



## The story behind the Only Human Story Approach

The first seeds to Only Human were planted in 1998 when Moya Sayer-Jones was approached by UnitingCare Burnside to develop a book of stories about families experiencing great disadvantage. She was best known at that time for her comedy, especially her novels and her column with the *Good Weekend* magazine in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Modern Guru). So she was a little surprised by the offer, to say the least. Why on earth was a social justice department of a welfare agency asking a comedy writer to write a book about hardship? Did they think she could make poverty funny?

Not so, as it turns out. There was nothing funny about these families living on the edge but there was something inspiring that wasn't being tapped in the materials at the time. Burnside wanted a new way to create understanding around marginalised people. They didn't want another research approach that could be read at heart's-length and put down. They didn't want a third-person journalist's perspective on the tragedy of disenfranchisement. They wanted a book where the families could speak for themselves and show their strengths and insights and their mistakes, too. Claerwen Little, who was head of Burnside's Social Justice program at that time, commissioned Moya because she wanted a writer who could craft authentic stories that would show the full complexity of these lives and yet engender empathy, not criticism. A strengths-based warts and all look at what helps and what stands in the way. Burnside wanted a proud book.

The stories needed to reach a remarkably diverse audience including field workers, service providers, decision makers, other families experiencing similar difficulties and the wider community. The challenge was to create a book that people would want to read to the end. This is no mean feat in a world of information overload and especially so, given this sensitive and difficult subject matter. The book was called **They...**

**They...** (with an initial print run of 6,000) was an astonishing success across many levels. The power of real people bravely telling their stories captured the imagination of believers and disbelievers alike. Three repeat print runs have since been completed and a fourth is planned. It was distributed in doctors' waiting rooms, high schools, universities, churches and a range of community service settings. It was repeatedly requested by an array of service groups and has proved invaluable to the ongoing work of community services and also to the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services who funded a number of repeat print runs, using the book for distribution through many of their family and community service programs.

**And so, Moya was hooked on story** and more books followed, including: ***In My Life\****, commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, about families and carers of people with illicit drug and mental health problems; ***Inspiring Not Retiring***, commissioned by the Office of Ageing; ***Another day – stories of people living with schizophrenia*** produced for the Janssen-Cilag pharmaceutical company as part of their mental health program; ***Big Story Country: great arts stories from regional Australia*** for Regional Arts Australia; and ***Beyond the Call***, a book of stories from veterans and their families for the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Australian General Practice Network.

\*This book has been widely disseminated, and is used as an in-service and training resource in a range of alcohol and other drug services. Since publication in mid 2006, 10,000 copies have been distributed and a second print run of a further 10,000 completed. Demand for the book remains constant.



Only human  
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