

I think you all know from last year, and maybe even the year before, that I very much enjoy the Australian of the Year Awards presentation, the evening of January 25 on ABC TV.

Last year I spoke about the Local Hero award which went to a migrant lady from Africa who was doing so much to help migrants, especially women, to feel at home in Australia and so integrate into society. I think I also spoke about the Senior Australian of the Year, an indigenous Christian.

This year I was delighted that Daniel Nour whom I spoke about a few weeks ago, is Young Australian Year because of his work bringing medical services to homeless people in Sydney.

I want today to talk about Shanna Whan, CEO of an organisation called Sober in the Country, SITC. She is our 2022 Local Hero. I quote from their website:

'Shanna Whan is single-handedly creating radical social impact and change around how we discuss and use alcohol in rural Australia.

When Shanna almost lost her life to alcohol addiction in 2015, giving up drinking was just the start. What began as volunteer work to help others locally, evolved into a grassroots charity called Sober in the Country (SITC) which now has a national reach and offers peer support, powerful broadscale advocacy and education.

Shanna donated about 20,000 hours to the cause and now travels on invitation as the spokesperson for SITC. She has appeared on multiple major national media platforms, in person, in paddocks and at conferences.

She courageously shared her harrowing journey to sobriety on Australian Story in 2019. Now, through the national charity, she is amplifying the essential, life-saving message and charity campaign that it is always "OK to say no" to booze.'

I know that many of us have, or have had loved ones addicted to alcohol. Of course now addiction to other drugs is also common so I fear the problems are compounded. When I was a child I had an uncle who was great fun to be with when he was sober. However, gradually he was never truly sober and I went from enjoying visiting him to not wanting to be in his presence. I have a cousin whose life has been ruined by his addiction.



On Tuesday night there was a clip of an Aussie farmer who'd been addicted to alcohol for, I think, 40 years and he just 'happened' to hear Shanna speak on the radio one day and that was the beginning of the end of his drinking, or the beginning of his sober life.

Shanna acknowledged the support of her husband in her battle to overcome her addiction. She is aware that addictions ruin many marriages, many families.

Her campaign slogan is 'It's OK to say no'. A young neighbour of ours in Hawthorn realised he had a problem when he fell over a cliff while drunk, and broke two vertebrae in his neck, thankfully not cutting his spinal cord. He has not drunk a drop since then. One of the hardest things for him was that his friends could not understand why he couldn't have just one drink.

Many of us can have one drink and enjoy it and stop there. There are however, many for whom even one drink is one too many and they can't stop and Shanna would say that this is very, very common in country Australia. Hence, 'It's OK to say no!'

And of course, 'it's OK to say no!' applies to any activity we are invited to take part in and just don't feel comfortable about. You may well find that when you have the courage to say no, others in the group will feel empowered to register their reservations about certain activities.

There are many references in the Bible to alcohol, mainly wine. Christians vary in their attitudes. Some never drink any, others think that moderate drinking is OK. What is definitely condemned is drunkenness, linked in Timothy with dishonesty.

First Timothy 3:8

'Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.'

Whatever our views, let us reach out to those in our circle who are struggling with addictions, pray for them, and in our own lives be prepared to say 'no' to any activity which doesn't promote the good of our loved ones, or the kingdom of God.

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