International Women’s Day
Thursday 8 March 2012

‘Her Inspirational Story’

A booklet of stories about the contributions and achievements of women in the City of Monash, including migrant and refugee women.

A celebration of the contributions that everyday women in our community
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>International Women's Day stories of the following women:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sonia Gandhi, written by Suman Naik (fully inspired by Sonia Gandhi).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sithy Marikar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Morna Sturrock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Thanh Duong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Joan Pretty, by Nicole Riley (Monash staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Davorka Gido (Dada)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Krishna Arora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Aimatul Yumna Learning from a vision impaired scholar from United Arab Emirates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Pauline Mani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Anamika</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Kath Louise Taylor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Susan Trowbridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Jenny Sullivan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Anna Sikkema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Liesl Meuris a.k.a Elizabeth Willemima Josephine Meuris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Connie Walker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Ngatuaine (Nga) Hosking written by Milena (Mel) Santangelo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Ngaumu George</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Tracy Makara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Tarere Nicholls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Muia Nicholls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Harriet Houghton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Helen Houghton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Elizabeth Kuoth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Sonia Gandhi, written by Suman Naik (fully inspired by Sonia Gandhi).

As the Indian personality of Mrs. Sonia Gandhi inspires me more, not as a supremo of Indian National Congress Party but as a woman with courage and love towards her family, India and the Indian people.

From a small village, Turrien in Italy, Sonia Maino, at the age of 18 came to London on 7 January 1955 for studying English course in Cambridge university. She was fade up with the cold London weather because Italy’s weather is hot compared to London. She found a Greek hotel named Varsity because the taste of Italian and Greek food is similar.

Sonia’s German friend Christine who spoke Italian introduced Rajiv Gandhi to Sonia. When they saw each other they fell in love. As per Hindu belief marriages are made in heaven by God.

Sonia and Rajiv were born for each other. Their love story began. Sonia did not know much about India. She used to think that India is a big country of perists, elephants and serapants. Now Sonia started liking London after travelling around hand in hand with Rajiv. She was happy. While talking with Rajiv she came to know that Rajiv’s grand father Pandit Nehru was the ex-Prime Minister of India and also a well known personality in the world. And her mother in law Smt. Indira Gandhi was a cabinet minister in central government who later on became the Prime Minister of India. Whereas Sonia’s father was a owner of a small company, very few people of the Italian community knew about them. In November 1966, Rajiv had completed his pilot course and got his pilot license. He then met Sonia’s parents. They also liked this smart and handsome Indian boy. At that time Sonia was only 19 years old. Her father said to her, “You are not matured yet. After you are 20 years old, you can marry with Rajiv.” Rajiv returned to India and Sonia returned to Italy. During that whole year they wrote letters to each other and they became very close. Sonia’s father thought that it is childish love and she will forget Rajiv within 3 months. But that did not happened. Then Sonia’s father gave permission to get married with Rajiv Gandhi. They said they will not interfere in her life.

On 13th January at the age of 21, Sonia alone came to Delhi. Rajiv, his brother Sanjiv and his best friend Amitabh Bacchan were present to receive Sonia. Now no one could separate them. To learn Indian customs and culture, she stayed with the Bacchan family. On 25th February 1968, Sonia and Rajiv got married. Indira Gandhi, Rajiv’s mother and ex-cabinet minister, also liked Sonia. Indira had a habit to write small notes to family members. She wrote a small note to Sonia, “Sonia I like you, and I love you as my daughter”. Sonia was pleased to read this note. Sonia was more comfortable speaking French than in English and it was noticed by Indira
Gandhi. Indira Gandhi used to speak with Sonia in French rather than in English. Indira Gandhi knew that a girl coming from abroad will find vast differences in the Indian culture and Italian culture. With Rajiv’s and Indira’s help Sonia adjusted herself in the family. First Sonia was very upset because where ever she used to go, people started staring at her because she was a foreigner and Indira’s daughter in law. She just used to smile and neglect all these things.

Sonia and Rajiv’s world was full of joy and happiness. Two sweet little members entered in their family, Priyanka and Rahul. But destiny did not allow Sonia to have a happy and joy full life. On 31st October 1984 Indira Gandhi was shot dead by her own security guard. Sonia took her and ran to the hospital. But doctors declared her dead on arrival. Rajiv came back to Delhi. Ruling Congress party of India insisted him to take an active part in politics because he was the only heir of the Gandhi family. But Sonia was against this. When Rajiv made the decision and took active part in politics, people of India loved this simple and smart person and saw him as the future prime minister of India. His popularity spread all over India. After her mother’s death Rajiv became the prime minister of India. He won the election from Amethi. Sonia gave full support to Rajiv in his duty. For 5 years she was the prime minister’s wife and traveled all over India and met the Indian people. After five years as the prime minister of India, he entered into election campaign again. This time Rajiv was defeated. Sonia did not understand the human psychology of the Indian people who first praised Rajiv as their idol and then defeated him in the next elections. The next elections were in 1991. This time Rajiv was determined to form a Congress government.

He used to campaign for twenty hours a day by standing in front of the public and giving speeches and visiting small towns. Again Indian public psychology changed. People were eagerly waiting for him. They loved his simplicity, his smiling peaceful face, his assurance that India will be the best country all over the world.

But again, destiny was cruel to Sonia. Rajiv did not return to Delhi from his campaign. He was assassinated by a suicide bomber. Sonia’s joy full world was completely destroyed, but Sonia stood firmly. She faced the situation bravely rather than returning to Italy. She had two small children, Rahul and Priyanka. She kept sorrows aside and decided to stay in India, her beloved Rajiv’s motherland. When she first came with Rajiv to this country, she was nervous. But now she was part of India. People of India gave her full respect, loved her as their ‘Ladli Bahu’ (Beloved daughter in law). She also loved people of India. First she did not take any active part in Indian politics. People of India teased her as ‘Gungi Gudia’ (Deaf and Dumb Doll). But she remained quite. She wanted Indian people’s love and trust. She became the president of the Congress party. Ultimately she won elections but she didn’t take active part in the ministry of the government. She choose Mr. Manmohan Singh as the prime minister of India who is selfless hardworking person in the Congress party. This shows Sonia’s cleverness. Today she is
one of the strongest women in the world. She kept aside the grief of her husband's death. With a broad mindset she loved the Indian people and India. This was her love and affection for the Indian people.
I arrived with my late husband & two daughters to Australia in August 1988, from Sri Lanka & lived in Fairfield Victoria. The reason for our migration was to get away from the civil war in Sri Lanka and give our daughters a good education.

At the start as with most migrants I was home sick and my mother visited me in December 1988, which was a great help. Since language was not a barrier for me, I took the initiative to get involved in Politics & social service, which in turn helped me, integrate with the Australian Community.

To help members of the Sri Lankan community integrate and also understand Australian politics and Australian way of life, I together with a few others formed an Association called Sri Lankans in Australian Affairs for which I was the inaugural Vice President.

As the Sri Lankan Muslim community grew, I was also involved in forming an association which catered to our religious and cultural needs, which was important factor for our younger generation. This organisation is “United Sri Lankan Muslim Association Of Australia” (USMAA) which is now 21 years old and well supported by the City Of Monash. I was an inaugural committee member and have held many executive positions.

In 1991, I moved to Nottinghill Victoria with my family. My two daughters attended Monash Primary, Monash Secondary & Monash University and both are now qualified Charted Accountants.

After working in home based child care in the initial months of my arrival, I joined Australia Post in June 1989 as a Postal Services Officer (PSO) and worked in many Post Offices as a reliever. I was an active union member and in July 2003 was elected as a union organiser for Communication Workers Union – Vic branch.

I am the 1st muslim female in Australia to be elected as a union member and held the position until July 2011. I am very thankful to our union members for having given me this opportunity.

In July 2007 – I was also elected as Vice President (Affirmative Action) of the Communications Workers Union of Australia.
I am a passionate supporter of the under privilege & workers rights. I have received the Victorian Multicultural Award for Excellence in 2008 and other community awards in appreciation of my work.

I love sports mainly Footy, Cricket & Soccer and I barrack for the might “COLLINGWOOD”.
Beyond the lifelong inspiration of my mother Ethel Condell, many women of totally different backgrounds and skills continue to serve as models of what I attempt to make of my life. These women are mainly of a religious calling, but three I would single out as compelling leaders, passionate, articulate, empathetic, and although all are deceased, I am still trying to please them!

I was born in the beautiful town of Orange in central western New South Wales, the first child of Ethel and Thomas Macartney Condell. My Irish-born father was practising as a solicitor there and sadly died when I was ten years old. My small brothers were aged eight and four at this time, and had baby Derrick survived a tragic poisoning accident at eighteen months, he would have been six. So this ten-year old and her siblings witnessed two family tragedies and their young mother’s valiant efforts to keep us together in our lovely home and garden in the early Depression years. Friendly immediate neighbours, especially the mothers, were always kind and involved, as all three households had children of about the same age.

