

Occasional Address

Lisa's Bio

Lisa is a Koori woman born, and today residing, on the Land of the Eora, the Peoples of the Sydney region. Her Grandmothers' countries lie in south western NSW and northern NSW respectively.

Her journey started - initially as a young 14 year old run-away from home - as a pupil nurse at Lidcombe Hospital, which eventually saw Lisa enrol in the undergraduate medical programme here at the University of Sydney, the Master of Public Health programme, and eventually graduating as the first Aboriginal person to be awarded a PhD in the Faculty of Medicine.

Since then, her journey has taken her through the rigorous Public Health Officer training programme in Epidemiology and the NSW Department of Health (1998-2001), South Eastern Sydney Area Health Service - where she served for some years as the Public Health Epidemiologist (2001-2004), and eventually into academia (2004).

Today, Lisa holds a chair in Indigenous Health at the UNSW and is the Director of the School of Public Health and Community Medicine's Muru Marri Indigenous Health Unit (MMIHU).

She has many other appointments as well, including that of Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the Prince of Wales Medical Research Institute (2006), Visiting Fellow at the National Centre of Epidemiology and Population Health ANU(2007), Visiting Consultant at POW Ageing Research Centre (2006),; and Squadron Leader (Public Health Epidemiologist) in the Royal Australian Air Force Specialist Reserve.

Lisa has been recognised for many parts of her work, including an award for her outstanding contribution to cancer epidemiology by the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council and the Ministry for Science & Medical Research (2005), and the Henry Stricker Community Honour for "outstanding service and contribution ... rendered with ... endeavours to make our society a better place in which to live" (2006).

Her service to the discipline is extensive, serving the Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council's National Advisory Group on Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health Information & Data (NAGATSIHID) as its Deputy Chair. She is a member of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Research Advisory Committee of the National Health and Medical Research Committee, Advisory Group on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics (AGATSIS) at the ABS, and has been an invited speaker to the House of Commons, London, on the anniversary of the closing of the first International Decade of Indigenous Peoples. She has been honoured with meeting HRH Prince Charles during his last visit to Australia and is recognised as a leader in Indigenous health research in Canada, the US and New

Zealand, collaborating closely with colleagues at institutional and community levels - all resulting in multiple invitations to address international and national scientific meetings.

Her background has made her acutely aware of the lack of appropriate, available data on urbanised Aboriginal Australians that identifies the particular health issues and both current and childhood risk factors for poor adult health. Her work has led to innovative hypotheses and funded grants in cross disciplinary teams in education, nutrition, law, social science, neurobiology and statistics to ascertain predictors of healthy ageing across the lifecycle.

Lisa has a particular passion though - and it is around the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into tertiary education. She has co-lead the development of a programme that has secured residential scholarships for Aboriginal medical students (each to the value of \$70,000) which has helped 18 students over the last four years. This has had a significant impact on the retention of Aboriginal students in medicine, optometry and other health related disciplines at UNSW and continues to work at attracting new scholarships for postgraduate students in Aboriginal Health.

Today, we will hear a little more of the journey Lisa has undertaken....

The Address

Deputy Chancellor, Provost, Dean, Colleagues, Graduates, Family Friends and all.

First, I wish to pay my respects to the Elders, past present and future, of the Eora people, the Gadigal Clan, upon whose Land we stand today.

I pay my respects to all of you here today, especially to my Aboriginal brothers and sisters who have worked so hard to be here.

I stood here, not too long ago, getting my degree conferred, thinking that a big journey had finished, and now, after such a lot of work and study – my *life* can now begin. And I know that many of you are sitting here thinking much the same thing.

You are wrong. Now the *real work* begins!

I want to talk on two matters today. One is on a journey of a person, Professor Jan Ritchie, and the other on the journey of Australia, and of where we are now.

I'll start with a little on the journey of Jan Ritchie.

Jan Ritchie

She was a young physiotherapy graduate in April 1958, in this very Hall.

It was a time of great change for the university, and a time of great activism, including the great riot of '58 – a student protest that blocked Parramatta Road – following multiple fatalities of people trying to cross the road to leave the campus, and it was through this action that the Footbridge was built. Something we take for granted today was something that students here fought hard for. Jan, and many others – including some of the academy behind – were there, Jan sitting crossed legged on the Parramatta Road until late.

That was 51 years ago.

Jan has always worked hard, and been a fighter – and tells me that she was asked to be a guest speaker at a graduation about 10 years ago – when she still “professed to be a physio”. Now she says she has a “background” in physio. Funny how people change the way they think about themselves. I think us health people are always what we are – carers, no matter what our present role is. We go into the health field because we care, right.

So. I am working as a researcher and academic at the University of New South Wales, and my work takes me to some pretty amazing places in Australia and around the world.

I worked in Moree, a remote community in North Western NSW. A remarkable place for many reasons, and most especially because of the remarkable Gamilaroi Aboriginal community.

