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The Ballarat Clemente Program: A doorway to the treasures of humanities education

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Abstract

This paper provides insight into the experience of Clemente education for five Ballarat students who each took part in an audio-taped semi-structured interview. The interviews explored the impact that university study had on the lives of each student, and the responses suggest that the Clemente Program was life-giving for these students. Student insights identified through an analysis of interview transcripts included: the importance of providing a supportive learning environment for people lacking life opportunities and routine; students feeling better and happier with themselves because of personal learning achievements; doing something that was about 'me'; the significance of support from the Learning Partners and the program's counsellor; students appreciating their strengths; students rekindling dreams; students seeing a way out of poverty for their family; finding friendship and connection; students appreciating the academic disciplines; improvements in well-being and mental health; pride in achievements; and apprehension of what comes in the future after graduation. These insights highlighted the treasures that students found when engaged in a humanities education based upon community-based socially supported educational structures that enabled them to engage and participate initially.

Key words: Social Exclusion and the Impact of Education for Bringing About Change

Enabling personal wellbeing, social inclusion and engaged citizenship for all is a necessity for those communities within Australia who acknowledge that some amongst them experience social exclusion. This social exclusion occurs when individuals, families and communities: experience low incomes relative to community norms; do not have secure and safe shelter; experience unemployment; cannot access the health, child care and social services needed; receive inadequate schooling; are not connected with friends, families and their community; and experience self-esteem and quality of life well below those of the general Australian community. Such exclusion impacts on individuals, families and communities contributing to increased levels of public spending on welfare and related public services (Martijn & Sharpe, 2006; Kohen, Leventhal, Dahinten, & McIntosh, 2008; Henry, 2008). Within Australia around 13% of those Australians facing disadvantage appear to have: incomplete secondary education; typically long periods of unemployment; high reliance on welfare payments, and low income; poor physical and mental health; and the lowest levels of social support of any group (Headey & Warren, 2007).

Extensive evidence suggests that there are positive correlations between education and the good health and wellbeing of individuals (Hammond, 2002; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Hartog & Oosterbeek, Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999). The specific impacts of education upon health and resilience throughout the lifespan have been thoroughly investigated (Hammond, 2004; Grossman & Kaestner, 1997; Hammond, 2002; Hartog & Oosterbeek, 1998; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). A number of studies have indicated that relevant education can lead to improvements in: self-confidence (Carlton & Soulsby, 1999; Dench & Regan, 1999); self-efficacy (Wertheimer, 1997); self-understanding (Cox & Pascall, 1994); competencies, communication skills, and civic engagement (Emler & Fraser, 1999; Parry, Moyser, & Day, 1992); a sense of belonging to a social group (Emler & Fraser, 1999; Jarvis & Walker, 1997); and substantive freedoms and capabilities (Sen, 1999). There are clear indications that purposeful and appropriate education can contribute to improvements within the social, economic, and personal domains of a person's life (Hammond, 2004; Luby & Welch, 2006; Scull & Cuhtill, 2010). Providing access to such education for all is a challenge for communities.

The Clemente Program: international origins

The Clemente program originated in New York in 1999 as an innovative approach to providing transformative 21st century tertiary humanities based education for people who were otherwise locked out of tertiary education. Earl Shorris, a journalist and activist, was moved by the remarks of a woman prisoner who thought the poor would benefit from another educational view of the world. He developed this idea into an educational inspiration: the Clemente program with the expressed purpose of empowering the poor and marginalised by offering a Humanities based education utilising a Socratic teaching paradigm.

Shorris (2000) has argued that often all the education the poor receive is training programs designed around instilling in people the daily habits of a disciplined life of work-ready subjects. The intention of such training is to move them from welfare to work. The other effect is to withhold from them a means of development of their cognitive and deliberative abilities. Rather than routines for the poor Shorris (2000) wants an education that offers the rich cultural capital of citizenship. He is quite explicit in his vision of Clemente as a politicising experience for all involved. For its teachers and supporters, it is a seminar in the school of the lives of the poor, a way to share experiences from different worlds. Socrates was his inspiration because of his commitment to public life, to the political. The active and engaged life is the model for the poor, according to Shorris (2000). Thus a Socratic education that re-engages people suffering isolation and profound disconnection should be the curriculum foundation of a program such as Clemente.