Ethel was married again four years later, to Thomas Henry Oates, a neighbor from across the road who was a retired grazier, widower and father of eight adult, mainly married children. Thenceforth my mother encouraged us to be as polite as possible to the large ‘step family’ we inherited, and one stepsister, Phyllis, was my first model of kindness, generosity and hospitality which she continued for the rest of her life.

Kambala, the boarding school in Rose Bay where I was sent in wartime 1940, had one unique blessing to compensate for the negative experience of homesickness, elitism and the usual problems of the nouvelle arrivée. My piano teacher was Miriam Hyde, perhaps Australia’s most distinguished composer, and for some reason she took a warm interest in me, and was sad, but understanding when I elected to return home to my local high school, thereby repeating a year to gain entry to an Arts course at Sydney University. Miriam kept in touch with me, and on the very day she received news that her soldier husband, Marcus Edwards, had been taken prisoner by the Germans, she wrote me a letter I still recall vividly. She said she was listening to a Beethoven symphony at the time, and her fearful news also carried to me a sublime message of hope: ‘Would that the German mind could still flow with such compassionate humanity’. This evocation of another mentality in the midst of all the Nazi horrors of the time has left an indelible mark on me. And when at war’s end the good news came that Marcus had been
released, this superb woman wrote to tell me he was on his way home. All this to a quite immature 16 year old country schoolgirl!

It was at that time that this 16 year old met the beautiful woman who was to become my lifelong friend. Sheila Nancarrow, bride of a senior appointee to the Commonwealth Bank and one of the many newcomers my mother would welcome by inviting them to afternoon tea. Sheila, now 95, still keeps regular contact with me and when I can, I fly to Sydney just for a day to be with dear Sheila, and we have a long, long lunch and much, much happy talk!

Again, living in residence at The Women’s College at Sydney University, I found the Principal, Camilla Wedgwood, a towering figure with, to me, the voice and presence of a Hebrew prophet as she offered the Bible reading at Monday prayers. She was a Quaker of the famous Wedgwood china manufacturers in England, and a world renowned anthropologist. With all this awesome background I was overwhelmed when, on calling at her office one day to seek permission for an outing with friends from Orange, she looked at me gently, and asked “Why are you so lonesome, dear lamb?” I had no idea that was my problem, and from then on I was able to speak with her freely, and find friends among the College’s outstandingly bright collection of young women undergraduates. Most of these have gone on to make significant contributions to Australia’s scientific, legal, medical and cultural life. At the time however, many of these young women under her tutelage broke their hearts when Miss Wedgwood was swept off to Papua New Guinea to advise the wartime Government on dealings with the native communities.

It was back in Orange, my hometown, that my future career was decided for me. I had been enjoying teaching (without any specific training) at a small primary school associated with my Anglican Church, and found many of the children delightful. One small girl’s father was manager of the local paper, the Central Western Daily, and it had just appointed a new editor from the Sydney Morning Herald. Immediately upon arrival this new editor asked ‘Where is the woman?’ ‘What woman?’ ‘A woman reporter of course.’ The manager hastily contacted me at the school, took me to be interviewed by the new editor, who appointed me on the spot with a week’s notice to bring in my first column of local news. Such training on a local paper, where one became quite closely identified, and at ease, with people at every level in the community proved the entrée to a wide world of journalism. I will return to the importance of the local community later.

Moving to Sir Keith Murdoch’s fine evening newspaper, the Melbourne Herald in 1948. I had the extraordinary good fortune to be appointed to the London staff within a year. Again I was the only female journalist in this very busy office in that street of adventure, Fleet Street. The
opportunities of expanding one’s knowledge and experience seemed endless, for my three and a half years there encompassed England’s beginning recovery after World War 11, the death of King George V and the coronation of his daughter, Elizabeth 11, all of which I covered in detail. An unexpected experience was my month-long travels with about twenty women journalists through Germany, still recovering from its wartime losses. We were guests of the Deutscher Frauenring, a newly created body of German women determined to make amends for their country’s loss of stature in the eyes of the world. I remember on meeting the West German Chancellor Dr Konrad Adenauer, and mentioning to him that I already knew some German immigrants now making their home in Australia. He replied ‘You will not like them… we Germans work too hard for a (laidback?) country like yours! I was to meet many outstanding women through my time in Fleet Street, coming to know well Lady White, daughter of Alfred Deakin and wife of the Australian Commissioner Sir Thomas White. I found English women of note very frank and honest, an example being Lady Slim, wife of the newly appointed Governor-General of Australia. She cheerfully told me her children were ‘too uninteresting to talk about!

A successful Australian woman who became my friend in London was Thelma Holland, who was a director of the cosmetic firm Cyclax and had the privilege of being the adviser to the women in the Royal Family, notably Princess Elizabeth herself. She trusted me with personal details of her visits to Buckingham Palace, but I was still able to point out in my articles the kind of detail that women enjoy reading.

Being born with a love of embroidery inherited from the exquisite embroiderer who was my mother, naturally saw me enrolled as an evening student at the famous Royal School of Needlework in Kensington, an experience I still carry with me as a co-founder of The Embroiderers Guild Victoria in 1960. The RSN tutor I had for all of my time in London was Joan Lander, a quiet, demure young woman who specialized in ecclesiastical and ceremonial embroidery, a skill I brought back to Australia and which I continue to express in seemingly countless and varied venues like places of worship, as well as schools, organizations and personal commissions. This lifelong love affair with the needle has given me endless pleasure in being with other like-minded (mainly female) textile artists, being inspired by them and always ready to share our knowledge. I have found embroidery to be a universal language among the widest imaginable variety of women of all ages.

Marrying at age thirty to dear Melbourne-born Bill Sturrock, a former wartime RAF Flying Officer, was an inevitable “change of lifestyle” to suburban domesticity with three little boys in Brighton. A dramatic change occurred when I accepted, with my husband’s support, an invitation to promote Melbourne University’s coming centenary. This made me the first “Public Relations officer” at any Australian University... now, as you know, there are armies of such professionals at all of them. It was a learning experience in every way, and happily gave me the
opportunity to suggest an embroidery exhibition as a fund-raiser in 1959. As it turned out, this became the largest money-raiser of all the University’s centenary activities AND led to me persuading Lady Geraldine Amies, wife of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, head of the Diabetes at the Royal Children’s Hospital, as well as an embroiderer, to hold a public meeting to consider establishing a Victorian Branch of The Embroiderers Guild in London. The rest is history!

It was through embroidery that I had the privilege of meeting many women religious who did beautiful work for their convents, schools, churches and cathedrals. I have also had wonderful experiences in working, particularly in history, alongside Anglican Sisters of the Community of the Holy Name, and Catholic Sisters of both the Brigidine order and that of Our Lady of Sion.

The arrival of a daughter in due course required the search for a bigger home with more bedrooms, and so we found the superb extra large block on the farthest edge of Glen Waverley where we were to spend nearly 40 years as enthusiastic citizens of the still burgeoning City of Waverley. There were challenges in every direction in which so many of the new homeowners were involved: pressing for sewerage and the building of roads, new primary then secondary schools, sporting facilities, expansion of youth organisations like Scouts and Guides, new places of worship, and on it went.

Writing for the local Progress Press newspaper (then competing with the longer lasting Waverley Gazette) I wrote, mainly from the kitchen sink at tuppence, (or was it a penny ha’penny?) a line. This gave me many opportunities to highlight good causes of all kinds, and what was still missing in a modern community, as well as studying the style and policies of the Waverley Council. Being involved at the same time with the Australian Local Government Women’s Association gave me connections with the brave few females already elected to Councils, and I made a personal decision to do all I could to publicise their value, the motto always being that “Local Government is a woman ‘s cup of tea”. I believe we are doing well now in that area of public life.

I conclude, as I began, with a tribute to my mother, always a supporter and encourager (and I imagine a private worrier about her gadabout only daughter). She retired as president of the Embroiderers Guild of Victoria after thirteen years as a much admired, much loved teacher and President. She continued with a needle in her hand, always making something beautiful for someone else, till the end of her 95th year. I can think of no better tribute than the one given to her by Moira Willes, a Guild member who has turned 99 in January as I write this. Moira is the author of the Guild’s Second Decade in Victoria. She wrote:

Mrs Oates is a charming woman, and she brings to mind the often quoted Maggie (from Sir James Barrie’s play What Every Woman Knows):
Charm (says Maggie). Oh it’s a sort of bloom on a woman. If you have it, you don’t need anything else; and if you don’t have it, it doesn’t much matter what else you have. Some women, the few, have charm for all, most have charm for one. But some have charm for none...
4. Thanh Duong

My family came to Melbourne in 1980 as refugees when I was 18 years old. We felt very lucky to settle here in Australia, a country that offers freedom and support to everyone.

