



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

# Challis Bequest Society News

Edition 18, 2018



## Thank you for the music

Young performers shine in the Rising Stars program, with help from a benefactor's gift.

The Verbruggen Hall at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music has hosted performances by stars from across the musical spectrum. On the stage beneath the shining organ, Canadian singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright has beguiled a sold-out crowd of fans. ARIA Award winner Dan Sultan has played stripped-back hits on a grand piano. And the genre-busting Ensemble Offspring have dazzled audiences with their virtuosity.

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Above: Rising Stars students Alicia Poon and Victoria Teo on stage at the Verbruggen Hall.



Alicia Poon (left), and Victoria Teo (below) are supported in the Rising Stars program by a bequest-funded scholarship.

Victoria’s mother, Josephine Cai, says the scholarship has made it far easier to support her daughter’s dreams. “It helps a lot,” she says. “The strings, all the maintenance for the instrument, even bringing her to the Conservatorium and paying for things like parking in the city – it’s a big expenditure. But also, the scholarship is such an honour. She feels that she is supported by all these people and wants to work harder to make everyone proud.”

It was clear to Josephine early on that her daughter had a passion for music. Her face would light up when playing her favourite pieces. “She tells me she makes up stories for each piece, and when she plays, it’s like telling the story,” says Josephine.

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It is a venue with a daunting pedigree, but also a place where young performers learn to shine. Among them are the school-aged musicians of the Rising Stars program. As well as one-on-one lessons from expert teachers, and classes in music history and theory, Rising Stars offers talented students the chance to perform in weekly concerts at the Conservatorium’s prestigious venues.

“They spend a lot of time together and support each other. I’ve had students say it’s been the best time of their life.”

**Joy Lee**

Rising Stars artistic mentor  
Sydney Conservatorium of Music

For violinists Victoria Teo and Alicia Poon, Rising Stars is an opportunity to spend time with other young musicians and develop their skills. “You play music with other people and have a lot of fun,” says Victoria, 12. “It’s a good opportunity to practise being on stage and performing in front of people. It helps you feel a bit more relaxed.”

Both Victoria and Alicia, who is 13, are supported in the program by scholarships funded by a bequest from Challis Society member, the late Melba Cromack. The Vic and Melba Cromack Scholarships benefit promising young piano and violin students at the Conservatorium.



Though the girls are still young, both are hoping their careers will be in music. Victoria adores playing chamber music – something she first encountered through the Rising Stars program – but is also interested in playing for orchestras and working as a soloist.

Alicia likes the idea of life as a performer, but is also interested in teaching. “I can’t decide,” she says. “But I want to be a musician. Playing music kind of takes me away from all my worries.”

Both girls value the companionship of other young musicians that Rising Stars provides. They learn from their peers, as well as their teachers.

That’s a crucial part of Rising Stars’ success, says Joy Lee, the program’s artistic mentor. “These talented students need instrumental lessons and good teachers, and they need the back-up of performances and musical structure and theory,” she says. “The peer group is also enormously important. They spend a lot of time together and support each other. I’ve had students say it’s been the best time of their life.”

The program is a decade old and some of its earliest students are beginning to embark upon careers in music. There are Rising Stars alumni performing with such prestigious groups as the Australia Piano Quartet, the Opera Australia Orchestra and the Australian Chamber Orchestra Collective.

For Victoria and Alicia, decisions about the future are still a long way off. They are serious about music, but having fun as they learn.

“Everybody at Rising Stars is like a big family,” says Victoria’s mother. “The kids feel so relaxed here. This is their playground.”



## Green guide

### An innovative app is teaching students, staff and visitors about the University’s botanical treasures.

Everyone knows about the jacarandas, but take a closer look next time you stroll around the University’s grounds and you will discover many other beautiful and fascinating plants.

Not far from Parramatta Road, there’s an Aleppo pine descended from the Lone Pine at Gallipoli. There are firewheel trees, whose vibrant flowers give them their name. On the Botany Lawn, there is a Wollemi pine – one of the first clones of the trees discovered in the Blue Mountains in 1994.

Thanks to the CampusFlora app, anyone can explore the University’s botanical life. The app’s development was led by Associate Professor Rosanne Quinnell of the School of Life and Environmental Sciences, in collaboration with undergraduate students.

It maps the locations of more than 3600 plants, providing botanical descriptions, as well as information and stories about individual specimens. It also includes themed trails with walking distances and estimated journey times, to promote moving more and sitting less.

