

VVT Grant Speech

Kelly Manning

Hi, I'm Kelly

About a month ago I was phoned by the trust and asked if I would say few words at the awards night for the new recipients of the Vietnam Veterans' Trust Grant (now AVCAT scholarships). At the time I said yes, forgetting all the anxieties I have with public speaking. Of course I love a challenge which is probably why I'm here tonight.

I am like many others here tonight, an army kid, spending the first half of my life moving from state to state, living within the realms of the army suburbs, sleeping on those ever-so-comfortable army cots, and living on army rations. And like most army kids I could swear like a trooper and fight like a boy. Being an army kid is not only character building, it taught me how to survive.

It wasn't until 1992 that things got really interesting, my dad was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, like many of his mates at the time. For me, initially it was amusing, it exaggerated all the neurotic traits my father accumulated from 20 years as an engineer in the Australian Army. My housemate still laughs at the times my father visited Melbourne. He spent a whole day moving the clothes from our backyard clothes line to the verandah clothes line, back and forwards. All day.

Last year he macheted our front yard in nothing but his stubbies and thongs, it's hard to shock a Collingwood resident, but I think he did. I love my dad but nothing has brought us closer than when I too was diagnosed with PTSD.

In 1998 when I was the lowest of lows my father suggested I should apply for the VVT Grant. I knew instantly that the grant was designed for people like me. The previous year I spent some time in hospital, I burnt my room down (not on purpose but my psychologist would disagree) and dropped out of TAFE three times. I felt like a big loser, but was still determined, persistent and passionate about my chosen career as an artist.

In 1999 I was awarded the VVT Grant and bought an etching press with my first payment. Then the next couple of months I bought books, mostly medical, photographic and army books which have aided my art making. That year I graduated with high distinctions and went straight to second year at RMIT University. I'm studying fine arts, and specialising in drawing.

At uni my area of interest move from the body to the Vietnam War, particularly PTSD and chemical warfare; which I feel I was affected by in the form of a bone tumour. During the mid-semester break in third year I was able to travel to Vietnam to research these topics. This experience not only enhanced my artwork but gave me a deeper understanding of my father's experience in Vietnam.

I finished uni last year with high distinctions and a degree. I'm the first member of the family to have a degree. My father came to Melbourne to attend the graduation ceremony, although he missed most of it as he was buying his new friends in the audience beers. It was a proud moment for him.

This year I'm one of two honours students and am the new Artist in Residence at St Vincent's Hospital, a far cry from where I once was. So this is my opportunity to say thank you to the Trust (AVCAT), you will hear great things about me in the future. And a big congratulations to this year's recipients.

Thank you