**A Boat Refugee**

My family of seven (my parents, myself, two brothers and two sisters) set out from Vietnam by boat filled with fear and worry. Our journey into the unknown was an experience that no one can ever fully prepare for. We could not foresee any of the dangers ahead, or know if we would even reach our destination. My parents made the decision to escape, and it all happened so quickly that I felt I did not have time to prepare myself psychologically. We were constantly afraid of being caught and put into jail and terrified that my family might die at sea.

We escaped the horrors of the Vietnam war, with 480 people, packed in a 22 metre wooden fishing boat, from the village Rach-Gia in April 1979. Our boat headed for Malaysia, as there was a refugee camp there that would take refugees in until they managed to settle into another country. On the way we were boarded by five separate Thai pirate groups who robbed us, but survived and arrived in Malaysia 10 days later. We spent 9 months at the Malaysia refugee camp Pulau Bidong and learnt English.

**Melbourne Australia, Freedom and opportunities**

My family arrived at Melbourne in February 1980. We stayed at Eastbridge Migrant Centre in Nunawading for one year while we learnt English and also learnt Australia Culture. I continued my high school study at Mitcham High School with English as Second Language.

My family has had great support from the government for jobs, education and welfare and importantly we were introduced to a friendly Australian family who helped us to settle in to our new lives. This family continued to support us after leaving the migrant centre and teach us about Australian customs and culture.
Thanh’s migration experiences in her art ‘Refugees’ Bronze 2009

Studies, Careers and achievements

With support from my school counsellor, I was recommended to study Information Technology at Chisholm Institute Tertiary Orientation Program. This study had given me the golden opportunity to enter Monash University to study Bachelor of Applied Science in Computing in 1983. I then worked in I.T. as a developer and consultant for Telstra and IBM for the next 20 years until 2006.

Teaching Art at TAFE Short Courses and Community Centres

From a very young age, I was very passionate about art. Melbourne is an ideal place for learning opportunities. In 1990, I began studying Chinese Painting at Centre of Adult Education Melbourne and fell in love with the Lingnan Painting style. In order to pursue my interest in art, beginning in 2007, I devoted myself to fulltime study in Visual Art at Chisholm Institute and followed this by Fine Arts at Monash University.

Many great opportunities arrived and allowed me to perform many demonstrations and workshops for artists' societies, community centres and schools. My work has been exhibited at many group exhibitions and solo exhibitions in Melbourne, Sydney and many were held overseas in California, Canada, China, Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan and Hong Kong.
Chinese Art talk and demonstration, Whitehorse Arts Association 2011
Chinese Painting Artist

I fell in love with the Chinese Painting style known as Lingnan when I first saw it demonstrated by my CAE teacher Patrick Lam in 1990. This painting style is a modern interpretation of Chinese painting with emphasis on simple strokes and liberal use of colours on rice paper. My favourite interpretations of nature include flowers, birds, animals, fish and landscapes. I am attracted to this style because of its simplicity and colour while retaining the aesthetic value of Chinese traditional paintings.

I am about to complete my Fine Art Degree and am looking forward to have more time in creating artwork that inspires myself and others.

I have lived in Melbourne for over 30 years. My husband and two teenage daughters have visited Vietnam to discover the culture and countryside and most importantly for me to visit old friends and to have a better understanding of the culture, customs, values and beliefs of the Vietnamese people.

I will continue to paint and teach Chinese Painting in Melbourne, to promote the Lingnan style of painting through teaching, demonstrations and exhibitions. I hope to enrich the artistic and cultural life of Australia’s multicultural society.
www.thanhduongart.com
Exhibition at Women Health Information Centre, Royal Women’s Hospital 2 Feb – 20 March 2012
5. Joan Pretty, by Nicole Riley (Monash staff)

I would like to share with you the story of an amazing woman in my life/working in my community. I believe that the beautiful, quiet way that she works with women in the Community Art Room warrants recognition.

I have only known Joan for around 5 years as that is as long as I have been aware of the Clayton Community Art Room. During which time, and for a good while before then, she has been the Teacher of the Beginners Sewing class at the Community Art Room and become a good friend of mine.

As a retired dance instructor and dressmaker she could have be forgiven for resting on her laurels and enjoying retirement, instead every Tuesday, in school terms, she can be found coordinating the sometimes ambitious projects and sometimes ambitious time lines of her students.

These students come from Monash and beyond as well as from different backgrounds and personal circumstances and include the spectrum of age demographics. From my point of view Joan has created a lovely sense of community for all of those involved be it the daytime class or the evening class.

And don't forget she has written a book called Fountain of Friendships tales of an Art Group in suburban Melbourne.

Not to mention to dresses, hand bags, covered hat etc she has guided me to make.

Joan Pretty is every week inspiring and empowering us to turn our sewing ideas into completed garments, accessories, home wares.

We participants couldn't do without her.
6. Davorka Gido (Dada)

I’m dedicating this story to all beautiful women who helped me to survive my new life in Down Under, which is too far from where I was born and I’ve come from.

I moved to Australia from Croatia five years ago following my husband who was then following his lucky star which led him to a new job in Melbourne.

Although we came practically from another part of the world as soon as I arrived I felt as I finally came home. Leaving rather messy situation back at my troubled home country it was a pleasure to feel relaxed in a beautiful country where everything seemed to work perfectly well and where people are polite and friendly. My luck was that I was relatively good in English so I was able to start relatively normal life from the first day in the new environment.

Group of ladies that helped me with my first steps of my Aussie life are my lovely neighbours – Denise who brought me a whole chocolate cake as soon as we moved in, Fay who taught me how to trim the roses in my garden and Betty who used to spend hours chatting and gossiping with me. I also had a “bad luck” that one of the lady’s husband was the manager of our Neighbourhood Watch branch so not before long I ended up delivering their newsletters and attending meetings. This is how I met even more people from our neighbourhood and learned a little bit about volunteering.

Now I would like to talk about another group of ladies that helped me and is still helping me a lot, and they belong to that special group of people – volunteers. Before I start talking about them, I would like to say something of that phenomenon itself.

In my country, such thing as volunteering does not exist. More over, if you do something like voluntarily work you can expect to be considered as a fool. Here I was really surprised and amazed that huge part of community is involved in that kind of work with such passion and dedication. In my opinion, volunteering brings only benefits to all involved. After enjoying their services, I was more than pleased to join the happy bend of volunteers when offered to me.

It all started with my great wish to meet more people in my community and to practice English. You know that all migrants have same habit to talk their native language at home. It’s just so much easier! And it’s so wrong too. So I decided to join English Conversation Circles kindly offered by Monash libraries. The volunteers, facilitators of these Circles, changed my life significantly. First Anna, who was a great source of information about migrants in Australia, and then Suzette, who is responsible that I am the member of that group too.
Conversation Circles are places where I’ve met lots of women from other countries and I’ve learnt so much about other cultures. That was such amazing experience for me but more importantly, the fact that through their stories I’ve got the answer to question that was bothering me for quite a long time – why people of Australia don’t mix even better.

When I was thinking of Australia before I moved here I imagined that this is a country blessed with so many cultures and religions and all living in peace and harmony. Such was my home country before the war and I was brought up in that spirit. I think that this is the only way how multicultural society should work. Australia really is like that, but, as often described as the melting pot, in my humble opinion, that pot needs a good steering. And what we can do about that? We need to do a massive work on language.

Language is something that joins us together. It is so important to understand the enormous significance of knowing the language if we really want to overcome barriers that at the moment still standing between us. Some people who are visiting our Conversation Circles were not as lucky to know language before coming here as I was and I can only imagine troubles and hard times that they were going through in their lives since moving here. Others are still struggling with language after many years of living here. Now as a volunteer, I feel privileged and proud that I can help others as others were helping me. This is a motivation for me to keep going with my voluntary work. And, who knows, maybe one day if I get opportunity to use my teaching skills as a preschool teacher, I’ll be able to help my community even more.

At the end, I would like to thank to all women that I’ve mentioned who supported me on my journey. I would like to thank also to all others that make that journey easier and pleasant but I haven’t mentioned yet – among others amazing people from Monash libraries, angels from Uniting Church who welcoming people in their Community Hub, Amara who is helping me to reach my dream of establishing a multicultural group of women in Monash Council and many, many others.
7. Krishna Arora

I came to Australia from (Chennai) to INDIA to be with my daughter and her family in August 1992. I was looking to experience a retired life. However, when I retired it was totally different from what I expected, I left my job and the Knowledge and skills acquired, certificates of qualifications and awards lost their value as I entered a different world. I realised that I had achieved a lot in my career and I felt it was not required anymore. I felt that I was in a deep valley. Being with family was a bright spot in my life.

