The 2008 report on achievement and philanthropy
A message from the Chancellor

It gives me great pleasure to be able to acknowledge the generosity of donors and benefactors to the University of Sydney. Our University is at the forefront of research and learning in so many spheres, all of which are vital to the future prospects of this country – and the world.

In difficult times, such as those we are experiencing, this University – Australia’s first – will only maintain its position with the goodwill, support and energy of farsighted people such as those we see honoured in these pages.

It is with much pride and appreciation that we can read about some of the splendid work and outstanding achievements made possible by their gifts.

Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir AC CVO
The Chancellor
University of Sydney
Since returning to Sydney and taking up the post of Vice-Chancellor in mid-2008, I have met many of those involved with the University’s philanthropic development and been struck by their commitment to education, research and the future of the institution.

The Great Hall will be the focus of celebrations later this year to mark its 150th anniversary (and I hope you’ll attend!). It’s a landmark historical moment that reminds us of Sydney’s position as the oldest and greatest university in Australia. As such, we must continue to strive to be a leader in research, resources, independence and teaching.

This is a challenge at the best of times and, as we are all aware, these are not the best of times. Difficulties, however, tend to bring out the best in human beings, as you can see first hand in the pages of this Sydney Annual, which celebrates acts of generosity and courage by benefactors and recipients alike.

The physical infrastructure of the University is in the process of being rebuilt and renovated – and this is of the greatest importance for the future wellbeing of the institution, and the city beyond. Nevertheless, buildings are nothing without the best staff and students. That’s why we are proud to be able to offer more funding for a range of scholarships than any other Australian university.

Sydney is fortunate to have a core of supportive alumni and friends who make this possible. Many of you have already indicated that you will have the faith and altruism to continue to support us. So with your help and through a realistic and innovative approach to both fundraising and investment, I believe the University will weather these tough times and eventually be the stronger for it.

On behalf of all those who have benefited and will benefit from the gifts detailed in this Sydney Annual, I offer my sincere thanks.

Dr Michael Spence
The Vice-Chancellor and Principal
University of Sydney

The fourth edition of Sydney Annual comes at a time of great economic challenge and uncertainty, not only for the University, but also for the world at large. For these reasons, it gives me great pleasure and pride to be able to salute the generosity of the many alumni and friends who contribute so significantly to the University.
Just after Christmas, the University of Sydney announced that a mysterious benefactor had donated $10 million to help establish a groundbreaking Centre for Indigenous Health with outreach clinics across western NSW.

The philanthropist wished to remain anonymous, despite entreaties from media organisations, including the ABC’s Australian Story, to go public.

He would still prefer anonymity, but Greg Poche (“it’s pronounced ‘poach’,” he says, helpfully) has reluctantly blown his cover, persuaded, though not altogether convinced, that the best way to attract other donors to the embryonic project is to talk publicly about the rationale behind his generosity.
Poche is not a pessimist. His motto, if he ever admitted to one, would be: “You can make a difference.”

Pochec, 66, has never been one for self-publicity. Even in 2003 when he sold the company he had founded in the early 1970s for $750 million, he kept a low profile, giving just one interview, to *BRW*. Its reporter, Nicholas Way, called him “the mystery man of Australian business ... the principal actor in destroying one of the most destructive business cartels in Australia’s corporate history ... [who], almost incidentally, accumulated a huge fortune that places him among Australia’s 20 richest people.”

Today, as Poche opens the door of his penthouse overlooking Little Manly Cove, he’s gracious but resigned. It’s obvious there are a thousand and one things he would rather be doing than discussing his own largesse.

The harbourside apartment he shares with his second wife, Kay, an American, is stylish and individual (“she dabbles in interior design,” he says proudly). But it’s not the over-the-top, look-at-me real estate most of us associate with the mega-rich. Even so, Sydney Harbour seems a surreal place to be discussing the desperate problems of Indigenous Australians in the remote inland.

There’s no doubting Poche’s passion. Who else has written a cheque – not a pledge, as many philanthropists do (waiting for governments or corporates to match their gift before they pay up) – for $10 million?

