

Engaging the Nation

CLEMENTE
AUSTRALIA

10
YEARS ON



“We are part of our own solution”

Clemente Australia student

Moving together beyond disadvantage

Clemente Australia 10 Years On

For people experiencing multiple disadvantages, finding enough money to live on, somewhere safe to live, food to eat, treatment for physical or mental illness (or both) and the support of friends, family and community is an on-going struggle.

Poverty is not just a lack of money. It also involves loss of a sense of belonging, of self-worth, of control over one's life, of meaningful existence. The unrelenting stress of such loss affects more than a million Australians, to whom the hope of any improvement seems unlikely. As one commented, “I've learned not to put expectations on new experiences so that I cannot be disappointed.” Such a view of poverty demands fresh answers to the question: “How can the Australian

community find new ways to support its citizens, especially those suffering multiple disadvantage?” Clemente is one of the answers.

In 1995 the program that Shorris developed from Viniece Walker's insight began at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Centre in New York City, and is described in his book *Riches for the Poor: The Clemente Course in the Humanities*.

The course was taught at first-year university standard by academics paid full salaries to undertake a serious teaching contract, being delivered at no cost to students suffering multiple disadvantage. The students had to be between 18 and 35 years old and able to read a tabloid newspaper. Classes consisted of no more than 15 members, to accommodate the Socratic teaching method using questions and discussion. Students were not graded at the end of the course, but received a certificate for each subject completed.

The Clemente program grew from an encounter in the USA in the 1990s between Earl Shorris (1936-2012), an American journalist and social commentator, and Viniece Walker, a female prisoner working to improve the lot of her fellows in a New York jail. Shorris asked her why she thought people became snared in persistent poverty and how they might escape it. To his surprise, she replied that they should be enabled to question the assumptions of their society through study of the Humanities — literature, philosophy, history and art — not that they should be trained to join the workforce. Her answer recalled Socrates' statement that for a human being, “the unexamined life is not worth living,” and asserted that the poor could learn to see themselves as agents of change rather than as victims by reflecting on their society and their relationship to it.

Clemente's Australian Footprint



By 2002 people associated with the St Vincent de Paul Society in Sydney were aware of Shorris's work, and in 2003 he visited Sydney to speak to interested parties. As a result, the first full-scale Clemente program began ten years ago, in September 2003, when Dr Graham English of Australian Catholic University (ACU) taught "Ethics: Living an Examined Life," with funding from Vincentian Village, the Sisters of Charity and the Sydney City Council.

By 2006 seven humanities courses had been offered by staff from ACU, and the Australian version of Clemente had begun to evolve, with twelve-week semester courses, including assessment and student evaluations. Students visited galleries and museums, and bodies like the Bell Shakespeare Company provided special expertise in literature courses. Volunteer Learning Partners recruited from corporations and the general community assisted individual Clemente students, and ACU provided practical training to prepare them. Many Learning Partners have now been involved for several courses, and new ones join Clemente every year. Unlike American Clemente courses, those in Australia include assessment, enabling them to be recognized academically for the award of a Certificate in

Liberal Studies by ACU. There is no upper age limit for students.

The Clemente program has spread from East Sydney to other centres: Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide, Ballarat, Canberra, Surry Hills, Newcastle and Campbelltown, and there are continuing expressions of interest from other locations. Since 2003, partners have included the St Vincent de Paul Society, Mission Australia, The Benjamin Andrew Footpath Library, The Sisters of Charity, The Smith Family, Ballarat City Council, Ballarat Cares, Centacare, Central Highlands Regional Library Co-Op, The Sisters of St Joseph and CatholicCare. Other tertiary institutions have taken up the Clemente program and continue to be involved in its delivery or research: The University of Ballarat, Curtin University, Edith Cowan University, Griffith University, Flinders University, and The University of Western Australia.

By the end of 2012, more than 700 students had participated in the Clemente Australia program. Of these, 122 students have completed the Certificate in Liberal Studies with ACU, and 35 Clemente graduates are continuing study in undergraduate courses at ACU campuses.



Research into the effects of the Clemente program has been a focus of publications since 2003. Refer to www.acu.edu.au/clementeaustralia. A 2009-2011 study of Clemente, *"We're part of our own solution,"* funded through an Australian Research Council grant, involved academic partners from Australian Catholic University, Curtin University, Edith Cowan University, and the University of Western Australia, in collaboration with Mission Australia and the National Council of St Vincent de Paul.

Benjamin Andrew Footpath Library

Clemente also engages directly with the community through The Benjamin Andrew Footpath Library, providing a street library every Tuesday in Sydney's Martin Place to cater for homeless and people affected by disadvantage. Mark Mahony, library technician at ACU's Strathfield campus, serves at Martin Place. He also supervises volunteers each month, selecting new, high quality books, magazines and journals suited to adult and child readers at over 60 Sydney locations, such as homeless shelters, refuges and prisons. The Library has a particular interest in Indigenous literacy for adults and school children. There is no requirement to return the books, and so readers come to own books, to feel a sense of self-respect, and to recognize that others understand their desire for knowledge.