I felt I had to start my life again. I would have to make new friends and completely change my way of living. I was fortunate enough to know a group of people from India who were my ex-students. They would visit me or we would talk on the phone but they were all very busy so I met them once in a while, Most of them had restaurants and one had a Motel.

My family’s been very supportive and co-operative allowing me to live the way I wanted and allowed me to be able to take every opportunity which has been presented to me in the community.

They were happy to help me to settle in Australia. Everyone knew I needed to stay preoccupied as I had been a very busy person in India, involved in many things. This included being the Principal of Asan Memorial Institute of Hotel Management and Catering Technology, Chennai and Hotel Management and Catering Institute, Pusa, New Delhi. At first, I could have never have become involved in the community work, if my family had not been supportive. I used to drive in India, the higher speed limits in Australia made me give up my drivers licence and yet I continued the community work here, using the public transport, is very good..

I came from a country that had friendly people and I knew my neighbourhood well. I was keen to meet Australians initially but they were not very friendly, they only smiled if you smiled. I decided to make friends so what I did was, went to the neighbours house introduced myself and said, I am looking for friends, I am an Indian. She said that she had come from the countryside, where they were all very friendly. We together went to neighbours homes and invited them for coffee. Very soon 7 of us were meeting. Through these interactions I became aware that several Australians do a lot of community work. At first I joined MECWA Opportunity shop in Malvern. I worked there for several years. After this I did a Cookery course from Australian College of Hospitality. Then I took up a job where I taught Asian Cuisine for two years at the Maribyrnong Community Centre. All my students were Australians. The family
opened an Indian Restaurant in Ormond,” Royal Indian Restaurant” at Ormond. I helped them.
That’s when I came to know that the Australians loved Indian Food. The Multicultural Policy is
one of the best thing the Government introduced. Australians are very adventurous many have
tried wearing sarees and they loved it. They love Indian Food . Usually all Indian Restaurants
are filled with Australians.

I wear the Indian dress Saree and everyone is very appreciative, the children are very friendly,
Some wanted to touch the saree. Many have asked me why I put a dot on my forehead., and a
small girl asked why I have put a stamp on forehead. I explained to her about it. The children
are very friendly. Everyone are friendly.
8. Aimatul Yumna Learning from a vision impaired scholar from United Arab Emirates

I always have a morning rush. Being a mother, wife and student in one time is really a big challenge. I always start the day early morning at 6 am, to do all domestic jobs: cooking, cleaning, preparing lunch boxes for my husband and kids, and lastly preparing and taking them to school. It becomes more time consuming and ever harder when the kids are not cooperative. As they are only kids and their mood keeps changing every time. But everything will be offer at 9 am when school time start and I have to change my other role as a student.

That morning, after took my daughters to her Kinder and Day Care, I saw it was 9.27 am. My class would be started at 10.00 am. It would take 45 minutes by bus to my campus and the bus would come in the next 10 minutes. Definitely, I would late and got there by 11 am. I thought I have two options: did not attend the class and stay in the local library to finish the assignment or go to campus by taxi which only needs 15 minutes to get there but would cost me around $25.

I decided to take the second option since it is very important subject for me. I was there at 10.05, only 5 minutes late. I think I took the right decision, $24 taxi cost (the exact amount I paid today) is worth nothing comparing to my amazing inspiration that day: a vision impaired scholar from UAE presented in my class.

The scholar shared her experienced in preparing the colloquium and presented her research to us. Her presentation was amazing. We can feel her passion in her research. She is very impressive and knowledgeable. The class really enjoyed to listen and contribute to the discussion.

The most impressive one is as she is vision impaired scholar. Her eyes have very limited function. She use stick for her mobility. Then, how can she read all the academic journals which are sometime very complicated. I, with proper function of eyes, require many days to finish reading of those journals. In her presentation, she told us that she reads the journals with screen reader assistance which is sometime not in logical orders and difficult to understand. I feel she is magnificent as with limited function of eyes, she dedicated her shelf as a researcher.

She is now doing the research about providing supporting facilities for the vision impaired students in higher education in UAE. She wants to give something to other vision impaired scholars. She believed that disabled people have to get the same opportunity with others in pursuing higher education. After being a researcher, her eyes’ function is getting worse and will
get to totally blind sooner than it should be as she has to read hundreds of journals and type in the computer. She really dedicates and devotes herself for her community.

She inspires us. With all her limitation, she still wants to do something for others. So, why don’t us do or share something to others?
9. Pauline Mani

My name is Pauline Mani and married to Junior Mani who is the President of Cook Islands Sports Association of Victoria where a lot of our contributions to community takes place. Life as a President’s wife has been difficult for me at times however the support and help from great women around has been my strength and synergy to keep serving with my husband.

I am writing this story to acknowledge the support of the City of Monash of their ongoing services to our people and for creating an opportunity for our community women to express our views and opinions through consultations and events like the Clayton Festival.

On a tiny island called Rarotonga in the Cook Islands on the hillside of Ikurangi 1700 lived a tribe of cannibals in the hills and caves where they glow in the dark to be seen by their teeth, hair and eyes. They travel by night following the stars as their guide in search of freedom. They use tree stumps as weapons, leaves as blankets, straws as their bed or they dig holes in the ground for a bed to keep them warm.

These cannibals has lived in these hills for years as they use the caves as storage places even human skeletons. As they continue to live in darkness one day one of the cave men has moved to one of the chief’s village in search of love. This chief his name is Tinomana was furious as he did not want anything to do with these cave man. The handsome warrior who stole the love of this king’s daughter decided to run away with him. This create a dispute between the village of Puaikura and Tupapa for years till this day.

The cave man and his beautiful princess decided to sail away in search of new horizons and opportunities. They even sailed as far as Papua New Guinea where they started teaching about a new learned God they believe to help those who were still living a cannibalism life.

This cave man’s princess Ngaro was eaten by the cannibals and so the cave man remarried again to Vaipiti and had a son Turu who is my ancestor.

Turu grew up to be a fine handsome man and was a true believer of the gospel married a beautiful girl from Atiu.

The story goes on to as the Gospel was spread in the Cook Islands and I have great honour to acknowledge the fearless strength of my ancestors who could have also been eaten however God had a plan to create such opportunity for me to live in this beautiful country of Australia.

“Puna has always been a strong, fearless, outspoken person and so supportive of her husband’s role as a president of the Cook Islands Sports. Not only she supports her husband even she helps a lot of people and goes out of her way at times to help and assist them with
housing, money etc. Puna is a devoted and committed women within her community and you would always see her doing something for others” Nga say.

My destiny has created many learning curves and I am thankful to God for it. Amen
10. Anamika

After spending her childhood in Stuttgart, Germany, Anamika moved to Madras when she was about to complete her primary school education. She was brought up in a very academic environment. Her father was a Mathematics professor in Germany and he joined IIT Madras when she came back to India. Her father has received the Humboldt scholarship and was invited by the German Government to teach at their University. Humboldt scholarship is given to a handful people from around the world for excellence in phd reports given by the German government. IIT is the number one college in India where people from all parts of India and Germany live. Her brother is also a IIT product. Getting into IIT is the toughest thing in the whole world. People from various parts of the world apply and don’t get a seat or even get to work there. She completed the rest of her school education in Madras. She went on to do her bachelors and masters in Madras itself. She then started working with GE Hyderabad which is where she met my husband Saket who was on a holiday as he was living in Melbourne as a skilled software professional. They then got married and moved to Australia. At first I was reluctant but then we decided to give it a try.

After coming to Australia, she was very sure that she wanted to learn something new. She had a background in Indian classical dance forms so she enrolled herself in ballroom dancing, club latin and latin dance forms. She attended dance exams and did very well in all of them. This is the time when she backpacked the world with her husband. After returning from the trip, she worked in Telstra for few years after which she decided she wanted to be a mother. She is now a proud mother of a three year old boy named Dhruv. In 2010, she enrolled herself in a ‘Masters of Business’ from Monash university and completed it in 2011. It was very tough to do it as she has a family as well but life is about overcoming challenges and coming out of our comfort zones to make a difference. In 2011, she participated in the Mrs Australia pageant and got selected as a national finalist in the top 15. Hundreds of girls from every part of Australia had participated in the competition but only 15 girls got selected. She worked for two charities, one was for disadvantaged kids and the other was for empowering women. She also opened a branch in India of one of the charity organisations. She was nominated for the Zonta scholarship award for women in business for getting good academic results and for working for charities. During this time, I became involved with the council’s women’s leadership project. She was inspired and wanted to start something of my own. She is currently working on empowering women and motivating them to be leaders in our society by organising pageantry style competition. She feels that it is essential to take up challenges to spice up life. She became the director for India and has been asked to take part to represent India in the Mrs Earth pageant this year in August.

When she attended the launch of building bridges, she realised so much as already taken place but is the perfect time to introduce a new activity. Pageantry style competition didn’t exist. She feels that women are not an object of just beauty but should be proper role
models in today’s society. Women has to be a good leader as she runs the family. It is essential that a woman is a good role model firstly within the family and then for the society.

