to move into supported employment.

Carla Raynes, the CEO of [Bridge It](#), outlined how her own experience with the justice system as a teenager in the UK sparked her desire to work in the sector. She set up Bridge It to house young women who have been in out-of-home-care or homeless. The Foundation supports *The Cocoon* program, which provides longer-term housing and wraparound supports.

"We bring in our young women when they are 17, give them a proper 18th birthday party and create a family for them – we teach them that life can be fun," Carla says. "And when they leave us, we don't close the case, they are still part of our family. Other organisations are now approaching us, wanting to replicate our model."

CEO Brigid Canny shared [YLab](#)'s work as a social enterprise that engages young people to consult with clients to design better services, policies and products for young people.

"We employ and train young people with diverse experiences, and work with different levels of government and corporates," she said. "Brian M. Davis Charitable Foundation has enabled us to explore a pilot program where we can find secure roles for young people, rather than casual work – which is what many young people want."

[Cultivating Community](#) was borne from community housing and gardening projects in the 1990s and now works with low-income communities to create fair, secure and resilient food systems. **CEO Rob Rees** said the Foundation-backed *Hear Me, See Me, Employ Me* program is increasing employment pathways for young Deaf people from CALD backgrounds.

"This is a real journey for us with many challenges – Auslan interpreters are expensive and difficult to find so we have needed to employ our own, many of our young people do not have English or Auslan at home, and there is a lot of work between developing a CV and actually getting them a job," Rob said.

Selba-Gondoza Luka, CEO and Anish Varghese, Project Manager from [Afri-Aus Care \(AAC\)](#) said the organisation, which provides culturally appropriate support services to at-risk African Australian young people and their families, was founded in 2015. The Foundation supports a project that includes community homework, after-school tutoring, sport programs, and cultural learning.

"This work is a great tool for promoting family connections and primary interventions," Selba said. "We start working with young people to prevent them getting into trouble, and we help the mums be part of the AAC team supporting the kids in cooking, gardening, and the children come along and develop a sense of community, rather than sitting alone in their rooms on their devices."

Emma Sydenham from [Social Ventures Australia](#) said that the importance of shifting relationships and power dynamics were a clear theme of the group's conversations.

The Foundation is funding a pilot to policy program supporting expansion of high impact integrated child and family service models through evidence building, practice support and policy reform.

Social Ventures Australia was established to find innovative solutions to entrenched social problems and speed up the rate of positive change.

“We can solve these issues in Australia,” Emma said. “We know the solutions – it’s not the “knowing” but the “doing” that is the problem.”

BMDCF board member Katherine Ellis, who is CEO of Leadership Victoria, reflected the view of the other members when she said she loved being part of the foundation that was continuing the legacy of Brian Davis.

“These organisations are all doing work that Brian would support, and I love hearing about these amazing projects,” she said. “There is so much energy and expertise in this room, and it is wonderful for the Foundation to be able to support you all.”
