

GROWING HOPE grows gala dinner

In only three years the Jesuit Social Services' Great Australians Gala Dinner doubled its fundraising revenue. [Lise Taylor](#) reports.

The Jesuit Social Services' Growing Hope initiative focuses on providing support for Australians touched by suicide – in many cases loved ones left behind are at most risk of succumbing to self-harm. It aims to make a difference at the grassroots of this problem.

The Great Australians Gala Dinner was developed during 2014 when government funding was at an all-time low in the social services sector. "The concept came about from the requirement to raise funds to continue the program. An employee at the time reached out to Melbourne-based event management specialists Incognitus, which in turn created an event concept where guests could dine and interact with 'great' Australians – those who had made exceptional contributions to their specific field of endeavour," says Shane Healy, Chairman of the dinner organising group for Jesuit Social Services.

The great Australians

Each year great Australians are selected for their extraordinary contribution to their chosen field of expertise.

"While many already have a high profile in society, such as sport and entertainment personalities, others have achieved greatness in fields generally obscured from the public consciousness," says Healy. "We have had Cross of Valour recipients, Brownlow medallists, Archibald Prize winners, politicians, artists, scientists, doctors, military medal recipients, Olympians, Paralympians and more."

Past great Australians honored include Christine Nixon, James Morrison AM, Duncan Armstrong OAM, Jessica Watson, John Bertrand, Kelly Cartwright OAM, Leon Wiegard, Maggie Beer, Aunty Pam Pedersen, Nova Peris OAM, Keith Payne VC OAM and Ray Martin AM.

One of the event's main challenges involves getting the great Australians on board: "At first, many were hesitant to get involved. However, as the status of the event has risen we are finding it far easier to motivate them to attend."

Last year was the first event in which a dedicated media specialist was involved in bringing a heightened profile to the night. National TV coverage on Channel 7 (*Before the Game*), Nine (*The Today Show*) and Network 10 (*Studio 10*) has meant inroads are being made into increasing the status of the event, and, in turn, the willingness of future great Australians to become involved.

Planning & strategy

Incognitus runs the event, including coordinating all contact efforts and support logistics such as transportation, accommodation and appearance contracts, and donates all net proceeds to Growing Hope.

"The thorough planning and strategy behind the event is one of the biggest reasons the night runs so well," explains Healy.

Most table sales are made through company contacts of Incognitus,

Jesuit Social Services and its patrons, and contact is made via phone and email. As the profile of the event has grown, members of the public have learned about the dinner through radio, TV and print promotions, however most sales are currently driven via directly working with the nonprofit's database of around 200 companies.

The goal for 2016's event was to sell out all available tables, to raise the dinner's profile and to encourage attendees to book for 2017's event. These targets were achieved, with the gala selling out at 300 guests, and a healthy number of bookings for this year's event already secured. For the 2016 event, tables of eight were priced at \$5,000 or \$625 per person plus GST and 38 tables were booked, most of them well in advance. Corporate sponsors included Evan Evans, Canidae, Amadio Wines, Alternative Freight Services and PMY Group, to name a few.

Alongside the entertainment, several generously donated high-ticket and exclusive auction items are sold off during the night, raising further funds. The auction items range from signed collectables – 2016's event included a guitar signed by the legendary late pop star Prince – through to luxury cars, holiday packages, home furnishings and specialist services.

Auctioned items account for around 25% of all funds raised. "Our biggest generator of proceeds each year is our table bookings, which is why there is such a strong focus on driving sales in the lead-up to the event," says Healy before adding, "The serious side of the evening involves a speech from a client of Jesuit Social Services who has been involved with the Support After Suicide program to help increase awareness for the program and those in need."

Originally the evening's line-up was tightly packed with non-stop entertainment of some description happening on stage. "We received feedback that attendees felt they didn't have enough time to network, socialise and enjoy the company of the great Australian seated at each table so we removed a little content and created breaks in the program, which this year turned out to be our most successful event yet!" adds Healy.

In 2017, the nonprofit is looking to expand the event to 95% to 100% capacity with a goal to raise \$150,000. **F&P**

Event growth

	2014	2015	2016
Number of great Australians	36	36	52
Number of guests	303	339	417
Dollars raised	\$60,000	\$90,000	\$110,000