

donkey wheel has never wanted to be the centre of attention in its support of changemakers. Our aim is to fund changemakers who support a multitude of changemakers, thereby making an exponential difference in our society.

One such organisation is Australian Progress. In this ‘unprecedented’ year of bushfires, pandemics and lockdowns, just imagine starting a new role in the midst of that lockdown (or lockdown 1.0 for those in Melbourne). Face-to-face planning, strategy and ‘getting to know you’ meetings were impossible. Kirsty Albion knows all about that, having been appointed Australian Progress’ Executive Director in the second week of lockdown. She reflects: “The last three months have been a whirlwind,” where she and Australian Progress had to grapple with a range of important questions: “How could we help organisations supporting the marginalised who were scrambling for help themselves? How could we help people re-orientate quickly?”

Amongst the whirlwind, Australian Progress made the extraordinary decision to create a virtual conference – Progress 2020 – in an environment where it was not only impossible to physically gather, but the participants were also processing a crisis that felt almost dystopian. Another challenge for Kirsty and Australian Progress was that their Progress Labs pitches couldn’t take place in person, as per their normal practice. Like many other organisations, Australian Progress was faced with dilemmas that required courage and creativity.

Such dilemmas are best faced in partnership with others.

Kirsty is convinced that Australian Progress was able to be creatively courageous and bring Progress 2020 online in the space of ten weeks was through the untied funding provided by donkey wheel and other partner organisations. “If we didn’t have donkey wheel’s support, our conversations would have been very different: you can’t be hopeful in a scarcity mindset – that funding helped flip us into a different mindset. It was like donkey wheel was saying, ‘We trust that you have important work to do – here’s the money to do it.’”

Kirsty’s assumption about donkey wheel’s motives is spot on. “We choose our grant recipients because we trust the leadership within an organisation to make wise decisions regarding the use of limited resources,” explained Col Duthie, donkey wheel’s Executive Chair. “We knew instinctively that if ever there was a time for untied funding, this was it. As a philanthropic foundation, our reason for being is to support social change agencies. The pandemic crisis was a clarion call to get as much money out of our bank account and into the accounts of those organisations we exist to support.”

The results of that boost to Australian Progress’ confidence and bank account were phenomenal. “That support was genuinely transformative,” recalls Kirsty. “It helped us put the pedal to the floor. It gave us the courage to ask what was needed of us – to be really bold. In just 10 weeks, we launched Virtual Progress – an online platform that brought together 1,600 participants with 225 speakers from 13 countries to engage with ideas, concepts and initiatives to launch into a new era of transforming changemakers towards a future of optimism, courage and hope. The learnings that emerged from Virtual Progress are not over.”

Those learnings will continue to reach out others, not only in Australian Progress’ sphere of influence, but through many of the people who participated in Virtual Progress. Stemming from a relatively small amount of funding and the resilience of Kirsty and her team, this is the transformative result that donkey wheel is proud to be connected with.

Craig Brown
donkey wheel storyteller