Before he signed the cheque on the roof of his car in the University grounds within minutes of the handover (“I couldn’t go empty-handed into a meeting like that”) he had already given $40 million to kickstart the Melanoma Institute of Australia, a world-class cancer research and treatment facility born out of the existing Sydney Melanoma Unit.

When Poche heard of the melanoma unit’s plight – from good friend and fellow businessman Reg Richardson – it was living hand-to-mouth. Next year, “thanks in part to $6 million which the former health minister Tony Abbott was able to find from his budget”, the institute will move into a purpose-built $40 million building in North Sydney, near the Mater Hospital.

So how did Poche get involved? After the sale of his business, which released millions of dollars to his personal bank account, Poche “was looking for causes which needed investment”. As a hard-headed, results-driven businessman, “they had to have very sound structures, people and skills which only lacked financial resources and infrastructure.”

In the case of the melanoma unit, it helped that there was a personal connection. His former wife, Roslyn – mother of his two children, Natalie and Justin – had lost a sister to melanoma. “It tweaked something,” says Poche.

The medical team is the world’s leading melanoma research, treatment and care organisation, Poche says. “They were already world-class in terms of people and skills. But they were living out of corridors in the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. There just wasn’t space for them to expand and we have the highest melanoma rate in the world.”

What the medical team lacked was someone with money who believed in them. The same was true a couple of years later when the high-minded academics of the University of Sydney’s medical faculty were urgently trying to attract financial support for their fledgling rescue program for Aboriginal health.

Again, it was Richardson who proved the catalyst. “Reg and I talked about finding another project,” Poche says. “Indigenous health is important to both of us, as it is to most Australians. Most non-Indigenous Australians feel helpless. So much money has been thrown into Indigenous health and other support over the years. And it really hasn’t made any difference. The life expectancy for Indigenous Australians is still about 20 per cent less than non-Indigenous Australians and infant mortality rates really haven’t improved.”

Poche believes that Indigenous housing, “which Kevin Rudd seems serious about addressing”, is out of our control, as is a lack of education and job opportunities.

However, Poche is not a pessimist. His motto, if he ever admitted to one, would be: “You can make a difference.” And if you do want to make a difference, it helps if you’re one of Australia’s 20 richest citizens.

Greg Poche was born in Marrickville, leaving school when he was “14 years and 10 months” old after completing his Intermediate Certificate. His electrician father wanted him to follow in the family footsteps, “but that didn’t work out”, so Poche took an £8-a-week desk job with the NSW railways before resigning to become a builder’s labourer (it paid £20 a week).

After finishing his Leaving Certificate, he joined the sales team of a pharmaceuticals company. The evening studies continued, leading to a degree in business. “Five nights a week, four hours a night” is how Poche recalls his student years. “I thought it was normal.”

He was still studying part-time for his two diplomas in business management and operations management.
in 1972 when he set up the company that would make his fortune.

According to business mythology, Poche was fired from his job as TNT’s national marketing manager by the transport giant’s founder, Sir Peter Abeles. Poche, so the rumour goes, took the sweetest revenge by building a rival freight, distribution and warehousing company which – after various name changes – became Star Track Express.

Poche says he never met Abeles himself. But he freely admits he “crossed swords with TNT, Mayne Nickless and Ansett Transport Industries because they were part of the cartel which tried to put me out of business.”

During the 14 months Poche worked for TNT, he came to understand the extent of the transport cartel Abeles and the others were operating: “It was absolutely terrible what they were doing.” Part of his objection was moral, but he also saw breaking the cartel as a business opportunity. “They were ripping off the manufacturers and distributors of Australia by about 20 per cent.”


Poche and his company prospered. By the time he came to sell it 30 years later, Star Track Express had a 15 per cent share of a $5 billion market. The boy who had left school at 14 to become a sparkie was now a very rich man indeed.

Professor Marie Bashir, the Chancellor of the University of Sydney as well as the Governor of NSW, has worked in Indigenous health for years, and maintains a keen professional interest in the subject. She describes Greg Poche as “a visionary philanthropist who appreciates the dire need for health education among our Indigenous population” and she is confident the new centre will reap dividends.

“[The centre] will be an incredible means by which we can draw more Indigenous workers into collaborating and training, because that is the way to be effective in our journey of transformation.”