Normally the impression of a pageant is that it is meant for women who are just out their to showcase their physical beauty and that pageants are aiming at the ‘perfect beauty’. But she has realised that this isn’t the case. If we organise pageant with an aim to empower women and say that we are redefining beauty, which we can, the perception of people towards pageant contests can change. Every woman is physically beautiful as we are made that way but the physical beauty cannot be noticed by other people if we are not humble and contribute to the family and society and atleast try to make a difference.

She would like to use pageant events to involve women from the Indian community and link women into mainstream services and community. She feels that working together in communities as a team is very essential. She feels that taking up mentally and physically challenging tasks are essential as they improve a self-esteem of a women.

She always had a burning desire to do something new, learn a new skill and is a very passionate and determined person. She has always been encouraged by her family to dream, follow her dream and work towards it to fulfil it. She feels that it is better to sympathise with people who pass racist comments as they are ignorant people in our society who unfortunately haven’t received enough exposure and education. Racist people have a lot of inferiority complex because of which they do what they do or say. She has enjoined her time working for charities and doing community welfare as it also involves networking and public speaking. She believes that the pageants are a great way to train women to be leaders in our society. She is the member of ‘domestic violence panel’ formed by the FIAV (Federation of Indian Association of Victoria).
11. Kath Louise Taylor

A new venture in life found me married to an Englishman that always wanted to live in Australia, using me as a ticket to emigrate to Western Australia in 1990.

New friends, new memories were just some of the barriers found during this journey. It took 2 years to realise that homesickness was a state of mind and once the revelation of memories being the main depressive feeling, my world turned upside down. To this point there was a terrible feeling of loneliness, of lost friendships and distant families. However when my brother-in-law stopped with us for a short 9 day visit, I shared all my new found memories and experiences. At long last this sick feeling disappeared and there was a new beauty in Australia.

During the two year adjustment, the language barrier was the hardest and I found my heart went out to people where English was their second language. The differences between English from England, Australia and Canada are vastly different and I constantly asked “How confusing would this be for immigrants and asylum seekers where English is their second language, when I find the adjustment so difficult and English is my first language?”

Bringing my skills as a Girl Guide Leader from Canada, gave me an insight into the challenges in Australia of fund raising, of cultural tolerance and sending young adults to local camps and world jamborees. This was a saving factor to building my courage to stay in this foreign country.

Accepting an invitation to become a Rotarian during my success as the Manager at the WA Equestrian Centre and WA Equestrian Federation, provided even more opportunities for sitting on boards, taking on directorships, and working on programs that benefit young people, people with a disability, national and international exchange programs and fund raising.

Worldwide friendships have been created through hosting a number of exchange students and then taking the opportunity of travelling and visiting their families in their own countries which increased my education and knowledge beyond my wildest dreams.

Work was difficult to obtain as Australians that sat on interview panels appeared to think that secretarial skills were different in Canada then in Australia. Spelling was a challenge, for example (tyre vs tire or Mom vs Mum) but in the scope of things a mother is still a mother no matter how it is spelled.

The first two years of living in Australia was the most challenging years in my life yet has made the foundation for the person that I am today. Therefore I thank all the people
involved in my settling into Australia and providing this opportunity for me to grow as a worthwhile individual in this multi cultural society.
Here is a story to make you laugh.

During my pregnancy I went to see the doctor in the city.

After a long trip by bus, train and then walking through the city I arrived at the appointment and was welcomed with ‘What is your name’? After telling the receptionist she then instructed me to ‘Take a seat’.

I can assure you that I thought that this was very strange, here I was pregnant and I was being asked to take a seat! I had thought that people looked after expecting Mums. But I had to follow instructions and so I did ‘take a seat’.

Then I saw the doctor and as my appointment came to an end he said to me ‘See you later’. As it was just on lunch time I hoped that he would not be too long before he saw me again because I was feeling very hungry.

I waited and waited until at 5.30 pm the receptionist asked me ‘Can I help you?’

I told her the doctor had said ‘See you later’ and I was still waiting. She told me that he had left a long time ago.

Ohh, I was so embarrassed when I found out what was meant.

My husband asked me to come to the city so that we could meet for dinner. To get there I had to catch a bus.

When I reached the bus stop I saw a sign which said NO STANDING ANY TIME.

So what did I do? I squatted.

Yep, there I squatted but when there was no one around I stood up and then as I saw someone coming I squatted again. This I repeated several times until the bus came along. I waved the bus down and when it stopped I stood up and got on.

The bus driver showed some concern because of my squatting down and asked me, ‘Are you alright love?’ I told him off saying that ‘You are not my love.’
13. Jenny Sullivan

My dear friend told a story that humiliated her at the time.

When she was asked to an occasion, her first invitation in Australia, she noted that she had to ‘Bring a Plate’. So of course she took along a plate without food, after all, there was no mention anywhere in the invitation of the need for food.

She had assumed that the empty plate meant that there were treats for her to bring home to her children, so had she instructed them to be very very good while she was out so that they could enjoy the treats she would bring when she returned home in a couple of hours time.

When she arrived at the event she noted that everyone was carrying plates that were laden with food and to save embarrassment she threw her plate in the gutter preferring to arrive without food rather than with an empty plate.
My wonderful family newly arrived in Australia were expecting a baby. Such excitement as my sister-in-law went into hospital ready for the great event.

Later in the labour ward, surrounded by medical experts she was surprised by the call of ‘Puss, puss’ and looking around to see a cat, not what you would expect in a labour ward.

She discovered that in reality they instruction was to Push.
15. Liesl Meuris a.k.a Elizabeth Willemina Josephine Meuris

My country of birth is the Netherlands. I came to Australia at 21 years of age as an Industrial Chemist. I arrived in Australia in 1957 with my family of 10 siblings and parents. I was the oldest sibling.

Our reason for leaving the village was due to having a German mother in a Dutch Village and the Dutch stepfather losing his job. He would not find another job due to prejudices. Australia was very active in attracting migrants.

Our first 2 years were the toughest for my mother who spoke German and Dutch but not English. She needed to do the shopping but somehow managed. She tried to learn English quickly because she didn’t want to miss out on what her children were talking about. She was still going to English classes when she was 80 years of age and then the funding was removed.

We were fairly lucky because we had promised to stay together and pool our earnings. We had a qualified lift mechanic, carpenter, motor mechanic and myself as earners.

The first 4 months in the army camp in Woodside was the toughest. We got out as quickly as we could and had Christmas in a rented house that year. We succeeded because we remained close as a family and still are. My mother never owned a house but all her offspring do.

**FIVE YEARS CYCLING TO THE CITY**

I started at primary school at seven years of age, in 1943, which was the norm in Germany. At our return to our place of birth in Holland, I walked an hour to and from school. As my legs were growing longer it took less time. I was in a group of siblings and was held responsible for their wellbeing.

My brothers got up to all kinds of tricks. Stealing apples was a favourite with them. We were hungry, but the farmers didn’t care about that, at times they chased us. Another way of getting extra food was by going into the fields and steal turnips (knollen). Mum however knew about any stolen turnips because one of my sisters would wet her bed that night. I don’t remember her being punished though. I can only imagine that Mum was happy for us to have some extra food in us.

The war was over by the time I was nine: I remember someone running along the road and telling people to go and get food from the German food storage in the factory down the road. My mother and our boarder, who later became my stepfather, grabbed a wheelbarrow and raced to the factory, leaving us behind.

They came back and in the first load they had candied honey. We were all, my siblings and the neighbours’ children, given a tub of that honey to keep us occupied. None of us had sweets for years and promptly got nauseous and sick. I didn’t eat honey again till I had my own children.
We were, in a neighbours’ house, hence did not know how much nor what kind of food was collected. I was told that it was mostly in tins. The ‘rich’ and ‘informed’ people of the village had helped themselves to the luxury items such as butter, sugar or flour before releasing the information to others.

After a few hours a message was passed around that the German soldiers had returned and were checking every ones’ home for what was stolen. So all of the tins were thrown in the underground rainwater tank making them unrecognizable because all the labels came off and floated around in the water.

After the war it was worse in relation to buying food. There were no social services, and supplies were compromised due to the village politics and our lack of money. We always had a surprise of what we might have for dinner, relying on the stashed tins of food in the rain-tank. There was a lot of marmalade and peas.

School continued to be a place where I at least enjoyed gaining knowledge, while trying to ignore the covert alienation from my classmates. I sure hated cleaning the toilets every Friday all the way till I left. I was either good at it, or it was persecution. I never found out.

Home was a constant struggle for food, warmth, clothes to wear and an opportunity to play. I was an easy target for abuse by a liberating Canadian soldier, who promised chocolate.