It has been a valuable tool not only for botany students but also those studying ecology, biology and even engineering. “It’s a way of viewing the whole campus as a teaching space,” says Quinnell. “Of bringing what you’ve done in class into the environment you’re walking around.”

For staff and visitors, the app is a way to explore and learn. As Quinnell says: “Our grounds are a botanic garden.”

Find out more: [campusflora.wordpress.com](http://campusflora.wordpress.com)  
Get the app: [campusflora.sydneybiology.org](http://campusflora.sydneybiology.org)

# On hope and suffering

A star researcher hopes the so-called love hormone could lead to new treatments for serious brain disorders.

Dr Michael Bowen knows all about despair. The psychopharmacologist was recently contacted by a woman struggling with two addictions: alcohol and gambling. “She’d given her credit cards to her children, and tried everything you could imagine – all the behavioural therapies for a substance-use disorder. She’d tried medication, spent an enormous amount on therapy and nothing was working,” says Bowen. “This was real desperation.”

The woman asked if Bowen’s research could help. “I feel for you,” he said to her. “You’re genuinely trying everything that’s out there. Unfortunately, the most promising thing we’re working on at the moment is a couple of years out from a trial.”

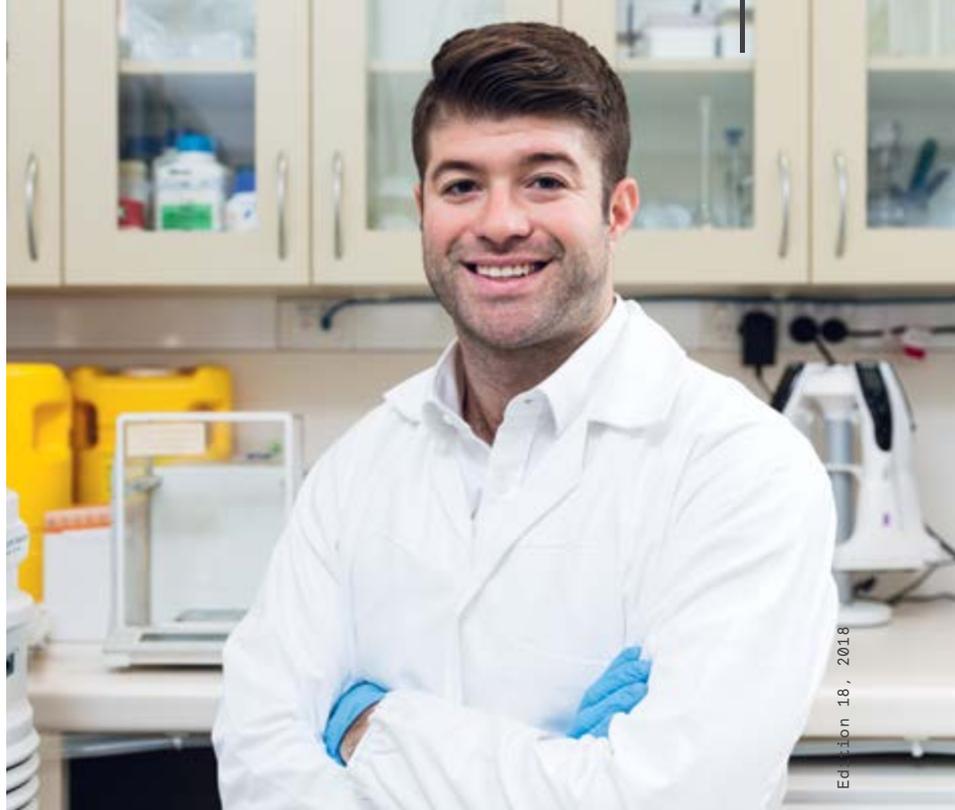
Bowen, who was guest speaker at the 2017 Challis Bequest Society lunch, frequently refers to suffering. But he also knows about hope, and it starts with his research into the oxytocin system. Oxytocin, colloquially known as the love hormone or cuddle chemical, is produced in the brain. In the bloodstream, it stimulates uterine contractions during childbirth and controls the breastmilk-release reflex. It’s also at work in the brain, facilitating attachment to other people, from the maternal-infant bond and romantic relationships to the trust, empathy and generosity crucial to social connections.

Research shows that people with poorly developed oxytocin systems are more prone to alcoholism and drug addiction. Harmful use of addictive substances is involved in 15 percent of all deaths worldwide each year, Bowen says. There are plenty of ways to die from an addiction: overdose, car crash, suicide, liver cirrhosis, heart disease, cancer. There are serious public health concerns such as hepatitis and HIV, and mental health issues such as depression and psychosis. Then there’s the social cost: violence, poverty, broken families, isolation, shame, stigma.