The Chancellor also believes that other Australians will be encouraged to donate by the example of a very successful person who thinks the centre is an investment worth making – “because that’s what it is. It’s an investment in a better Australia.”

Poche remains sceptical whether the revelation of his identity will inspire other donors. However, “this is a cause which is on the mind of most Australians. There’s been a feeling of frustration and helplessness at the plight of Indigenous Australians. Now there’s a way forward. We have a responsibility. Non-Indigenous Australians can play a major role in fixing this up – through governments, and through [initiatives like] this centre.”

“I feel a lot happier that I’m doing something to help – and so can others. Guilt? Yes, I guess I do feel a bit of guilt. It’s more than concern and it’s more than unhappiness with the situation. But guilt isn’t a practical endpoint. If you feel guilt, you should do something about it.”

A longer version of this interview was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. There’s been a feeling of frustration and helplessness at the plight of Indigenous Australians. Now there’s a way forward. We have a responsibility. Non-Indigenous Australians can play a major role in fixing this up – through governments, and through [initiatives like] this centre.”
In the aftermath of World War II it was unusual for a woman to prefer a career to marriage and babies. Melba Cromack laughs at the memory. “I think I was a bit of a pioneer for women in careers ...

Working with Professor Le Fevre meant spending time in the Chemistry, Physics and Medical buildings – to her aunt’s disbelief.

“She came to see where I worked and liked my big office but when she saw the specimens – you know, organs and babies in jars – she was horrified! My mother said ‘you haven’t been the same since you went to that university’ and she was right. It makes you grow up; you learn to think freely.”

Sadly for the Keeper of the Chemistry Castle, ill health forced Melba to retire in 1956 but her connections with Sydney remained strong.

“I had cancer in 1989 and surgery in 1990. Sam Ball came into my life then. He came to see me and said ‘lunch or dinner – whichever you want, we’ll lay it on for you’, and he did. He went right through the roof in my estimation!’

Professor Sam Ball (BA Med PhD FAPA), by the way, was the Professor of Education from 1978 to 1993, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Community Affairs) from 1991 to 1993, Chair of the Academic Board and a Fellow of Senate, from 1988 to 1991.

A lifetime of optimism keeps Melba Cromack on song.

By Diana Simmonds
Although Melba is named for the diva and not the dessert, she is partial to good food and wine and, she says, had every intention of “doing a Melba” after her cancer.

“Damn right I am, I told them. Cancer made me a fighter. I made a vow that if I lived I’d make my mark. They’d know I’ve been here.”

Her husband Vic was also on staff at the University and after his death in 1990 she began to plan bequests in his and her own name.

“I became a nuisance,” she chuckles. “I was on the Chancellor’s Committee, which does very good work by the way. I annoyed the hell out of Dame Leonie Kramer when she was Chancellor. I saw her a few years later and she said, ‘are you still fighting?’”

When Dr Michael Spence was appointed Vice Chancellor in 2008, Melba made it her business to find out about him and to meet him.

“He’s a very interesting man; very approachable. He made a wonderful speech,” she recalls. “He talked about vision, the future and generosity and nobody said a word so I called out ‘Well said!’ because that’s what I believe we’re here for.”

The Vic and Melba Cromack Scholarships will benefit students of chemistry as well as piano and violin students at the Conservatorium. (A further bequest will benefit the Australian Ballet.)

“I don’t like negativity,” says Melba. “I don’t like dreary. I’m positive and I like that. I want to try to make sure other young people get the chance to love what they do, as I did.”

“Cancer made me a fighter. I made a vow that if I lived I’d make my mark. They’d know I’ve been here.”
David Coffey, a pioneer of geotechnical engineering, sees the University as a future leader in agricultural research.

David Coffey was born in Lindfield and attended Barker College. He graduated from the University with a Bachelor of Engineering in 1947 and observed of that time: “they were very formative years because in 1945 fellows joined the group who had spent some years in military service. Because of their experiences, they were far more mature than us fresh-faced school kids. I came under the influence of several of them.”

He spent a couple of years with James Hardie & Co (and “feels fortunate” to have suffered no ill effects from the cavalier attitude towards asbestos) before joining the Public Works Department of NSW in 1950. “I was sent down to Adaminaby Dam, later known as Eucumbene Dam, in the Snowy Mountains Scheme, and was put in charge of investigating materials and testing. Knowing nothing about earth and rock materials at that stage, I took a couple of well known textbooks with me and became an expert after reading these in the first few weeks.”