My light went out inside me but I continued to do my best on the outside of me for the benefit of my mother who worked hard to keep us alive. Fortunately I had a brain that could remember facts and pass tests. This brain however stopped me from telling anyone what had happened to me. It was my secret.

I am now twelve-years-old and it is time to go to the big city for high school [MULO]. My primary school score was high enough to go to a high school that would lead on to university, however there was a fee attached to that. I wanted to become a doctor and needed to go to the fee-paying high school to have a chance. This was not possible hence I went to the best public high school that would allow me to challenge my capabilities.

This high school was thirteen kilometers away and there was no public transport from our village. The man who became my stepfather when I was nine, now managed to put together a second hand bicycle from bits and pieces. I remember how happy I was about that. It was mine and for me to use.
In Holland school starts in July, which is summertime. A neighbour, several others and I who attended the same high school as I, met centrally and cycled together. This was my opportunity for a fresh start, because I did not know the young people of the new group, they were protestant and had been at a different school. I also lived three kilometers outside the village, hence did not mix with them. All of them are still my friends now, even though we are in different countries.

The benefits of cycling in a group was the fun we had, but also if one would have a flat tire someone would move the bike by it’s handlebars while the person whose bike had a flat would get a piggy-back ride from someone else.

I was lucky that my tires didn’t puncture. I was happy to give someone else a piggyback but would have been stressed to sit on the back of someone else’s bike.

Winter times were challenging. We would not go to school if it snowed and the streets had iced over. We would however cycle in the rain and arrive at school drenched at times. I remember being cold and miserable. I was happy in class because I was always eager to learn new knowledge and the teachers liked me.

We had a female teacher for our all-girls class who taught us ‘female’ skills; knitting, sewing by hand, crochet and embroidery. I loved it and looked forward to it, but the rest of the class teased her till she would cry. I never understood why the other girls would do that and
I didn’t know how to change that. I do vaguely remember having gone to the headmaster, who really liked me because I was the top in his Math’s class, and told him what was going on.

I must admit it was funny though to be taught to knit our own underpants from white cotton yarn. Mine never got finished and became pretty dirty.

From these early starts of looking for justice I contributed to the community and my family for the rest of my life by becoming a teacher of Maths and Science here in Australia.

In that time I promoted ‘girls in education’ and started a rowing club for girls in a public school in Adelaide against all odds and resistance. The school still rows including the boys.

I now teach and am a practitioner of Reiki as well as being a Civil Celebrant.

I am completing my Certificate 4 in ‘Professional Writing and Editing’ as well as being the secretary of a Ladies Probus Club in Monash.

I still cycle on an exercise bike.
16. Connie Walker

“My philosophy of life is simple. ... To do what I’ve learnt well and to keep on learning! I abhor violence, ugliness, exploitation and in my work I seek to recognise only the beautiful moments nature has to offer”.

Connie Walker commenced life in 1924 in the small Mallee township of Carwarp, near Redcliffs, Victoria, where her father [Robert James Smith] and his wife Florence, had been granted a Soldier Settlement block by the Government after serving in the second Boer War and at Gallipoli in WW1. A rustic house built of hessian and iron with furniture made from orange cases [including Connie’s cot] was home to this small family of three.

An extraordinarily tough life was faced [no water for 10 miles which had to be carried to the home, regular red dust storms & willy willies, mouse plagues, flies, snakes and lack of rainfall]. After continued crop failures, Robert & Florence were forced to walk away from the land.

It was decided Robert would seek work in Western Australia while Florence & baby Connie returned to live in the Melbourne seaside suburb of Brighton with Connie’s grand-parents and three maiden aunts, where Connie attended kindergarten.

When her father returned, he set up a poultry farm on a few acres in Mitcham Rd., Vermont. It was another hard struggle for the family and after only a couple of years where Connie spent time at State School on the corner of Canterbury & Mitcham Rds., she was to return to the family home in Brighton while her parents battled to make a living on their property. The addition to the family of young brother Angus Stewart also put enormous strain on the couple’s resources.

Connie was then enrolled in “Rosbercon” Girl’s Grammar School in North Rd. Brighton; a small but excellent school run by the “Misses Constance and Elizabeth Tisdale”. This school provided, as well as the prescribed education of the day, the sporting facilities and cultural outlets that were to set the young Connie Smith on her way.

She became interested in drawing, painting, pottery; as well as music, ballet, tennis and athletics. After passing her Intermediate Certificate, Connie wanted to pursue a career in Commercial Art, but as this was not seen to be the vocation for a “young lady” of the day, was pressured by the family to enter Zercho’s Business College in Collins St., Melbourne. She became a very proficient stenographer, but was “just average” at book-keeping & accounting!

After a short career with A.Capper Moore & Associates [a firm of solicitors in Queen St., Melbourne] WW2 was declared. When the threat of being seconded by “Essential Services” or having to work in a munitions factory, Connie took her fate in her own hands by immediately enlisting in the Forces as a “raw” recruit in the A.A.M.W.S. [Australian Army Medical Women’s Service]. After a harrowing time at rookie camp in Darley, Connie was to learn the Army discipline of rising at 4.30am, marching out to clean ablutions blocks and lavatories – a far cry from the comfortable and sheltered home life she was used to.
From here, Connie was posted to 115 Heidelberg Military Hospital, working for the Ward Doctors as secretary in the X-Ray Department, Transport and Medical Records for the next 5 years.

Private C.H. Smith, VFX 127013, was scheduled to take up a posting in Japan when she met Airman Ron Walker, and decided to remain at the Repatriation Hospital until their marriage in 1950. With the wonderful assistance of a War Service Loan, they purchased their first home at No.1 Jordan Grove, Glen Waverley.

During this time, a block of land at No. 18 Wilson Rd., [next to the gooseberry patches owned by the well known orchardist Rhodes family] was purchased and both Connie and Ron were involved in physically building the house that was to become their family home. Children – James, David and Cathie were to grow up at No. 18 Wilson Rd.

Orchards, market gardens and gooseberry patches were more abundant than housing. Connie could even see Jimmy walk to school at Coleman Parade through the kitchen window.

The kids all played together in the street until tea time; football, cricket, cowboys & Indians featured. There were no safety issues with either cars or “stranger danger” in those halcyon days. Very few cars were privately owned at this time, they walked everywhere or took the available public transport.

Waverley was known in those days for its unmade, pot-holed roads [especially Jordan Grove., which Ron would regularly fill up with the briquette ash from their heater]; very few shops and a shocking rail service. There was a one carriage train that ran from Glen Waverley to Holmesglen where everyone had to change to go on to the City. The access over the muddy paddocks during wet weather created a unique sight at the station each morning. Everyone walked there in gumboots, took them off and changed at the station before commuting to Melbourne. The rows of gumboots stayed unmolested all day waiting for their owner’s return at the end of the day. No one ever lost a pair!

Life was a bit of a challenge, but very sweet, and many strong friendships were formed as a result. Connie joined the CWA, became a member of St.Paul’s Church of England in Waverley Road [where she taught Sunday School for 5 years] and and Ron joined the Committee of the historic Glen Waverley State School where the children attended, which has since become a Neighbourhood House.

Once the children were off doing their own thing, Connie was then able to pursue her love of the arts in amateur theatre [at St.Paul’s one of the first Drama Groups in Waverley - which eventually became the Waverley Drama Group] for approximately 20 years. It was a great social group whose annual performances raised funds for the church. To name a few: Mary Allingham, Valda Daff, Liz Lucas, Trevor Vickerstaff, Doug Lawrence.

The Fine Arts beckoned and Connie joined art classes held by distinguished teacher, Carol Boothman, learning the basics of oil painting. Followed by training under Alfred & Yolande Calkoen, Erica McGilchrist, Ken McFadyen, Roy Griffiths and then with David Taylor the wonderful water colour medium which Connie gravitated to with such passion. This is Connie’s favourite medium, but she does like to break out with a large oil painting every now and then.
Many visits to the National Gallery, regional galleries and the V.A.S. [Victorian Artists Society] were to assist Connie in her quest for knowledge. It was in 1970 that Connie was asked to join the V.A.S. It was also the year that she, along with Carol Boothman [and the assistance of the “Waverley Gazette”] formed The Waverley Artists’ Society, serving as foundation secretary and later in 1980 as President for a term of 3 years, and being granted Life Membership in 1983.

W.A.S., as it is affectionately known, was Connie’s main passion and many friendships formed during that time are on-going today.

In 1974 Connie held her first solo exhibition at Peninsula Galleries. The following year, 1975, along with Barbara McManus, Connie was instrumental in forming “The Tuesday Painters” – a group of six women artists who held more than 40 group exhibitions all over Victoria and the first women’s art group in Waverley.