Shorris (2000) set out a striking vision for confronting the reality of poverty, especially multigenerational poverty through studying the humanities.

> '…poverty in contemporary America…is the life of necessity with all the violence the Greeks found in that word. To live in poverty, then, is to live according to the rules of force, which push people out of the free space of public life into the private concerns of mere survival.' (p. 32)

What, therefore, does this concept of teaching the humanities offer the poor? How does this relate to the apparent power of necessity? In place of vocationally-oriented training typical of any educational systems (Jensen & Walker, 2008), Clemente engages the disaffected, isolated, homeless and poor in a values-based education. Clemente promotes practices of autonomy that counteract the routinisation of the poor. It is a radical

alternative to welfare training programs that often churn the poor through regulatory bureaucracy. The Clemente Program emphasising community embedded socially supported tertiary education is an alternative in several ways (Howard & Butcher, 2009): Shorris (2000) has expressed the following as key pedagogical principles of the program.

1. It is generalist in content. The curriculum breaks down the substantive distinction between learning (for well off) and churning (for the poor), thus opening a regular routine of participation.
2. Dialogue is the purpose taking the place of a teacher-centred education.
3. The classes become a temporary public space, a public sphere to be involved in for its students to escape their private troubles and confront public issues. Clemente is a place and a time that students can break out of isolation.
4. Participation is the measure of success. Academic grades are important to the students to be sure. Being present and participating is a key aspect in the students' success.

In 2010, the program is becoming international as a dialogue with the poor, homeless, imprisoned and indigenous in the USA, Mexico, Canada, South Korea, Turkey, Sudan and Australia. This has posed challenges for a curriculum grounded in Socratic principles, though Shorris is adamant that those expressed pedagogical principles serve intercultural contexts.

Establishing the Clemente Program in Ballarat: Regional Australia

The potential of the Clemente Program for providing all Australians with access to the treasures of tertiary education in the humanities was recognised in 2003 by Peter Howard from Australian Catholic University (ACU) and the St Vincent de Paul Society (Sydney). Since 2003, Australian Catholic University [ACU] with other partner organisations and national universities have collaborated in adapting the Clemente Program across nine Australian locations and contexts. The Clemente program has been widely and positively reported in print and electronic media since 2005 (Yashin-Shaw, Howard & Butcher, 2005; Egan, Butcher, Howard, Hampshire, Henson, & Homel, 2006; Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2006; Mission Australia, 2007; Stevenson, Yashin-Shaw, & Howard, 2007; Howard et al 2008). This has encouraged government, community, university, and corporate groups to support and extend this transformative 21st century tertiary education program. It is seen now as a highly effective method of addressing poverty, social isolation, inequity and the social injustices faced by many Australians. The Ballarat Clemente Program benefits from this experience and became the first regionally-based Clemente Program in Australia.

Established in 2008, the Ballarat Clemente Program is an innovative and effective venture in community engagement by ACU, Ballarat Cares/United Way Community Fund, Centacare, Central Highlands Regional Library Corporation, the City of Ballarat, The Smith Family and the University of Ballarat (UB). Today, these organisations collaborate closely to provide a rigorous, university-approved course in the humanities for people in the region who are otherwise locked out of university education at a given point in their lives. A key benefit of studying the humanities through literature, politics, sociology, history and ethics is that it enables people to think about and reflect on the world in which they live. By doing so, they examine, question and contemplate, engage in "activity with other people at every level" (Shorris, 2000) and become engaged 'public' citizens (Howard & Butcher, 2007).

The program is embedded within the community and is being supported by community agencies and organisations. Students are enrolled at ACU and student fees are absorbed by ACU. Those who successfully complete the program's required four

units are awarded a Certificate in Liberal Studies by ACU. Community volunteers recruited and supported by Ballarat Cares/United Way, act as 'learning partners' to students in planning, writing, research and learning computer skills. Community agencies, such as The Smith Family and Centacare, recruit students, co-ordinate the Program and provide personal support for students. Both ACU and UB provide academics who teach academic approved units and who offer a positive experience of tertiary learning.