Thus began what became a successful career in soil mechanics and foundation engineering.

He married Judith Fielding of Sydney, and two of their four sons were born in Cooma. Because geotechnical engineering – as it’s known today – barely existed at that time, Coffey decided to go overseas for more experience.

“We emigrated to Canada in late 1956. I flew over in September in a DC6 to find a job and accommodation. My family followed in late December of that year.” Initially he secured a job as resident engineer in what is now known as Terzaghi Dam in central British Columbia, but a few weeks there convinced him it wasn’t right.

“A house trailer in a deep, snowbound valley that never saw the sun in winter was no place to bring a young family.” He quickly found a more suitable location, with the Department of Highways in Victoria, British Columbia. By the late 1950s, life and work were going well. Then the hard decision had to be made: stay in Canada or come home to Australia. Family ties won.

“The greatest challenge in those days was to get recognition of the geotechnical speciality as being a truly professional pursuit,” Coffey says. “The attitude among other civil engineers was that it was a sort of a technician level of operation of which the predominant part was drilling holes in the ground, or the geology associated with the identification of materials.”

It took years for geotechnical engineers to reach the place in the profession they now occupy. One of the reasons was the adoption by British practice of having geotechnical work performed by divisions of large contractors such as Wimpey and Mowlem.

Australia’s farmers of the future will have far greater potential to realise their goals, thanks to the generosity of Bowral residents David and Judith Coffey, who have donated $4 million to establish a Chair in Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Sydney.

“The students studying agriculture at Sydney University now are the ones who will lead the country in the future,” says David.
During the 1960s and 1970s Coffey’s activities expanded – as did a proliferation of competitors, “mostly trained initially as employees of my own company, now known as Coffey International Ltd!”

The times were right: the company took part in the growth of Canberra, iron ore development in the Pilbara region, and expansion into South East Asia and beyond. It also allowed more time for David and Judith to indulge their shared passion for flying small aircraft – both hold pilot’s licences. Coffey admits that “a lot of the flying visits to field and interstate offices could have been undertaken commercially a lot more efficiently, but when you are keen on flying you can rationalise the need to fly in most tortuous ways.”

Coffey International is now an ASX 300 enterprise employing more than 4000 workers across Australia and overseas. In 1984, however, the chairman decided it was time to “take a back seat”. In reality it meant spending more time at Narroogal, the 1200ha property near Wellington, NSW, which the Coffeys bought in 1975. “I learnt – the hard way – farming techniques for winter and summer crops, as well as sheep and cattle. I even won a prize for the best wheat crop in the central western slopes for 1976.”

This conjunction of interests between agriculture and engineering has finally reached a kind of fruition with the funding of the Chair.

“It’s going to be a very exciting time ahead,” he said. “Students are going to be able to carry on with their studies and develop the skills needed for fundamental research on sustainable agriculture.”

“I think it’s absolutely essential for sustainability research to be of high importance at the university,” he told the Southern Highland News, earlier this year. “The Chair of Sustainable Agriculture will make that a reality.”

Australia’s increasingly severe drought, floods and bushfires makes research of the country’s unique terrain even more urgent. Mr Coffey said the grant will benefit postgraduate research especially.

“I hope to see them develop new methods of growing crops in the harsh Australian environment. I also think they’ll come up with solutions to help with problems such as salinity and drought.”

Coffey believes that farming practices must also come fully into the ambit of researchers. “Future students need to develop crops that can better withstand fungus and pests.”

He’s hopeful that the University of Sydney will become a leader in agricultural research. “In the long term I hope the University will grow and develop in the field,” he said. “I would like to see it become complementary to the CSIRO. This would be a big step forward.”

Meanwhile, Coffey continues to pursue his other interests. After moving to the Southern Highlands in 1996, he and Judith established the Bowral Bridge Club in 1999. “It provides a really good and popular social service and we regard it as one of our best achievements,” he says, along with the “good fortune” of having four happily married sons and 13 grandchildren, for which the Coffeys are “eternally grateful”.

