

Smart Money Enterprise

Enterprising women

Dynamo behind kids' charity



Anne Fulwood

It was the haunting image of a seven-year-old boy, inconsolable at the funeral of his drug-addicted mother, that kept Jane Rowe awake all night some 15 years ago and, to this day, is the driving motivation behind the children's charity she founded.

Within days, she had arranged the first fund-raising event, held in December 1998, for the Melbourne-based Mirabel Foundation, the only Australian not-for-profit business working specifically with children orphaned or abandoned due to parental drug use, and who are being cared for by extended family in what is called kinship care.

Fourteen years later, Rowe is running an organisation with annual expenditure of \$2 million. Mirabel extended its kinship support beyond Victoria to NSW in 2003.

Numbers are rising, Rowe says. Four new children are referred to Mirabel each week, usually by government agencies.

"The numbers are going up ridiculously," Rowe says. "It grows every year and we all know that drug use is not going to disappear."

According to Rowe, what sets Mirabel apart is its specialisation in one area – the unique needs of these children and their kinship carers. Barnardos, OzChild and the Benevolent Society, among others, work more broadly with kinship carers and foster families but without a specialised focus.

For 15 years prior to that fateful day, Rowe had worked as a drug and alcohol counsellor with Melbourne-based facility Windana, which was established in 1984 by Peter Bucci, who passed away in 2003 but who mentored Rowe and her fledgling organisation.

Rowe was born in England in 1955 into a life of privilege. "I used to think the only work I would be doing would be entertaining my husband's business connections,

throwing lavish dinner parties and bringing up the children," she laughs.

Rowe's father sent his errant teenage daughter to a ladies secretarial college but bored with that, she applied for a job at the young Richard Branson's Virgin enterprise and ran his mail-order department.

The lure of life on the periphery of the punk scene in London in the 1970s led to a heroin addiction. After "partying hard" for a few years she managed, with support, to get clean. She met and married an Australian and arrived in Melbourne in 1979.

Her marriage broke down and with two children (a third came later), Rowe had to find a job. She credits her own experience with drugs for preparing her to work as a volunteer counsellor at Windana, where she encountered the children of addicted parents. Over the years she also counselled many high-profile members of the music and entertainment industry.

For her first Mirabel event, which followed that funeral, she gathered a few music contacts and they raised \$6000. She bought a fax machine, started running support groups and distributed cash for children in dire need.

The Mirabel business plan continues to build on the relationships Rowe has developed with high-profile entertainers and philanthropists, who get behind fund-raising activities.

Money is raised via donations and a mix of events, including annual gala comedy evenings in both states and a one-off show at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival where performers waive their fees.

Philanthropists provide 45 per cent of Mirabel's annual revenue. The first big bequest came from the Felton Bequest. Sir Gustav Nossal and his fellow trustees delivered enough funding in May 2001 for Rowe to employ someone full-time and deliver more programs.

Volunteering has always sustained Mirabel and amid the army of unheralded are big names such as Shane Jacobson, Lawrence Mooney, Deborah Conway, Rebecca Barnard and Mikey Robins.

"We have to be innovative about raising money and we are heavily



Jane Rowe: 'We are 100 per cent accountable.'

Photo: Josh Robenstone

reliant on all segments of the community," Rowe says.

The pressure for funding is constant. Each year demands a new budget and new fund-raising ideas. Money is spent on programs to provide emotional and practical support for the children and their carers. These include day activities, respite care, holidays at a Mirabel House and camps.

"Our motto is, every child deserves a childhood," Rowe says. "There is a strong focus on education and support to complete their schooling, and all Mirabel programs are designed to bring children together and restore a sense of belonging and

hope, while reducing the isolation they feel."

Anyone who has spent time with Rowe will know her as the walking, talking PR and marketing department, with her protégé, Nicole Patton, who has been at Mirabel since the beginning. There are now 24 employees at Mirabel and Rowe says their remuneration is in line with the welfare and charity sector.

Mirabel will not employ a fund-raising executive because the money would be better used for service delivery, she says. "It would be like bringing on a second-hand car salesman and no one can talk about Mirabel like Nicole and I

We have to be innovative about raising money.

Jane Rowe,
The Mirabel Foundation

because we believe in it so much."

A board of management, chaired by VicRoads executive director Judith Pettitt, oversees all decisions on expenditure and Rowe's challenge is always to balance resources with needs and demands on services.

Expenditure for the 2011 financial year was \$2 million but is expected to rise to \$2.5 million for 2012 due to increased demand. Rowe has neither the plans nor capacity to extend beyond NSW and Victoria at this stage.

"We are 100 per cent accountable and we are 100 per cent transparent, but we are not bureaucratic, there are not reams of paperwork," she explains. "If any child comes to us abandoned through illicit drug use and is living with extended family, they are eligible and there is no waiting list."

A key to success in working with children, according to Rowe, is early intervention. "If we don't invest time and money in these children early on, we are only going to have to pick them up at the other end. They will not learn how to parent, or connect with people. It is economic madness not to do something early."

Rowe doesn't get involved in policy debates regarding drug use. "This is purely a children's charity," she says. "I refuse to comment on drug laws or judge drug use because our focus is absolutely on children. Every decision we make is based on the wellbeing of the child."

There is no exit strategy for Rowe. After all, she laughs, there's a lot of the song *Pick Myself Up* by the late reggae singer Peter Tosh in her rock'n'roll veins, and with every approaching financial year: "I've got to pick myself up, dust myself off, start all over again!" Anne Fulwood has 30 years' experience as a journalist. She works with small business through the Telstra Business Awards.