The Aboriginal Medical Service is set on the site of the old Pius X mission, and serves the community's health needs and runs a child care centre on-site.

A small group of women, all grandmothers, used to see each other at funerals, or in court, or at the prison, or at the hospital. The youngest grandmother was just 35, the oldest was well over 80.

Many were the primary carers of young grandchildren or great grand children. They had a lot in common, and one of them, Aunty Shirley, arranged a place at Pius X for them to meet every fortnight - to share a cuppa, some sandwiches, and a yarn, to help support each other in their lives, and listen to some relaxation tapes, do some line dancing, and have a laugh.

They even had a name – the “Moree Granniators”.

They had been meeting for some years, and part of their work included setting up and running a before-school breakfast programme for children in town, running a young women's group where the local hair dresser or beautician would come and work with the girls, and a monthly movie night at the local oval with the local Policeman.

They became an important group in the community to liaise with. They had loads of Social Capital – and when I asked about what was the most important effect of the group was, a couple of the grannies responded “we are all still alive”.

This is not such a strange response; these women were used to losing their partners, their families and each other to unexpected or untimely death.

But, in the four or five years of the Granniators' existence to the time I saw them, there was not one death in the Grannies. All remained strong and well, and all were agreeing that the reason they felt so well was because they were coming together to share, and do their relaxation tapes – as Granniators.

I asked Aunty Shirley about these tapes, and she rattled around in her filing cabinet, and presto.

A very old cassette tape, with a label on it “Health Commission of NSW. Relaxation and Stress Management, Tape One” Jan Ritchie, Physiotherapist. 1982. I kid you not, these were the original tapes. They were still being used, some 24 years later, nearly every other week.

I photocopied the side of this cassette tape, and took it to Jan.

As a younger physio, Jan said she made a number of relaxation tapes for the then Health Commission, in the early days of when there a recognised link between physical and mental health was emerging.

Two were made in 1982 and the third in 1984. "Relax to the Max" was the community nickname for all the tapes.

She simply remarked "It's funny how time reminds you of the good things you do when you first graduate". Funny that – she had graduated some time before 1982!

And it is interesting the journey people take.

That was 25 years ago.

Signing Day

Jan no longer professes to be a physio – but she is a carer. And she works tirelessly now, as a retired senior academic, and as a Human Rights advocate. She has never been busier! Retirement does that to some of us.

And today is a REALLY big day, not just because of your graduation, but also because – at 9.30 this morning, as we were filing into the Great Hall as the academic procession, Mr Rudd made a formal statement of support for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – which is likely to go down in history as a watershed moment in Australia's relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This is the same declaration that Canada, the US, New Zealand and Australia refused to participate in only a few years ago – much to our collective shame.

And this action is consistent with the aspirations expressed by the Government through the Statement of Intent to Close the Gap amongst other things.

Sorry and Welcome to Country.

And of course, one of these was the National Apology. The Thrice Sorry.

But before the Apology, on the 12th Feb, there was something even more important.

The first ever Welcome to Country for an Australian Parliament took place, and the people of Australia, as represented by the Parliament, were properly Welcomed to Country.

My old Aunty said the biggest shame the people of this country has ever held was in the first instance, not being able to welcome people to country – and to help people learn the proper way of being here, and of knowing the paths they are to tread, and in the second, not being Welcomed to Country and knowing their obligations.

And Mr Rudd, once he was welcomed, was obligated to make the apology. He behaved properly.

That was his path.

Welcome to country is a two way thing, it's as much about being welcomed as it is about learning your responsibilities, and about the expectations that the path you follow while you are here is a good one, full of strength and love and respect.

It is about belonging. We all now belong. We are now all expected to be responsible, and we are all Carers. And that will never change.

Belonging

We all have our journeys to take. The great riot of 1958 resulted in the building of a couples of footbridges, something that we take for granted and don't really think about today as we cross them.

Jan, for example – had no idea that her tapes from 1982 would have such an effect 23 years later in saving the lives of so many women and provide before school breakfasts for so many children. And what will happen to those kids, who – because of a modest action of a physio therapist way back then, can today go to school with a good breakfast in their bellies –I have no doubt one or two – or more – could be sitting where you are today in years to come.

Jan tells me that the tapes were such a little thing then – but knowing the effect now, realises it was one of the most important things she has ever done.

I had no idea I would ever even know how to spell or be working in the manner I do, and I know that the path before us, with the formal statement on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the Prime Minister today – I think this is the most auspicious of days for you to be graduating as Carers.

I want to leave you now with a simple thought.

There will not be a day that goes past you where your clinical experience as a Carer is not used.

Where ever you go from here, you have such a precious experience to draw upon, and in 25 years from now – I truly hope you remember this watershed day in Australia as the day you graduated.

And remember- it will be the little things you do that will change lives.

I wish you well.