Thanks to Jed Kemsley and the Southern Highland News for material in this story. Photo by Jed Kemsley.
Although just 24 Tim Gilbey has had to grow up quickly. He is studying medicine full time, which for most is difficult enough. Throw in the added pressures of raising two young children and he has more on his plate than the average university student.

“Once your kid reaches the two-year-old stage you start realising just how full on it is,” he laughs.

“You always know it’s going to be hard work, but once they turn two it gets that much harder.”

Originally from Wagga Wagga, New South Wales and of Koori descent, Gilbey was in his final year of high school when he decided to study medicine. By then it was too late to go through the protracted selection process for undergraduate medicine, so he opted for a Bachelor of Physics degree at the University of New South Wales.

“I was always pretty optimistic about what I could do,” Gilbey says. “I always wanted to go to uni; that was always a goal.”

Successful graduation from his physics degree helped him gain entry to the Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) degree at the University of Sydney.

“In our family it’s kind of expected that you’ll go to uni,” he says. Two of his three siblings are both at university, back in Wagga Wagga.

Now in his second year of the MBBS, Gilbey is currently receiving the Orana Scholarship, which
helps him cope with the expense of full time study and raising a young family.

“I was eligible because I was of Aboriginal background and also because of my financial situation. I was struggling quite a bit,” he says. “Throughout my last degree I was working 25 to 30 hours a week, which is doable in physics but not in medicine.”

Gilbey says he was fortunate enough to meet his benefactor, Jenny Parramore, at an event held for scholarship recipients and donors. “She’s a really nice lady, Jenny. We talked about all sorts of things – what home life is like and about the degree, that sort of thing.”

The demands of his course can make it difficult to find time to spend with his partner Jamie and their two young children. As well as the hours spent in face-to-face classes on campus, he has to find extra time to study independently.

“They say if you want to be the best in your field then you should be doing at least four hours of additional study a day,” Gilbey says. “But obviously it can be a balancing act because I’ve also got responsibilities at home.”

Consequently Gilbey’s calendar doesn’t have many openings for part-time work. He has been able to take on limited work as a tutor and technical assistant recording lectures at the University, but without his scholarship, studying full-time wouldn’t be an option.

“It would be impossible; I wouldn’t be able to do medicine,” he says.

It can’t be easy being in a course full of competitive students, especially when many of them don’t have the added pressure of a family to look after. However, Gilbey sees that as a motivation rather than a setback.

“Everyone in medicine is competitive,” he says. “But if others are better than you at certain things, then naturally you’re going to strive to be at their level or above.”

When Gilbey finishes medicine he wants to put his skills to use in the field of Aboriginal health.

“It’s something I’m really passionate about,” he says. “Obviously having a family affects things, because you’re not just considering your own goals, but ideally my job would allow me to travel to remote areas.”

While he’s still unsure which field of medicine he would like to specialise in, Gilbey is interested in neurology and cardiology.

“One of the main issues facing Aboriginal health is cardiovascular disease,” he says. “But having said that, neurology also really interests me and so do many other fields of medicine. “It’s difficult to choose just one area ... particularly in medicine. I think you find out more about your preferences the more you do,” Gilbey says.

“Timothy Gilbey has my admiration and respect, for undertaking this demanding course, which leaves no room for a job to earn money. He deserves full support. I am delighted to be one of his collaborators.”

– Jenny Parramore
The death of a child is not well dealt with by our society.

By Diana Simmonds

Catherine (BSc ‘63) and John (BA ’64 LLB ’67) Harris are a gracious, reticent couple who live the quiet life of the older, established Eastern Suburbs. Their home is private, sunny and comfortable. Furniture and silver gleam, cushions are plumped. There are framed and grouped family photos, including one of a smiling, chubby-cheeked little girl – Caroline – who is now commemorated in the Caroline Elizabeth Harris Scholarship.

“There’s no word for it, you realise,” says Catherine. “You can be a widow or a widower and everyone knows what that means, but when a child dies there is no description.”
Caroline was never old enough to go to the University but we like to think she would have wanted to. The scholarship is a living thing – for the future.