It was a great pool of talent, including: Barbara McManus [internationally known pastel artist & teacher at V.A.S.], portraitist Nan Bretel [studied under Sir William Dargie], Pam Bierenbroodspot, Libby Francis, and Fay Smith [now deceased], together with Connie Walker. At first the group painted on location, which gradually became more and more difficult as development encroached on open areas. In recent years the group has preferred to work in studios. Every Friday afternoon, the remaining members still meet at the home of Libby Francis in Mt. Waverley.

It was a very busy and exciting time for Connie and her delight was more than evident when she was invited to join the Council of the V.A.S. In 1988, Connie was elected President – a position she held for three years and which she claims to be the greatest achievement in her world of art. In 1990, Connie was made a Fellow of the Society. Another of Connie’s achievements that greatly excited her was the successful move to have the Central Gallery at the V.A.S. named “The McCubbin Gallery”.

With all of this inspiration, Connie’s work developed into what she describes herself as an “Impressionist Landscape Painter”, but is always looking for new directions in which to expand her expertise.

On the 17th September, 1980, Connie was welcomed as a Member of the City of Waverley Art Acquisition Committee and served on this committee for eleven years.

During that time, purchases of over $100,000 worth of art works, including major paintings by famous Australian artists such as Sir William Dargie, Harley Griffiths, Harold Herbert, Kenneth Jack, Tom Garrett and Clifton Pugh, were made.

In the early 1980’s, when Connie’s enjoyment of her life and activities in the art world were at their height, tragically her second son, David,[not long out of Agricultural College] was critically injured in a horrendous electrical accident; resulting in the loss of both arms and parts of both feet and legs.

Connie’s life drastically changed with the struggle to deal with the challenges faced by her son. Her work went into a decline over the next couple of years as David’s many months of hospitalisation and 35 operations took their toll. David made a degree of recovery then badgered his mum to “get back to the drawing board” and get on with her life.
That very day, Connie was to do the best water-colour she had ever attempted and it now proudly hangs in the home of Mr. & Mrs. Ross Mellor of Williamstown.

Not only is Connie’s work displayed locally, her paintings have been sought by corporations throughout Victoria, as well as Kerang Shire Council, Clayton Arts Council, the permanent collection of Victorian Artists’ Society, Collection of Castlemaine Art Gallery, and in the offices of Dunn & Bradstreet [Aust] Pty Ltd., New York. It doesn’t end there – her work is also in many private collections throughout Australia and Overseas.

“In 1991, I was very fortunate to win the Mountbatten Award at the annual exhibition of the Royal Overseas League. The work was to be exhibited at the R.O.S.L.’s annual exhibition entitled “View of the New”. Apart from being very honoured, I thought this would be a golden opportunity to travel to England to see the exhibition so Ron and I planned a 10 week holiday around it.

On the opening night of the exhibition at St.James St. London, we were greeted by the President of the Society and Roderick Lakin, Director of Art & Music. It was a very ‘posh affair’ with titled V.I.P.’s, members and exhibitors from several Commonwealth countries.

Another highlight in 1991 for trail-blazer Connie, was her work being selected for the Anhui Provence of Foreign Exchange Arts exhibition in China.

A trip overseas with Prize Winning artist [and fellow Tuesday Painter], Barbara McManus visiting the great museums of the world, including The Hermitage in Leningrad, Scandinavia, Belgium and Great Britain, all added to the inspiration to create her future works.

The majority of Connie Walker’s paintings have captured but a moment in time – a moment which appealed to her as something she must record on canvas or paper.

In her own words: “I am still searching for that elusive ‘something different’. Each time I approach the canvas or paper, I am aiming at a higher plateau. To me art is an exciting and enjoyable journey through life with varying high and low patches. When I experience the feeling that the painting is ‘actually working’, I am transported to heights of great ecstasy!”

I enjoy filling small sketch books in my journeys and whilst I loved visiting European countries, I still favour the magnificent living heart of Australia, the inland country”.

Connie still resides with husband Ron in the house that they built together in the early1950’s and she is still an active teacher and judge of art.

From Connie’s earlier notes “It is my desire to live as long as Picasso and paint like John Singer Sargent – “One must have dreams”!

Connie Walker’s paintings will be on display at the MGA Monash Gallery of Art, from 18th July to 26th August – “Connie Walker – A Celebratory Retrospective”.
Nga has a beautiful welcoming smile, big brown curious eyes and a gentle, kind voice. When she talks to people she looks them straight in the eye, like she has known them all her life. People and what they have to say matters, to Nga.

She wears a traditional Cook Islander floral head piece, over her mid-length, modern and layered brown, sun-kissed hair: showing respect to her descendants and that culture is not forgotten but here to enrich Australia and the modern world. Floral island flowers adorn her fashionable, fresh, summer outfit. Her outlook is matched by her gracious laugh: a chuckle, a belly laugh and a huge smile.

In a room full of people everyone looks for Nga, they want to engage with her and talk with her, on all topics of conversation. She is a kind soul, a wise woman, a matriarch. She stands strong and close-by when she listens and speaks to people.

Nga is on a personal mission to create generational benefits for her family, the Cook Islander community, migrant and refugee women in Australia, especially in Melbourne in the City of Monash. “I am passionate to make a difference in this community to create a better future for my children, grandchildren and the many generations to come,” she said.

The enormity of her goal and contribution in creating generational benefits for her family and community is one that most of us could not even begin to imagine and took hold as the eldest of 7 siblings in Aitutaki, of the Cook Islands. It is almost a complete lagoon island surrounded by the Great Barrier Reef. It is the second most visited Island and is north of Rarotonga. Avarua is the main town in Rarotonga and is the capital of the Cook Islands. There are fifteen islands in total.

In this island paradise and surrounded by her close family, extended family and friends Nga is a beloved, responsible and gracious daughter, sister, wife, mother and provider – Aitutaki her family, her friends, her life, her home, her heart.

Nga after finishing primary school in Aitutaki left to finish her education in Rarotonga. “She was the first in the family to achieve...to enter the highest secondary college in the Cook Islands ...While she was studying in Rarotonga an aunt that was living in New Zealand asked her and her husband to look after a house...Also while she was working and studying...at the same time the younger children were sent one by one...She was taking care of them while
she was studying but it was years apart...also with the support of mum and dad sending over...food, all with them to get a better education in Rarotonga. After completing the New Zealand School Certificate in Rarotonga she worked and married and had 2 beautiful children and then went to Australia,” Tereapii (Apii) Aupuni, Nga’s youngest sister said.

Nga migrated to Melbourne, Australia in 1986 due to the economic downturn. “During that period...the Cook Islands’ Government was downsizing the public service. I traveled with a New Zealand passport which at that time allowed me to work in Australia,” Nga said.

Nga admits with such close ties to the Cook Islands, cultural and geographical differences, it took her a decade to decide if she should stay and continue to raise her children in Australia. “I was overwhelmed with how many people lived in Australia. I couldn’t believe how people didn’t even say hello to each other on the street.

It took me a few years to get over this through getting out and asking ...community members about these issues,” Nga said.

In 1997 she bought a family home in Clayton, City of Monash. Her children call the family home their “birth home” and never want it to be sold. These days Nga still lives in the City of Monash and has close ties there: “Monash is a great city to live in and...has easy access to: the main services, transport, city and has some of the best schools and university.”

Apii jokes to Nga at the house in Clayton, “Who are you?” All the female relatives around Nga: Apii, Tarere William-Nicholls, and Muia Nicholls, a relation through marriage, begin a chorus of laughter that is infectious. Their bright smiles and sense of fun lets everyone know that Australia is home too. Tarere, who is a recently separated, single mum of 8 children, and Muia, who is divorced, laugh and joke: “Do you interview single ladies, too?”

Nga, Apii, Tarere and Muia are each others hearts. They are there for each other all the time. Apii tells of how Nga helped all the siblings to migrate safely and happily to Australia. “She is our [surrogate] parent...in Australia, especially to all 7 children. She is my idol...When we first arrived our parents were back in the Cook Islands...We all came at different times one by one and with different reasons. My mum and dad never liked Australia and told us their hearts are in the Cook Islands. They both died here and we had to return them to their final resting place at the family home on the island of Aitutaki. They were supportive of all their kids to create a better life and future for them. We...all miss them as well,” Apii said.

“Our aunties and uncles helped me with my kids. They help me support my family financially at times. Nga encourages me to move on and to build a better future. She is a good aunty,” Tarere said.

“She was the shoulder to cry on when I came out here. She was a word of encouragement,” Muia said.
Nga explains that in the early days in Melbourne she also had some very dark times. She worked in manufacturing and over a period of time sustained physical injuries that made it difficult for her to work.

“I was depressed and totally withdrawn at one point of my life however I was determined to overcome that by choosing...the friendship, mentorship and guidance of... other women that...surrounded me and gave...me the strength to stand up again and move with great confidence,” Nga said.

