

GUEST EDITORIAL

HONEST HOPE IN THE FACE OF VULNERABILITY

by Mel Jackman

Values in Action has invited Mel Jackman to the role of Guest Editor for this edition. Mel has many roles, Chair of *Training and Evaluation for Change*, the SRV group in Adelaide, advocate, friend, student, and avid walker. Welcome Mel.

The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it - Michelangelo

One of two things happen quite reliably for devalued people. The first is that devalued people are affected by a lack of belief about their potential to grow and have full lives; they are surrounded by low expectations and negative assumptions.

The second is a more complex phenomenon. It is where belief about possibilities are held, but done so in the absence of understanding the context of devalued people's lives. Lives full of wounding experiences, limited resources, rejection, devaluation, isolation, and the list could go on. In short, belief in the possibilities, is embraced in the absence of addressing people's *heightened vulnerabilities* and *negative life experiences*. The outcome of this is often that people are set up to fail. We then find ourselves having travelled full circle: we have held positive beliefs without taking account of the supports people need, which leads to disappointments. Our response is to return to holding limited, negative beliefs about a person and their capacity to achieve an ordinary, good life.

What is needed is what Fran Peavey calls 'honest hope'. Honest hope is created not out of unrealistically high expectations nor built of too lowly expectations. It is an honest hope because it shines a light on our low expectations and pushes us to dream big.

SRV addresses this issue in the theme of *mindsets*. Wolfensberger reminds us of the importance of positive mindsets, which encapsulate beliefs, values and assumptions. And he says that it is vital to hold the belief that 'all people, no matter how impaired or oppressed, have the capacity for growth and change'. He further emphasises 'that this capacity is much greater than most people realise, than is evident from a person's current life conditions and functioning'.

We all need to be surrounded by our own (and others') belief to succeed. And for devalued people the simple act of believing can be incredibly powerful. Belief becomes a catalyst for opportunities that would otherwise have remained unseen. The simple act of believing is the tool that shines a light on pathways to bigger and better things in life. When people hold *negative mindsets*, devalued people are denied the opportunities, and resources, to achieve their life goals – those pathways forward remain in the shadows, unclear. Also, because of the countless bad things that have happened to devalued people, sometimes those life goals are not evident or even seen as important. Just getting through the day takes one's whole attention. However, something bigger and better is *always* possible.

But devalued people are more vulnerable to having bad things happen to them. So belief and positive mindsets need to be paired with safeguards and thoughtful support. Embracing belief blindly and charging forward to the ordinary good life can be harmful. A support worker, in exasperation at my unwavering belief in the possibilities, once said to me, 'yes, I can see across the river to what you are talking about but I cannot see a way across'. A brilliant metaphor for the journey forward. The way across may seem deep and treacherous but there is a way across. The way is just not paved yet. It never is for any of us, just like in any journey we will face barriers, setbacks and moments of uncertainty. But belief and honest hope can be used as beacons to keep us on track as we pave a way across the river. We can ask ourselves 'Are we being too cautious, too reckless? Are our assumptions negative and our expectations too low?' We can ask ourselves honest questions so we get honest answers. Without that belief we will be blind to the possibilities (or stepping stones across the river) because we will be looking the wrong way!

Knowing where we want to go, and believing it is possible, gives us the opportunity to place those stepping stones down for the devalued people who rely on our belief that better is *always* possible.