Catherine, the happy, laughing little girl of the photographs, died of brain cancer a few months before her sixth birthday in 1983 after a last family holiday on the Gold Coast. And the pain lurking behind her mother’s serene expression is evidence that no matter how much our society likes to think we “get over it” or that there can be “closure”, it is neither that simple nor that trite.

“You never ‘get over it’ you learn to get by. You learn to cope and you concentrate on life and the living, but get over it? No,” says Catherine. “Every Victorian family lost children, it used to be so much more common, but I don’t think the grief was any less. They had better ways of dealing with it, I think. It wasn’t hidden and you weren’t supposed to go on as if nothing had happened.”

Perhaps it was less difficult when there were those visible Victorian signifiers: the dark clothes of mourning, the drawn curtains and the ritually solicitous behaviour towards the grieving?

“I think there’s something in that. I didn’t really think of it at the time but later I realised I hadn’t put on bright clothes for some time – no nail polish either.”

It would have been a poignant and marked contrast for the Harris’s elder daughter Catriona, then eight years old (now BA ’96 LLB ’99) whose little sister loved wearing pink and insisted on carrying her own mini-handbag. “They were always very close,” remembers Catherine. “She still doesn’t see herself as an only child. They did everything together.”

John Harris says that Australia, until recently, has not been in the habit of being demonstrative about losses. “We weren’t very good at allowing grief, then all those roadside shrines started popping up at the site of traffic accidents. It’s come from Europe I suppose and it’s a little reminder, something that can be done.”

The Harrises are not showy people, nor do they seek sympathy or enjoy courting publicity, but they believe it may help others to speak about their experience and what they have decided to do through the Caroline Elizabeth Harris Scholarship.

“Caroline was never old enough to go to university but we like to think she would have wanted to.” The scholarship in Caroline’s memory is a “living thing – for the future,” says Catherine.

The scholarship is broadly available in relatively modest amounts because, as John says, “It’s something where a researcher might think ‘maybe I could do that if I could get there’ and it would be like a trigger to be used for airfares to go to a research school, for instance.”

“We’re hoping it will encourage a research student to think, ‘I can go for that’ because the money will help get them on the way,” says Catherine.

The scholarship is also one to which others will be encouraged to donate. “It’s not exclusive and to be honest, we hope it will be a long time before our wills top it up,” says John.
Natalie Aroyan — pop to top
By Oscar Ware

Natalie Aroyan’s early ambition was not to make a career in opera. She sang pop music from the age of three until well into her teens, and if you had told her she would be performing arias one day, she probably wouldn’t have believed you.

“I would have laughed,” she says. “Back then it would have sounded like an old person’s job.” It’s a good thing she changed her mind. Now aged 27, opera is her life and she has the credentials to prove it, including two tertiary qualifications and a range of scholarships and awards that allow her to travel the world studying and practising her art.

So how did a young woman from East Roseville on Sydney’s upper north shore become an opera singer? Aroyan was 19 when she decided she wanted formal singing tuition. She sang a pop song for her voice teacher and was instantly told she was in the wrong genre.

“My teacher said ‘No, no, no. You’re not meant to be a pop singer. You were born to be an opera singer’,” Aroyan says. “I’d never thought of opera before then, but I started doing some lessons and really enjoyed it. I knew this was what I was meant to be doing; this was the life I wanted.”

Aroyan hasn’t looked back. While studying for an Advanced Diploma of Opera and Master of Music Studies (Opera) at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, she was awarded a Henderson Scholarship. George and Margaret Henderson bequeathed more than $16 million to the Con – the greatest gift, to date, in the school’s history.

Aroyan later won first prize in the Herald Sun Aria awards in Melbourne, and the Nelly Apt traveling scholarship in the 2007 Suzanne Mathy Australian Singing Competition, which enabled her to travel to Israel and perform at the International Vocal Arts Institute in Tel Aviv.
As well as studying and singing a range of roles, including Mimi in Puccini’s *La Boheme* (tutors in Tel Aviv declared she had “the perfect voice colour for the role”), she also met and worked with key figures from New York’s Metropolitan Opera. These contacts proved invaluable when she went to the United States to study at the Metropolitan Opera, having won the Opera Foundation Lady Fairfax New York Scholarship.

What is it about opera that makes Aroyan so passionate and dedicated?