In August 2008, fourteen students found the courage to walk into the Ballarat Library to commence a time of re-engagement and learning. This paper provides insights into the personal impact of the Ballarat Clemente program for five of these students aged between 35 and 55 years. These five were selected because they had each been involved in the Clemente Program for at least three semesters and could discuss the impact of their studies over time. Each agreed to be interviewed in an audio-taped semi-structured conversation. The researchers were interested in how students might 'biographise' their lives; that is write their lives as a narrative (Ricouer 1988). The interview schedule focussed on how the students became engaged in the Clemente program, the highlights, personal strengths and challenges they wished to identify and, finally, how they and others about them, such as friends and family, had been influenced by their participation in Clemente. The data emerging from research highlight the positive impact of Clemente upon students, confirm the relevance of the program's model for the Ballarat context, and suggest significant potential for the Clemente program to increase educative justice for all Australians.

Clemente Ballarat –Examining Impact on Students in a Regional Setting

Existing research has identified a number of positive outcomes for Clemente students in relation to their sense of self and their abilities, their relationships and their perceptions of the future (Mission Australia, 2007; Howard et al, 2008). This study seeks to examine Ballarat Clemente students' experiences with respect to these outcomes, and contribute to the growing body of evidence about the impact of student participation in the Clemente program. Overall, the key aims of the research are to:

1. Gain insight into the life journeys of students in the Clemente program with respect to their engagement in learning and re-engagement with the community;
2. Explore the supports and barriers to students' successful re-engagement and ongoing participation in a regional-based Clemente Program;
3. Explore the effectiveness of the Ballarat Clemente model as it has evolved and report on implications for other regional centres;

This study employed participatory action-based research in which participants are partners in the research as together we seek to modify, adapt, refine, change and enhance the effectiveness of the Clemente Program. The research proceeded according to the terms of its ethics guidelines, and adapted a similar methodology to that used in existing published research on Clemente, in particular the 'methodology of engagement' (Howard et al, 2008). In-depth conversational interviews were conducted with individuals or pairs of students who were invited to participate. Each semi-structured interview took about 60 minutes. The research design included a piloting phase during which the interview schedule was validated, clarified and refined. Piloting the questions enabled the interviewers to hone their skills in interviewing a group of people with whom they have little previous experience. The semi-structured interview schedule focussed on how students became engaged in the program, what highlights and challenges they identified and how participating in Clemente impacted on the students. In this respect, the researchers investigated how students might 'biographise' their lives, that is write their lives as a narrative (Ricouer, 1988).

Although there was negligible anticipated risk for participants, a counsellor was available to assist any participants who became distressed or wished to be debriefed. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed and participants invited to check these for accuracy. The feedback loop is intended as an ethical measure and a point of data validation. Personal inspection of the transcripts was used to assist with the identification of themes emerging from the data.

Clemente Student Insights

Gervasoni and Smith asked students about Clemente and its place and role in their life journey. Responses suggest that Clemente was life-giving for its students. Each interview produced unexpected and varied results with some common insights identified across the interviews. Quotes from Debbie, Christine, Tammy, Lily and Taryn (pseudonyms) are used to present and discuss a number of insights.

Debbie believed that Clemente provided a learning environment for people lacking life opportunities:

> *It's an opportunity for them and for people like myself who struggle a little bit to get us out there; to get us back out there into life, and, to see some sort of future….And for people who couldn't, didn't learn before, or didn't have an opportunity or weren't in the right environment years ago who can now.*

Debbie described what seems to be common to most students' life experiences:

> *…it's been a reinforcement every week, and to be with the other women and know that they are going through the same thing with kids, and grandchildren and stuff. That's comforting as well to know that you are around women who are dealing with the same things, issues with children and so forth…and learning together.*

Debbie described accurately the general student profile though each student in the program is extraordinarily unique and Debbie was no exception to their exceptionality. In her life, Debbie viewed Clemente as a chance to reclaim something for herself. She had sacrificed much for her family and a distinct theme in her remarks was about 'me'. She engaged in a twofold reflection on her own place in the educational process. On one hand it was a battle she fought with herself to just be there:

> *I withdraw, and then I have a constant battle with myself and then I get down on myself too, because I didn't, you know, so it goes on…but…the times I could get through the door and come to sessions I did feel great, so it's fantastic for that, for someone like me, who's battling….it's been great for that. When I could get through the door and have the support from everybody.*