"Working at Strathfield Campus library, I regularly assist Clemente students, and see first-hand how much they value

the opportunity to be part of the University, and to be engaged with learning and personal development," says Mark. He has worked with IACE to create materials promoting Clemente in homeless facilities, and information packs to encourage case-managers to consider Clemente for their clients. The Footpath Library and Clemente "give the most disadvantaged people dignity and hope and facilitate the full expression of the human person," says Mark, who shared in the 2012 ACU Staff Award for Outstanding Community Engagement.

Community ownership

"Clemente Ballarat" began in 2008, and provides an excellent example of community ownership of the program and its transformative effects. Delivery is embedded in the community, with local agencies providing the social supports that students require in undertaking tertiary study.

Ballarat has been identified as one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged communities in Victoria, with high unemployment, many single-parent families, a high percentage of residents renting accommodation, a growing population of African refugees, and double the state average of Indigenous people. Social and economic disadvantage has reduced levels of educational participation and performance, affected public health, alienated children and their families, and increased levels of poverty and crime — outcomes that sap community vitality and cohesion.

Such a description fails to recognize the capabilities and potential of the people of Ballarat. Victoria's third largest city, Ballarat is home to three university campuses and its sense of identity and community has fostered commitment to education among its citizens, built respect and co-operation among community institutions, and mobilized all levels of private and government education in the city to enhance the educational participation and performance of disadvantaged children and of marginalized adults. On March 20, 2012 a Memorandum of Understanding supporting the Clemente program was signed by ACU, the City of Ballarat, The Smith Family, Ballarat Library, United Way, Centacare, and the University of Ballarat in a concerted effort to support the Clemente program and its students. Clemente Ballarat received a Community Education Award from the Australian College of Educators in February 2013.

Clemente Ballarat has provided units in Australian History, Indigenous History, Ethics, Sociology and 2D art, and in 2013 will run its first Australian Literature unit. Students are often referred by Centacare and the Smith Family. Centacare provides a student co-ordinator, who also offers healthy lunches for students, learning partners and teaching staff. United Way provides learning partners for students. Ballarat Library offers a learning space and kitchen, and expert help with computing and library skills. ACU and Ballarat University supply teaching staff, and Ballarat City Council hosts functions that support the costs of Clemente. ACU enrolls Clemente students and covers all administrative costs, and its Academic Skills staff provide support in essay writing, referencing and research. Clemente Ballarat students have access to ACU's Library services and resources and to its counselling and careers services.

Dawn Manning, a Ballarat Clemente student, addressed those gathered in 2012 for the signing of the MOU. Part of her address considers Clemente students' view of themselves:

"As a group, we in the Ballarat Clemente group have perhaps experienced a broad range of life issues that do not rank amongst the genres of 'advantaged' or 'successful.' Recently the Ballarat TV station presented a well-informed segment on the Clemente Program; the narrator concluded that this program was for 'disadvantaged' students. WE do NOT own or accept this label. May I suggest this is the perception of those outside our experience? In fact, I/we/other Clemente groups interstate are courageous people undertaking an opportunity as it is presented. For this reason we applaud the supporters of the Clemente Program who enable us to continue this wonderful experience of university studies. Thank you to the financial supporters, the educators, agencies, mentors and visionaries who enrich our lives."

Agency and hope

The experience of Clemente in settings around Australia enables people to see beyond seemingly hopeless situations and to look forward to a future: "I can make decisions for my life," says Mary. "I don't think I could ever stay stale and not be doing something or learning or growing."

Michael writes: "I will never have to wonder now whether or not I could have done it. I AM doing it, and I am at least competent, maybe even good at this, and my self-confidence has grown — quietly on the outside, but a roar within me. It's not about being best in the class ... but getting an insight into formal education is enough for me to finally say: 'Well, it's up to me now.'"

Viniece Walker's insistence that Earl Shorris should offer disadvantaged people a humanities course rather than job training grew from her own experience and insight. Clemente students agree that reflection on themselves and their situation through critical discussion of philosophy and literature and history and art enables them to break free from mere reaction to the pressures of life on the margins and to think and plan for themselves.

Enrolling in a Clemente course requires decisions to act and to meet expectations. Continuing the course brings social relationships with fellow students, lecturers and learning partners. Learning at university level supports students in developing new views of themselves and their capacities.

After entering a degree course, Suzanne writes: "I have learnt to trust people a lot more Young people have reached out to me so much ...that my confidence has grown. They don't see me as different so I feel more part of this world and academic environment.... It's really exciting to see people respond, some of whom I would have been afraid of six months ago.... Right now I am the most happy I have been in a long time. No one can tell I have a serious mental illness.... I can kiss mental illness goodbye really. I'm swapping it for an Arts Degree. I'm a student first and foremost. It's like having a job. My family are very happy for me and support me in reading my essays. Relationships with them are better than ever. Nobody judges me. Why would they? I'm at ACU studying for a degree.... Uni gives my life a richness and sense of connectedness and equity that I couldn't get any other way."

In 2013 we celebrate 10 years of Clemente in Australia.

For more information: www.acu.edu.au/clementeaustralia

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