



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

NATIONAL COMMUNITY HUBS CONFERENCE

Wednesday 18th September 2019

Dr Sonja Hood, CEO and staff of Community Hubs Australia

Community Hub Leaders

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

First, I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land upon which we are gathering and pay my respects to their Elders past and present and to Elders here with us this morning.

What a pleasure it is for me and for Tony to join you here at the Community Hubs 3rd National Conference.

We did not hesitate in responding positively to the invitation to join you this morning. Bridging the gap between migrants and the wider community is dear to us. That is for a number of reasons.

First, I am one of the almost 50% of us in this country either born overseas or with one parent who was born overseas. My father came to Australia from Poland in 1929. He was very fortunate to do so.

He was also particularly conscious of that good fortune, that had taken him out of Europe at a time when the world was again heading towards war, and all the ghastly consequences of it.

My father made sure that he never left me or my siblings in any doubt as to how lucky we were to be raised in Australia.

And so, I am conscious that I am the product of the migrant experience. The product of someone blessed to find safe harbour here. And the beneficiary of the opportunities that were afforded to him in this country.

I am conscious too of what it was like growing up in Australia in the 1950s. In a society significantly less diverse than today. Less globalised. More inward looking. More homogenous.

It was not always easy. There were times when I felt different. Or was made to feel different. When I was the target of prejudice. Made to feel 'other'.

And so, although I do not know first-hand the rigours of settling in a new country, I do have at least a second-hand idea from my father's description of having to adjust to an adopted land, culture and language.

Those rigours were graphically brought home to me from another perspective, when I was just starting out as a young lawyer.

I was volunteering in a Citizens' Advice Bureau, (effectively a forerunner to a Legal Centre). I was struck by how many times those newly arrived to our community came to our office with pressing problems that, with quite simple help from us, could be solved quickly and positively.

I think of a Greek man, with little English, who had nowhere to live. In fact, his ACTUAL problem was just that he could not understand a rental application form in English. I was able to help him.

It was not really my legal skills that were needed. Just a bit of welcoming and welcome help. Something very familiar to your organisation. Very much a part of your ethos.

As an adult, working in the criminal and family courts, I saw time and time again just how hard it could be for those who came to settle here from afar, especially those who had lived through significant trauma, or endured long waits in refugee camps along the way, or - through race or religion - had never felt fully welcome here.

I mentioned refugee camps. As barristers, my husband and I went to live in Hong Kong in the early 1980s, to work as prosecutors. Our work took us to one of the camps in Hong Kong in which many Vietnamese waited a very long time for safe passage to Australia.

It made me mindful of just how much stress and trauma so many people had endured before they had come to settle here.

I recall a case I heard, several years after we had returned, when I was a magistrate in the Melbourne Magistrates' Court. It involved a young Vietnamese man on drug charges.

His barrister made a plea in mitigation on his behalf, advocating why he should not be sent to prison, and then sat down.

I asked the barrister where his client had been born. When had he arrived in Australia? From where? Had he come directly to Australia? Had he been in a refugee camp? For how long? Who accompanied him here? What had happened to the rest of his family?

Each of my questions elicited a painfully slow question and answer process between barrister and client. From that slightly elevated perspective on the Bench, I had a birds-eye view, and gained an immediate understanding of the fact that the barrister had not turned his mind to any of those antecedents.

I knew that I could not deal with that young man without understanding just what his needs might be, as a relatively new arrival to this country, after such an unsettled past.

Almost a decade of sentencing in the criminal courts made me reflect upon that often.

I gained another insight into how it must feel to arrive in a new and strange country, when I was an AFL Commissioner. An insight – more particularly – into how it must feel to be a parent at such an unsettled time.

One of my favourite experiences as a Commissioner occurred on a grey, wintry Sunday in a modest hotel in Melbourne's CBD, when I welcomed a group of multi-cultural youth to a week-long AFL camp.

These youngsters – a true representation of our State's diversity – had been selected for the leadership skills they had displayed in their various communities.

As the camp was just starting, they were accompanied by their parents. Many were very recently arrived in Australia. I looked at them as I spoke. It did not take me long to realise that they mostly understood very little – if anything – about footy. Or, even, what the camp was about. They were certainly underwhelmed by some of the AFL legends who had top billing to work with their kids.