The door was a portal metaphor for Debbie as well as referring to the literal door of the classroom. She repeatedly invoked this metaphor, the door that she must compel herself to traverse. The metaphor referred also to Clemente as an opportunity, a door onto something which was community-based and framed her into routine:

> *I can't run and beat myself up about it, but getting through the door is half the problem and once you get through the door you feel okay and afterwards you feel better about it, so getting through that door is the hardest part but once you are through it, it's the easiest part. At the end of it you get to feel better, as well, and*

happy with yourself because you did achieve and that you spent that time there. The course was really important for me…because I have routine in my life again. I had Tuesdays to do and I was getting routine in my life and it was for me. For the first time in years it was about me.

The community that Debbie passes through to was made up of students who were true peers. The spirit of this community was very supportive: *'The life experiences are brought into it so you are not feeling like some silly dodo sitting there or whatever. You're not made to feel inferior of anyone else in the room.'* Teachers and supportive staff make up that community too.

Christine also felt the same way. *'They …support staff and teachers… pump you full of confidence and lift your spirits.'* Christine commented on the positive support from Learning Partners and the program's Centacare Student Co-ordinator, as well as the reinforcement from her parents, though not from her daughter. Support is vital to inclusion in this educational community. Debbie explained the importance of the Co-ordinator.

…that when anyone comes through the door, whether it's someone who is having a hard time that day getting through the door, or somebody that's not happy or someone's upset or so forth…, she's that one person we know, as we walk through the door...that Narelle will always be there...if I know I am feeling uneasy, she'll look at me and try and pull me back again, and she knows.

As the content of the Certificate's units is testing, personal encouragement and assistance were vital to keeping Christine in the program when she faced challenges: *'I'm scared of failing.'* Even so, her tenacity was a personal strength. She knew what it was like to rise to an occasion. Indeed, anecdotal observation from teachers, administrators and researchers in Clemente was that every week was an occasion for most of the students, a test to see if they could just make it to the class. Passing through doors to the outdoors and then to the site of Clemente motivated Christine in her everyday life. Invoking the well-known Foucaultian phrase that infers self-empowerment, she identified a major purpose of Clemente for her was to: *'get out of the house 'cos I get a bit cabin-fever-ish…Knowledge is power. And I think the more knowledge you have the stronger you are mentally, physically, whatever, you know.'* Even in assessment (which by Christine's own admission she struggled with), she felt a power. Clemente education produces results in providing a learning environment in which people can find their own strengths. When asked about strengths Christine said, *'I like to debate…I surprised myself actually; I didn't think I could get up in front of people and talk.'* Studying in Clemente was a journey of self-discovery for many of the students. Christine has found a resource within herself in her talent for debating. On the whole, Clemente has become an essential part of Christine's life journey: *'If I didn't have it I think I would be in a psych ward. I'd definitely be in a psych ward actually.'*

A different journey is set out by Tammy, who has dreams that help her journey with multiple sclerosis. She is most intelligent but had to 'rewire' her brain *(as she puts it)* after some short term neurological problems. Self-expression is her power: *'…there's stuff that's within you that just needs expression and it tends to find a way, once the obstacles have overcome and Clemente's a path through that'* Her dreams drove her on:

Okay. I have a couple of options. I overcome MS and I'm determined to do that. It is doable; people have done it before. The other option is …I mean…yes, I've done a few interesting things in my life and I like to write…

Her dream was for her children to flourish and she has a dream of writing to help inspire them. Tammy described Clemente as a 'path' to help her in this. Though creative writing came easily and smoothly to her not so academic writing; with which she had difficulty sitting down to write. As with other students Tammy stated that she did not face such challenges alone and unsupported:

My brain is still rewiring itself, but I've learnt such a lot along the way that I'm completely and utterly thrilled and proud of myself. Without the Clemente guidance and supportive, really, truly supportive atmosphere, I could not attempt to go into say UB Uni and the, er, fulfil their expectations without any help along the way, or, you know, much reduced.

