Global Dignity Day, Sydney 2013

Reflections on dignity

We the younger generation are more distant than ever. We seem to be hiding behind our Facebook walls, and using emoticons to mask our true feelings.

It seems we are becoming more and more disconnected as a generation.

Sometimes we are so caught up in the lives of others, we forget about our own.

That’s why Global Dignity Day is essential for people like us to gain some perspective and to unite for one central cause.

We are so protected and shielded from the outside world that sometimes we forget about how insignificant our problems are in contrast with the problems of others. Gatherings like Dignity Day have truly shown us what dignity meant on a larger scale.

Former High Court judge Mr Michael Kirby addressed a crowd of teenagers – something that in itself would be very daunting to most people, yet he managed to touch every person in the room. He spoke with wisdom, humour and truth. He gave the audience a truly holistic view of our society and what dignity means – not just on a personal level, but on a global level. As the generation of the future, it is important that we have opportunities like this that give us a refreshing perspective of the role our lives play in the big scheme of things. Our actions could change the way that society, or the world, thinks and works.

Making national or global change may seem daunting or disheartening. But Mr Kirby spoke about how anyone could inspire change in the world: it was simply a matter of standing up and saying, ‘enough is enough’. He told us that in order to achieve a truly equal and thriving society, we must eradicate the fear of difference. He explained there is still an underlying sense of racism and discrimination that boils under the surface of society. This can be traced back to when our forefathers seemed so desperate to achieve a ‘white utopia’ by excluding a majority of the world’s population. However, this fear we have of things that are different is going to continue be a stumbling block if perspectives and mindsets aren’t radically changed.

Many students made inspiring speeches about their experiences with dignity. We shared stories about racism, discrimination and the value that dignity had to the individual. We heard stories about homosexuality and self-harm. The experience provided closure to those who spoke, and perspective to those who listened.

The story I told disappointed many. I spoke of a group of Year 10 school girls, of Asian heritage, who went to popular girls’ clothing shop to try on various garments with friends. Soon after they entered, however, a group of ‘Australian’ school girls began telling them to ‘go back where they came from’.

Previous generations of Australians were racist and perhaps these acts of discrimination would be expected out of those older generations who hadn’t had time to get used to the idea of a multicultural society. But what disappointed me was the fact that this discriminatory rant came from a Year 10 school girl, who had grown up in a multicultural society, attended a
multicultural school and been educated about things such as racism and discrimination. Yet this racist outlook had still been passed down from generation to generation, and it continues to poison Australian society.

A country such as Australia, which is at the forefront in many respects, such as its economy, trade, global relations, technology and mining, is still behind when it comes to the diversification of our population. What kind of nation are we, when Australian citizens who have been born and brought up in our country, cannot feel safe in their own society simply because they are not ‘conventionally Australian’? No matter the colour of their skin or their cultural background, they are Australians.

If we truly intend to shift perspectives and change the lives of future generations, we must lead by example. Not only is a sense of dignity a human right, it is an integral piece of the human puzzle. The maturity of a developed society is the number of differences it embraces. The society of the future is going to be a patchwork of differences but it can only fully flourish when human dignity is treasured.

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