But they did understand one thing. It was that their children, in this new country that they had hoped held promise for them, had been recognised as leaders. Had been chosen. Were receiving a precious opportunity.

I came to see that (to my surprise!) a love of footy was not universal, but the pride of a parent when a child was earmarked as special knew no cultural bounds. It was understood, even when other bits were 'lost in translation', as it were.

These are just a few disparate stories from my background, to explain why I was so keen to join you here.

I know I am not telling anyone in this room anything new.

You are the ones who recognise the need for and benefits of newly arrived migrants and refugees experiencing a caring and effective transition into Australian society.

You are the ones who recognise that it is social cohesion that can best underpin strong, healthy and prosperous communities.

You are definitely the ones with the runs on the board, supporting families, helping with English tuition and conversation, vocational training, early childhood playgroups and programs to counter social isolation.

These are, of course, only examples and a particularly high-level description, in no way doing full justice to the detailed and caring programs that you run, and opportunities that you offer.

Today, Tony and I have a very personal reason to sing the praises of the work of Community Hubs Australia.

In the last few years at Government House, we have teamed with Community Hubs to run a program that is particularly close to our hearts.

Feeling the privilege of being the first female Governor of Victoria, I wanted to enable a program at Government House, specifically for women. My husband joined me in that vision.

When we reflected upon the gift we wanted to give, it was an easy decision to design a program specifically for women from refugee or migrant backgrounds.

Eighteen years as a judge in the Family Court of Australia had shown me up close just how much the happiness of a parent facilitates the happiness of the children. And for refugee and migrant women, their happiness was often adversely impacted by social isolation.

So, we decided to create a kitchen garden at Government House – in fact where one had been but fallen into disuse in bygone years. We named it the *'Peace and Prosperity Garden'* after Victoria's State motto. The words seemed perfect. *'Peace'* and *'Prosperity'* are certainly what each of us craves for our families.

I think some of you visited yesterday. We hope you liked it!

The garden was to be the vehicle for a program, but we knew that we did not have the expertise to create the program ourselves.

And this is where Community Hubs Australia comes in.

We are grateful to the Scanlon Foundation and Community Hubs Australia for helping us to realise this fertile setting for women to come together, to meet, to talk, to improve their English, to enjoy the garden, to cook, dance, sing, laugh and to make friends. And to spend time with us.

Above all, we love the fact that these women, often from difficult and traumatic settings in their countries of birth can feel welcomed into the home of the Head of State and, by extension, to Victoria and Australia.

So far, some 260 or so women have come to us for their term-long programs, through School Community Hubs. They have come from at least 30 different backgrounds.

What a thrill it has been to see their friendships forming. To hear of the women catching up outside the program. To hear of little kitchen gardens being planted in some of the school or community playgrounds.

And, in particular, to hear from the women themselves.

One woman, Lina from Lebanon wrote after a recent program:

“I am living in Australia for more than 10 years. I have never explored anything of my own. For the 1st time ever I have got an opportunity to be a part of such incredible program. 2018 Peace and Prosperity Kitchen Program has added confidence in me to make new friends, to see other cultures, to understand and learn more about Australia and all in a safe and comfortable way. I felt blessed and thankful to everyone.”

And so, against that backdrop, what a pleasure it is for me to address this Community Hubs Conference today.

We do have a fair insight into your expertise and your dedication. We are in awe of both!

I have no doubt that this opportunity to be together, to connect with and exchange ideas with each-other and to plan for the considerable expansion of your work next year, will be welcomed and embraced by you all.

Understanding the intensity of your work, I hope you will also be able to capitalise on this opportunity to pause, and to enjoy our beautiful city. I hope that some of your important discussions might take place in one of our cafes, restaurants or wine bars.

For those from out of Victoria, you are welcome guests here.

For all of you, your work is gratefully recognised. I am convinced if our recently arrived Victorians or Australians are welcomed and helped to settle, then we, as well as they, will be the stronger for it.

May I again frame things in terms of Victoria's State motto.

'Peace and Prosperity'.

May I thank each one of you for the part you play in ensuring peace and prosperity for us all.