The Smith Family, a key partner in the Ballarat Clemente program, has helped her family access education through personal support and scholarships. The family atmosphere of valued education has motivated Tammy to pursue education after circumstances had inclined her, at one point, to *'sort of put that dream on hold'*. The scholarships from The Smith Family were a circuit-breaker in the life of the family. The potential to break out of the poverty trap through participation in education and an accumulation of cultural capital had yet to be realised for them. Poverty itself was the greatest substantial barrier facing the students. In discussing how important education was to her family, Tammy commented:

…its the only way out of poverty because I've had, I've lived below the poverty line for what, 30 years basically, and there starts to become a build up to want to, to sort of need housing, to, to need things and I think that the…and to seek the opportunities that would allow you to get what's needed to live life, instead of not being able to participate in life, not being able to do your hobbies and things like this.

Tammy maintained her ambition to rise above a life of poverty which was partly caused by her illness which was a neurological condition that interrupted her study regularly across time. Nonetheless, she drew upon her inner resources to return. Creativity was one of her strengths, though she reported feeling that it was inhibited by the requirement to write assessment tasks in a scholarly style. *'It's very hard for me just to do the academic stuff without being creative.'* She recognized that writing in a disciplined academic style was something she had learnt.

Lily and Taryn (interviewed as a pair) spoke about other goods available in Clemente education. Friendship and connection were high on their list of priorities. Their close friendship with each other was born in the Ballarat Clemente program. Lily explained, *'I've made some good friends in the class; two really good friends, and they help me a lot. They help me through it. So that was a bonus-making new friends as well.'* She added that she expected to meet new people *'but I didn't know how I'd go because I don't go out a lot.'* This experience of isolation was a common theme for many. Taryn also spoke of her friendships:

I'm good friends with Lily. I'm over there probably every second day but we talk on the phone everyday and with another one of the ladies here. The girls have actually organized a weekend away for my 50th… If I wasn't here that…I'd probably be sitting at home or just going out for tea.

Lily agreed, *'You meet nicer people, too, like…..different people, different atmosphere from what I've been used to…'* Sociability takes the form of friendship here. Other values

informed how Taryn interacted with people. *'I think I've learnt more tolerance too, with knowing some of the people's backgrounds.'* Both had strong views about the Certificate and the units that they had completed. They appreciated the academic disciplines they had learnt. Both had embraced Clemente. That does not mean that it had not challenged them academically or indeed in terms of the personal difficulties. As with Debbie, Taryn had to push herself to attend.

> *I have low days, but I've come here on low days and had tears in me eyes and still done it which surprised me. In the past I usually just lock myself away when I have days like that. So that's something really different for me and a lot of people here have bad days, so everybody seems to understand and says "you'll be right". You know, and it's not as embarrassing as I thought it would be.*

The students both appreciate the support and connections they have found through Clemente, as well as truly valuing the opportunity to participate in intellectual activity and conversations. Debbie highlighted the importance of the intellectual community shaped by the Clemente classes.

> *All the time, when I read the newspapers I'd have myself in such a routine that, I haven't late, but I'd be consumed by it. I would just have nobody to talk to about it so coming to school was good thing for that as well because I would have nobody to chat to with. No neighbours or anybody who was, not on my level, but just not doing what I was doing so I would suffer intellectually from that sense, but then you would come to class and discuss these things, so you could get that out as well. That was inside me bursting and things like, "isn't this fascinating", and "I couldn't believe this", or "isn't that amazing" and all that stuff. It's great.*

Debbie had a strong sense that Ballarat was an "*educational hub*", and that this gave her opportunities for the future: "*I love thinking I'm part of all this too, this progression that Ballarat is moving in. I sort of like being part of that. That things are happening for the future in Ballarat and that I can be part of that*,"
Debbie acknowledged the role of local government in her education and sense of community building.

> *It just reinforced for me that the community is in it together. That if your local government is supporting what you are doing, and supporting the program that you are in, it ...it would make me think that someone like me, who's going through changes and rebuilding and so forth, that support is there, in your head, within your community. That even your local government is there, standing in front of it and it makes you feel good. That they are backing it, and that you get to meet the mayor, and we get a pen. I've met two mayors and [laughs], no-one's allowed to touch my mayor pen, where is sits at home.*

In contrast to this view of a supportive local government, Tammy questioned the approach of Federal governments towards "*people like me who were struggling beyond my capacity to do the right thing and then being shunted through their system*". In a manner that echoes the sentiments of Shorris, Tammy recognises that many people would benefit from the educational treasures of Clemente.