“Opera is timeless,” she says. “Pop singers come and go, but opera’s been here for centuries, and will continue for centuries to come. I’d like to be a part of that.”

Nevertheless, she hasn’t entrusted her entire future to an uncertain world. As well as the qualifications from the Conservatorium she has a double degree in business and information systems.

“After high school I wasn’t exactly sure about my future,” she says. “I wanted to sing but also needed a backup plan in case my singing fell through. I wanted to be smart about it.”

Fortunately for Aroyan and her audience, her career in opera has flourished. Ahead of her is the shining example of a singer she met while performing in master classes in Sydney – one of Australia’s best known and most loved sopranos, Yvonne Kenny.

(De) Kenny is another distinguished alumna of the University of Sydney, not only in music but in science (BSc ’72).

“She’s an amazing singer,” Aroyan says. “I met her at the Opera House. I remember thinking that whoever I could hear singing before me had such a great voice, and the person who walked out in front of me was Yvonne Kenny. How was I supposed to sing after her? She’s beautiful.”

While Aroyan is greatly encouraged by Australians such as Kenny and Dame Joan Sutherland, who have had successful international singing careers, they are not her only role models.

“I have many favourites,” she says. “I love Maria Callas, Leontyne Price and Pavarotti. I try not to copy them, but to take the best from them – to learn how they do it.”

She’s also supported by an enthusiastic family. Her father and grandmother were keen singers, and her cousin – an Elvis impersonator – is able to appreciate the pressure and thrill of performing on stage.

With Aroyan’s growing profile as a singer comes increased media attention. Although it’s been mostly positive so far, she takes the negative criticism with good grace.

“My worst critic in the world is myself,” she laughs. “No-one can be meaner about me than I am! What critics say are usually things I already know, things I felt while I was performing.”

So where does Aroyan want to be in 10 years time?

“Ideally I’d like to be an international soprano and operatic artist. I’d like to perform on stages all around the world and hopefully grace the stage for Opera Australia while I’m doing that.”
As Sydney Annual goes to press, the Quadrangle is alive with the sometimes bewildered but always hopeful faces of the new intake of students. Watching them, one can’t help but wonder which young woman or man will be a future breakthrough researcher, sporting Blue, cultural star, social entrepreneur, Supreme Court judge, campaigning politician, poet, Pulitzer prize winner, or life-saving heart surgeon? The only certainty is that among them, there is greatness waiting to happen.

That certainty is tempered, however, by the knowledge that without benefactors – scholarships, endowments and quality equipment – that greatness might never be realised. So despite the pride we all take in the achievements of our University’s most priceless assets, its people, we are mindful of the need to maintain and improve infrastructure and opportunity.

This year sees the completion of the new Law building, the Jane Foss Russell complex, the improvements to the Eastern Avenue and Darlington landscapes, and the restoration of MacLaurin Hall’s sandstone. This program of restoration and renewal will continue alongside the major investment in our people, which you will read about in Sydney Annual.

Greg Poche’s endowment for Indigenous health research will mean unique – and timely – progress can be made in this long-neglected area of the nation’s health.

Health of the population must go hand in hand with health of the country itself and sustainable agriculture is at the heart of both – as Judith and David Coffey have acknowledged in their gift to the University.

Friends of the University come from all walks of life and from within its walls too. Melba Cromack is one of the latter; she was a valued member of staff for many years and has maintained a fierce affection and concern for Sydney. These feelings have been translated into a practical decision that future students will benefit from her interests in chemistry and music.

Of our many exceptional students striving to do their best, we have highlighted just two to represent those whose futures have been enhanced by financial support. Indigenous medical student Tim Gilbey is one; the other is a budding opera star, Natalie Aroyan. Both are names to watch.

As you will see in the personal stories and the honour roll of generous benefactors, the University of Sydney is in good shape and good hands for these uncertain economic times. It is our determination that the global financial situation should not be allowed to deflect us from the greater goal of fundraising for the long term future.

Our sincere thanks and appreciation go to all who assist in this never-ending project of investing in the best hearts and minds of young Australia.
The University of Sydney thanks the following alumni, friends and organisations for their generous support. Each and every gift – no matter its size – is sincerely appreciated. We also thank our many donors who wish to remain anonymous.

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