

PAUL RONALDS: THE PHILANTHROPIC ENTREPRENEUR

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After a varied and highly influential career across government, NGOs and various other social activist enterprises, HSF alumnus Paul Ronalds is currently the CEO of Save the Children Fund.

The briefest discussion about his background makes it clear that caring about social justice is simply part of his DNA. One of six children, he comes from a Gippsland farming family. “From a very early age, both parents instilled in me a sense of community responsibility,” he recalls. “I can remember every year collecting for the Salvation Army in the Red Shield door knocking appeal. Accompanying my mother... we would be calling in at the local domestic violence refuge and providing support there.”

But he insists his initial career instincts weren’t altruistic. When asked if he went into law and then politics as outgoing US President Barack Obama did, so that he could understand the law before changing it, he laughs. “I was a little bit entrepreneurial,” he says. “Actually my real motivation or desire was to be the CEO of BHP, because that was the biggest company... so I’ve come a long way from there.”

He did a double degree in law/economics as “it seemed to me that law was a really effective way to start to engage with senior business leaders at a relatively young age,” he says. And this is exactly what happened. His three years in corporate law at what was then called Freehills in the mid-1990s gave him a great basis for his future career, he believes. “I still look back at my time at Freehills as being extraordinarily foundational, in terms of the disciplines of working in an office, responding to the day-to-day demands. The in-house education, the love of learning...”

But that entrepreneurial spirit reared its head and he left the firm to co-create the extremely successful online start-up Wishlist.com. It was during those heady days of the first dotcom boom that he received some of the most pivotal advice of his career.

He talks fondly of a “grizzly old CFO” brought into the company by its venture capitalists, whose recommendations set him on a completely different path. “Every 10 years he’d taken a year off. He didn’t work and would use the time to reflect on what he’d achieved to date and what he wanted to do for the next 10 years,” says Ronalds.

Almost at burnout with the long hours and frenetic pace of the start-up, he and his wife followed suit, heading overseas to travel, volunteer, read and reflect, before returning to round out the non-earning year with volunteering for old friend Tim Costello at NGO Urban Seed. This led to a stint as deputy CEO at World Vision, before a move into Julia Gillard’s Government, where he spent three years as First Assistant Secretary in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. This was a challenging period, where he learned a great deal about government as a risk minimisation machine, but he jokes, “Working in the public service was a bit like eating bran for breakfast. You don’t enjoy it much, but you know it’s good for you.”

He’s been the CEO of Save the Children Australia since July 2013. His latest role has multiple challenges, he says. “ You have a vast array of stakeholders, from ultimate beneficiaries to donors to board members to employees to government... and then of course in an organisation like Save the Children you’ve got all the international aspects on top of the domestic ones. So that complexity is daunting. It’s also what’s so intellectually exciting about working here.”

Ronalds believes he has an easier job than those who actually work at the coalface, but it’s his experiences in the field that really inspire his passion to succeed. “Having three young children myself, when you see a child that’s about your son’s or daughter’s age and you see the circumstances in which they live and how the world has dealt them a hand and you say, ‘There but for the grace of God go I’... you get that fire in your belly. That’s a terrible injustice. If it was my child I would be trying to change the world. It doesn’t matter that it’s not my child, I’m going to change the world nonetheless.”

And what will be his next contribution? “I’ve always thought about three factors to judge the next role on,” he says. “The first one: will I be intellectually challenged by it? I’m someone that’s by nature curious, I like being stretched intellectually, so I look for jobs that are complex and have that strong intellectual element to them. Second: will I enjoy the people that I’m working with? You go in there, you spend long hours with the people that you work with each day. Are they a good bunch, do they share your values? And three: what will be my legacy from working with this organisation? I don’t know what will happen after Save the Children. I’ve still got quite a few things that I want to achieve here, before I leave, and we’ll see what’s after that...”