They're really intelligent and they're being asked to do really simple stuff that gives them no challenge and gives them a lot of unhappiness. I mean we all know how to wash dishes. … It's a waste, a real waste of a good load of innate talent that people have. That really does need expression and I would really like to see people given a chance, but sometimes it's a hard road to get there.

The power of the learning within each unit and the continuing impact upon their lives were other important insights. Lily finished school after Year 8 and had had little opportunity for education since. She found a politics unit difficult but both she and Taryn continued to reflect on political issues, as demonstrated in the following excerpt.

LILY: *I did learn from it but since we've done that course I've thought about it more cos I had a whinge the other day and thought if it wasn't for the politics and the government, the world wouldn't be how it is today. With all the trouble they're having. They should have…like the pubs open from seven till twelve – or whatever it was - like they used to. Instead of having them open all night – no wonder people are getting killed everyday because everybody's just getting too drunk and its all got to do with politics….*

TARYN: *And money.*

LILY: *Or that's the way I looked at it. Yes, just after the money but they're not really caring about the people – what's happening to the people. So I learnt that much.*

TARYN: *And I'm more aware of what's happening in the political world now. I tend to take a lot more notice of…*

LILY: *I am more so, too.*

TARYN: *What's going on. I've even been out to see the prime minister's heads [in the Ballarat Botanical Gardens] about three times since we've done that. I want to try and learn them all in a row [laughs].*

Interviewer: *I suppose that's saying that the learning from a particular unit continues?*

TARYN: *Hmm, yeah it does. But I'm still learning like I said.*

LILY: *When I finished all the courses, cos you've learnt more, and then after the courses, things come up and it's… you're still learning more. There's still a follow on from what you've learnt.*

These women both needed to justify their participation in education to friends and family, but were convinced about its importance. Taryn commented:

A lot of people said, "What are you doing it for?" "What job do you get?" and I go, well it just adds to everything else that you do in your life. And as I've said, it's made me more aware of things as in politics and ethics and especially with the Australian history – it just horrifies me when I look, think about what we did…. I would never have known any of that if I didn't come here. I would have just kept

living, plodding on, not knowing, like, it's pretty ignorant not knowing about it…. As I've said, I've become a lot more aware of what goes on in society now, take more notice, don't just sit back in my house thinking nothing's happening out there.

Both Taryn and Lily had reflected on the end of the Clemente program when they qualify for the Certificate. Taryn worried in particular, *'I'm a bit scared of what I'm going to have to do next. I don't think I could handle full time work. I don't think I could go back full time. Not mentally.'* Such sentiments raised the need for the Clemente programs to support those students graduating to be more aware of and acknowledge the choices they had about further education and other life choices. Graduation is also an important signal to the students' families about the role of education in their futures. In the words of Debbie:

Well of course, I want to achieve that [graduation], and I want my son to be there [cries] and for him to see that, you know, even if you have had a rough ten years you can still get up, and Mum's moving on. Even though Mum fell to pieces, she's getting up…all of that's important and then it rubs off on the grandkids, hopefully. So that's the plan.

Conclusion

Analysis of the interview transcripts suggested that the Clemente Program was life changing and path-breaking for these five Ballarat students. The student insights indicated: the *gravitas* of providing a supportive learning environment for people lacking life opportunities and routine that includes a significance support role for the Learning Partners and the enabling role of a Centacare Student Co-ordinator. Such a supportive learning environment has resulted in students:

- with increased feelings of positive wellbeing and self esteem;
- doing something that was more about 'me' for the first time in years;
- finding personal strengths;
- rekindling dreams;
- breaking the cycle of poverty for their family;
- finding friendships and connections;
- appreciating the academic disciplines;
- appreciating the role of education as a means of getting through bad days;
- reporting overall improvements in mental health;
- finding pride in learning achievements; and,
- in considering their future life choices in what comes after program completion.

These student insights highlighted many outcomes and the treasures of a humanities education. Shorris' (2000) vision of Clemente as an especially inclusive form of education that expanded the participation of the poor as citizens in society, found realization in this Ballarat Clemente study. Community-based socially supported educational structures that enable these students, initially, to participate and then to sustain their engagement in Clemente appeared to be valuable for each.

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