This is where oxytocin comes in. “Over the course of chronic substance abuse, the parts of our brain that motivate us to engage in social interaction can become absolutely ravaged,” Bowen says. “So our idea was, if we could come up with a way to reawaken those social pathways in the brain, we might be able to help people shift their focus away from seeking out harmful substances and back onto seeking out the positive social interactions in their life that we know are critical for long-term recovery.” He hopes to find a way for oxytocin to reopen the brain to these crucial social connections.

“We might be able to help people shift their focus away from seeking out harmful substances and back onto seeking out positive social interactions.”

**Dr Michael Bowen**  
NHMRC Peter Doherty Fellow,  
School of Psychology



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Research is proceeding “fantastically well”. Beyond addiction, the oxytocin system is also of great interest for treating other conditions such as autism spectrum disorder, social dysfunction and a range of psychiatric disorders. Once again, the note of hope – particularly for children with autism – is in the human connections enabled by a well-functioning oxytocin system.

It sounds pretty simple. An alcoholic or addict could take oxytocin pills and no longer crave alcohol and drugs. A child with autism could make friends. But it doesn’t quite work like that. If taken orally, oxytocin is broken down by enzymes in the gut and never hits the bloodstream. A nasal spray initially looked like a good workaround but it turns out only about 0.5 percent of the oxytocin administered makes it into the brain, and even then, it has a half-life of just five to eight minutes.

To overcome these limitations, Bowen and his colleague from the Brain and Mind Centre, Professor Iain McGregor, are working with Professor Michael Kassiou’s group in the School of Chemistry to develop a synthetic compound that activates the brain’s natural oxytocin system. “Unlike oxytocin,” Bowen explains, “this substance can be taken in pill form. It enters the brain at very high concentrations and has an estimated half-life in humans of many, many hours.”

The next step with this promising development is to get the lead compound ready for human trials. “We’ve gotten it as far as we can with grant funding,” Bowen says. “The big pharmaceutical companies have largely lost interest in psychiatric drug discovery in favour of other areas from which they anticipate greater profits.”

Fortunately, the team has managed to raise the money required to get the compound ready for the first human clinical trials in 18 to 24 months. “In the meantime,” Bowen says, “we will be working hard to secure the funds required for these human clinical trials. The faster we can get things moving, the sooner we will be able to provide some hope and – hopefully – some help for the millions of people suffering horribly from these disorders.”

And so we come back to hope. “I’m interested in what I call the ‘forgotten disorders,’” Bowen says. “There are a lot of people suffering without hope. Where I feel I can maybe do something to give them a little bit of hope, I feel a responsibility to do so.”



## The stranger in need

Sixty years after arriving in Australia as a refugee, Anna Breinl is planning to transform lives with a generous bequest.

On a winter's night in Budapest in 1956, Anna Breinl and her family prepared to leave their home forever. Their city was in chaos. The occupying Soviet forces had beaten the Hungarian revolutionaries and there were tanks and troops everywhere. Anna's father decided it was time for his family to leave.

To avoid attracting the attention of the guards, they took nothing but a single bag with some food and a few changes of underwear. Each of the four children took a book by a great Hungarian writer. "Hungarian is a language on its own," says Anna, who was 17 at the time. "How did we know whether in the big, wide world we would be able to find Hungarian books to read?"

On their long escape to Austria and (eventually) Australia, Anna and her family were reliant on the goodwill and generosity of strangers.

There was the villager who walked with them through the night, guiding them across the fields to the Hungarian-Austrian border, staying in single file to avoid the landmines. There were the Austrians who opened their homes to the refugees. There was the doctor who treated Anna's frostbite.

Finally, after several months, there was the Australian embassy in Vienna, where they were offered the chance to travel across the ocean to a new life.

A lifetime later, as a member of the Challis Bequest Society, Anna is working with the University to help others in need.

In making her bequest, Anna is drawing inspiration from her father. In Budapest, he ran a business selling men's suits and overcoats. Without telling his family, he also donated clothing for the children at an orphanage near their home. "He was a humble man," says Anna. "I am following his example."

Life in Australia was good to Anna. She worked hard to improve her English and educate herself. By the age of 33 – about 15 years after arriving in her new home – she graduated with a diploma of medical technology. She eventually built a career as a senior hospital scientist and for many years was in charge of the histopathology laboratory at St George.

Recently, though, she received some bad news. She was diagnosed with stage-four adrenal cancer. Worse, it quickly became clear that she was violently allergic to the only medication available.

