

# It's Yule to be kind



**KATHLEEN NOONAN**

Strange and fantastic things happen in garages. Passionate things. Rock bands start there with five mates, dope and beer, amid tools. Vintage cars are lovingly tinkered with. Boxers leave their sweat on the concrete floor.

People may sleep and eat in the rest of the house but the garage is where their hearts sing. Garages are places where people are passionate *and* practical, where hard work meets crazy vision, where they are truly themselves. So it is in Isabella Bevan's crowded, sweaty garage. While not exactly Dante's Inferno, on a muggy summer day in Brisbane it can be a little ... stifling. Still, they come. Before I explain why, I need to explain "who".

The "who" are good people. Yes, there are bloody mongrels, dropkicks, heartless idiots, lousy creeps, peanuts, jerks, bastards, ruffians, brainless barbarians, sadists, louts, fiends, brutes and awful swine. The headlines are full of these types and their crimes but, generally, there are a great many more good people in the world.

Back in March 2013 I wrote about the lack of school shoes and proper uniforms for the 3000 kids in Queensland's domestic violence shelters. Most need to start afresh because the violent parent stalks their old school. Some of these traumatised children, without the right uniform, bag or hat, stand out in the playground, becoming a lightning rod for further bullying. So I wrote, hoping a large corporation or government would step in. Silence. Then a short email arrived. Isabella Bevan and her sister, Carmel Martin, might be able to help. I passed on the contact details and promptly forgot about it, moving on to the next story, as the media circus so often does. Time passes.

Then, a great surprise. The sisters' idea morphs into Zephyr Education Australia, a lean, all-volunteer model that has become a game-changer in the sector. Today it supplies essential schooling needs – specific to

each child, school, grade – to 57 shelters in Queensland and seven in Tasmania. It's a huge logistical feat, transporting school needs all over Brisbane, southeast Queensland, up and down the eastern seaboard.

So, good people were needed. Such as Jim, in his 70s, who has become the Sunshine Coast delivery person. Such as women who sew the library, chair and swim bags and like elves, leave them outside the garage doors for Isabella to find in the morning. Such as the utterly reliable Gang of Eight – friends and neighbours – who gather in the garage on Tuesdays and Wednesdays to organise these packs.

The pay? Lousy (non-existent). Conditions? You get a sauna thrown in with your good deed. There are transport companies, Hawkins Transport in Cairns, Brisbane's Followmont Transport and national operator Transfreight who said: Yep, we can help. There are Queensland Bridge players, *The Courier-Mail* Children's Fund, Rotarians and the Sentinel Property Group who assist. There are women at Suncorp who sew small fabric comfort hearts to pop in a pencil case so an anxious child can slip them into their uniform pocket, unseen, and when upset can feel for them, squeeze them. Shelter workers say they are treasured. And there's Bob, 75, one of Bevan's neighbours, who helps with single backpack deliveries: "He throws it on his back and heads off on his scooter." Good men. In the discussion about family violence, often that phrase is not used enough.

There are good men out there who are hellbent on being part of the family violence solution. Bevan and Martin's husbands David and Terry must be mad. What was supposed to be retirement has become ... this huge thing. They couldn't have imagined this life. It wasn't part of the plan. Yet, they are up to their elbows in it. Isn't that the best kind?

Social researcher Hugh Mackay, in his



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Gandhi Oration at the University of NSW this year, said the state of the nation starts in your street; that the focus on self is making us miserable. "We are not living as if we need each other, though we do. We are not living as if our own health depends on the health of the communities we belong to, though it does. We are not living as if we understand that a good life can only be a life lived for others, though that's all it can ever be ... You can't be good on your own: goodness is inherently about responding to other people's need of our kindness, charity, compassion, respect – our love."

Don't let anyone tell you Zephyr is just

about shoes. When the mother sees her children settled at school and happy she is more likely to forge a new life for them, to not return to the perpetrator. It's a vital piece in the complex strategy of keeping women and children alive. Give Zephyr your time, your skills or your cash at [zephyreducation.com.au](http://zephyreducation.com.au). There are no admin costs so 100 per cent goes to the cause. At this time of year, it's good to know you've reached into someone's life at the most vulnerable time. In a humble little garage this December, the very essence of human kindness is born.

### AND ANOTHER THING ...

Readers, thanks for your emails throughout the year. This is the last column for 2017, as we scribblers need a nice lie-down. I've squirrelled away a copy of Don Watson's collected essays, *There it is Again*, so can happily endure anything the season hurls. Stay cool and calm, read something moving, hold someone close. See you on the other side.

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PUZZLE SOLUTIONS 1. Singapore 2. Special Air Service 3. Florence Nightingale  
SYMBOL SUM Cross = 1, square = 3, triangle = 0, hexagon = 5, star = 6, circle = 2 PALINDROME STOLEN OPALS I FIX IF I SLAP ONE LOTS