Anna's knowledge and experience as a scientist is evident when she talks about her disease. She is interested in emerging research into immunotherapies, which could harness the body's immune system to kill cancer cells.

Facing page (left):  
Anna Breinl during her early days in Australia.  
Facing page (right): Anna's family in Austria.  
This page: Vice-Principal (Advancement) Tim Dolan and Anna Breinl at the 2017 Challis Bequest Society lunch.

At this point in her life, it would be unsurprising if she chose to direct her bequest towards cancer research. Instead, she has decided to support scholarships for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

She notes that both her brother and sister benefitted from philanthropic support for education. Her brother, who knew little English when he arrived in Australia, received a mature-age bursary and eventually became a lecturer in early-childhood education at Macquarie University.

Her sister, who now lives in the United States, studied home economics thanks to a bequest, graduating *cum laude* and giving birth to her third child the week before the exam. "Her kids are tremendously proud of their mother," says Anna.

Anna understands the power of education. She also knows that offering help to a stranger in need can change their life forever.



## Bequest director's message

The Challis Bequest Society lunch last October was a particularly special occasion, as we were celebrating the society's 10th anniversary. As I chatted over lunch with a gentleman who told me about his passion for education, I felt privileged to be part of such a thoughtful and visionary gathering.

The keynote speaker was Dr Michael Bowen. He's back in this edition of the *Challis Bequest Society News*, talking about his work targeting substance-use and social disorders. We'll soon be hosting a tour of the University's Brain and Mind Centre, where Challis members can meet other researchers who are creating healthier minds and happier lives. Stay tuned for details.

It's always a pleasure to spend time with Challis members, so please get in touch. I'd love to meet you in person to learn about your connections to the University, your passions and vision. These links help us communicate and engage with you, as well as inspire others to get involved.

We have an exciting schedule of events lined up for 2018, from concerts to talks, as well as the Challis Bequest Society lunch in November. See you there.

### Alexandra Miller

Associate Director, Planned Giving,  
Division of Alumni & Development

## Challis Bequest Society events

**1 November, 12-2.30pm**

**Challis Bequest Society lunch**  
The Great Hall, the Quadrangle  
Our annual celebration brings together members of the Challis Bequest Society.

## Other events

**Second Sunday of every month, 10am-2pm**

**Marine Studies Institute open days**  
SIMS Discovery Centre,  
19 Chowder Bay Road, Mosman  
Learn about marine research right on the harbour. A perfect adventure for the whole family. To book a free visit, contact Alexandra Miller on +61 2 8627 8811.

**17 April, 12-1pm**

**Lunchtime concert**  
The Great Hall, the Quadrangle  
Enjoy a free showcase of arias and songs from well-known operas and musicals, featuring the Con's talented undergraduate vocal students. Register to attend on +61 2 8627 8811.

## Nicholson Museum events

**11 April, 12-1pm**

**Heritage tour of the Quadrangle**  
Discover more about the architecture of this iconic building with a guided tour.

Sydney Ideas events are free. Register to attend at [sydney.edu.au/sydney-ideas](http://sydney.edu.au/sydney-ideas). For details of all University events, see [whatson.sydney.edu.au/events](http://whatson.sydney.edu.au/events)

**2 May, 6pm**

**Decline and Fall: Rome and the USA**  
This talk by former NSW Premier, Bob Carr, includes light refreshments.

**20 June, 6pm**

**Pompeii of the Pacific**  
Discover the archaeology of volcanic disasters in Papua New Guinea with the Australian Museum's Dr Robin Torrence.

Tickets to Nicholson Museum events are free for Challis Bequest Society members. To register, call +61 2 8627 8811.

## Sydney Ideas talks

**27 March, 6-7.30pm**

**Artists have never been more important**

Law School Foyer, Sydney Law School, Eastern Avenue  
A panel of artists, curators and writers explore how the arts can help tackle the world's greatest challenges, including climate change.

**14 August, 6-7.30pm**

**Jellyfish behaving badly?**

Law School Foyer, Sydney Law School, Eastern Avenue  
This panel discussion will not only acquaint you with the latest research into the changing behaviour of jellyfish, it will help you understand and imagine what that research means for the future of the sea.

## Contact us

**Planned Giving**  
**Division of Alumni and Development**  
Level 7, Jane Foss Russell Building  
The University of Sydney NSW 2006

+61 2 8627 8811  
[alexandra.miller@sydney.edu.au](mailto:alexandra.miller@sydney.edu.au)  
[sydney.edu.au/inspired](http://sydney.edu.au/inspired)