In 2004, Nga did Community Leadership Training with the Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women’s Coalition (VIRWC), Connecting the Community Project and Kingston Council. She made friends from many different backgrounds and those connections gave her a desire to serve the local community through volunteer work. “I have been truly honored with the trust of this community and friendships...they have nominated me to local council committee positions...where a great wealth of experiences have equipped me to better serve the community,” Nga said.

VIRWC Executive Director Melba Marginson, is Nga’s manager, mentor and friend. She said Nga could have been a business woman but gave that up for the community. “I kept on mentoring her...I exposed her to advocating...I kept her in the loop...With community you just have the key person to network and Nga is very good at that...and articulate...Even how she uses technology now,” Marginson said.

“I believe VIRWC Leadership Training has not only empowered me with great skills but also the ability to facilitate, advocate, lobby and help women who have great difficulties with navigating the system which can have lots of complexities,” Nga said.

In the past, Nga has developed many community projects for the advocacy of Pacific Islanders. But currently her determined focus is on her role as Community Development and Partnership Officer South East she is working on and developing the Monash Women Building Bridges project. “It is a pilot community development project of the Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women’s Coalition. The project is looking for women volunteers who will conduct community education, leadership training and partnership initiatives by engaging with local mainstream clubs and council,” Nga said.

Nga is very modest and doesn’t elaborate, even with encouragement, on all the work she does in the community. She has developed community projects and also participates in committees and community bodies. “I wear various different caps in the community participating on committees and community bodies including: the Globe to Globe Festival Committee, Monash Multicultural Advisory Committee, Cook Islands Community Services of Victoria, Cook Islands Women’s Federation, Monash Women’s Leadership Strategy, House of Refuge,” Nga said.
Privately, at the core of Nga is her faith in God. Among all her family, friends and community commitments she is also a Leader in the House of Refuge church. And her inspiration is all her family, friends and the community with a special place in her heart for the immediate women in her life. “My mother and children who have always been proud of what I do...they are my inspiration.”
18. Ngaumu George

I am Cook Islander Born and migrated to Australia in 1993 now married with 3 beautiful children. My first home in Australia has been in Clayton in the City of Monash where there is easy access to transport, work, hospital, shopping centre and where most of my families and community live and meet each other through church activities. Together with my husband we have bought a house in Pakenham but are social activities are still mostly held in Clayton.

Growing up as a teenager life was not easy and simple for me as I was so entangled in the things of this world. I left school at an early stage and started my first job working in the factory. Having a young family to raise has not been easy however lots of things has to change due to the fact that money was never enough to support my family. I have done years of casual work and has been so difficult to get a permanent job.

My growing up as a child has been very difficult especially coming from a family of seven kids. My parents are very strict and have taught me lots of great things and to this day I value them and at times talks about them often.

I am so proud to be living in this country where there’s lots of opportunities where I could send my kids to have good education so they don’t go through what I am goin through now. I believe that education here is far more better than the education back In my country.

The things that my kids have to go through will have to change now as I have decided to go back and re – skill myself so I could a permanent job to secure their future and for my own personal developments. I feel the many years of missing opportunities can still be a goal that I can accomplish if I persevere through completing Certificate 3 Aged Care Services with Anglicare through the help of “Monash Women Building Bridges” officer.

I also want to thank the many people who have encouraged me to take the course and the services who have created this opportunity for me.
19. Tracy Makara

My name is Tracy born in New Zealand but raised in the Cook Islands on the main island of Rarotonga which is the capital of the Cook Islands.

I am the second child of 4 children and my father is a Minister of the Cook Islands Christian Church (CICC) based in Clayton with affiliations with the United Christian Church of Australia.

My parents has served as Ministers of the gospel for 31 years and my teenage life has been revolving around my parents ministry and I enjoy and blessed with new places that we would go to like Tahiti in the French Polynesia and Australia where they are living and ministering now. Challenges of my journey has been to learn other languages eg. French and English. Having to move to Australia has opened my eyes to start developing my skills in gaining employment in the community sector rather than working in factories.

I met and married my husband in Tahiti who faces difficulties in learning English however that did not stop us we continued to keep encouraging each other landing him a permanent job as a forklift driver. While he is working I care for our two beautiful children whom are my inspirations to why I am determined to persevere in life and create a better future for the kids.

My involvement in community activities has been a stepping stone for me who I at times can be shy and find it difficult to interact. I believe that the prayers of my parents has given me the confidence to overcome that. I enjoy engaging through sports activities, fundraisings, youth event and community events that encourages people to interact.

A woman of influence who has inspired me greatly is Nga Hosking after hearing her story and what she has gone through to be able to do what she does today. How she has overcome those hurdles of life and working in the office now. If she has overcome these elements to achieve and live her dream I can definitely do it.

I have great determination to complete Certificate 3 in Aged care and looking forward to working within the community and learning about seniors and to serve them.

“Tracy is a young bright, sensational and beautiful girl with great inspirations of learning and making a change to serve others” says Nga.
20. Tarere Nicholls

Born Jan 15, 1973 in the Cook Islands and raised by my grandparents rather than my biological parents on a little island of Aitutaki surrounded by beautiful turquoise lagoon with beautiful swaying coconut trees dancing to the sounds of the wind.

Married with many difficult experiences of marriage life, raising kids and being the father and mother to my children has developed great despair, isolation, low esteem at times for me. However this has also given me the learning curves to give me strength to move on with great confidence to raise my kids who are teenagers now. For the 21 years of marriage my husband was hardly there to support me as he had his own agendas at hand.

Arriving in Australia 2004 also has been difficult for me cause the changes to NZ Passport Holders was changed in 2001 depriving me of my opportunities to gain employment through Skill Programs. The impact of this not only affected me but also the opportunities for my children in developing through education.

Raising 8 children in Australia has been difficult for Tarere especially navigating the system in search of where to get help and has been supported by her family, church members and the Cook Islands Community.

She is excited of her new journey in life to enroll and commit herself to completing Cert 3 Aged Care if funded.

“Tarere has inspired me in a massive way through her dedication and confidence in raising the kids as a single mum. I see her closely bonded to them through trials and good times. She is beautiful with great smiles that covers her inner strength and ability to overcome. I strongly believer she is an overcomer with attachable characters of joy. Always joyous and hospitable with great respect of others.” Nga says.

Tarere has great love for her family especially her children and family.

She dedicates her work and success to her children and grandchildren.
21. Muia Nicholls

Kia Orana as we say “Greetings” from my mother tongue.

My name is Muia Nicholl, I came from the beautiful island of Aitutaki which they call worldwide “Heaven On Earth” in the cook Islands. On my island there’s about 1,200 people living there and everyone knows each other.

Married and separated made me decide to migrate to Australia in search of opportunities and to deal with my separation. I was not aware of the difficulties of getting a job in Australia and have applied for lots of job without success.

I find it very difficult to settle in Australia due to the fact that I have lots of paper works to complete. The system here is totally different from my country and access can be very complicated.

I am very grateful to the help of families and friends through their encouragement, support and guiding me to upskill through training and networking. I have confidence that I will be able to achieve my dream one day if I keep surrounding myself with positive people and keep working at it.

“Muia has arrived in Australia with great expectations of achieving and accomplishing her dream through developing her skills however various barriers she faces today can be removed with confidence if she keeps working at it.” Says Nga

Muia was raised within a big family and had enjoyed her time growing up in Aitutaki.
22. Harriet Houghton

My Maternal Heritage

My name is Harriet Helen Houghton and I have been a local resident in Glen Waverley since 1969. I was born in Sydney in 1939, a few weeks after the declaration of World War II. I would like to tell the stories of two inspirational women who have helped to shape my life.

My grandmother, Alexandrina Seager, (known as Ina), was born in Ballarat in 1872, the eldest daughter of William and Helen Laidlaw. A country girl, she was educated at home and I wonder if she knew what she was taking on when in 1891 at the age of 18, she married my grandfather, Clarendon James Seager. He was a 33 year-old widower and former British cavalry officer whose father was one of the six hundred ‘who rode into the valley of death’ at Balaklava in 1854. Luckily for me, my great grandfather rode out again, a hero and strong military influence to his own sons and grandsons. My grandfather, born in 1858, was a charming and intelligent man, and great horseman, but his privileged background ill-prepared him to support his young wife, their three sons and three daughters. In 1908 the family moved from country Victoria to Adelaide, where my grandmother showed a flair for business, starting a successful agency supplying governesses and servants to families, as well as caring for her own young children.

Alexandrina Seager
In 1914, World War I (the Great War), called on thousands of young men to ‘do their duty’ and join up. Following the family tradition, the three Seager sons rushed to join the Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.). Ina’s organisational abilities and enthusiasm to support the war effort came to the fore. She assembled a small army of women of good character in an endeavour called the Cheer-Up Society, run from her business office. The Society aimed to provide comfort, welfare and entertainment for lonely recruits, soldiers and sailors on leave and wounded men returned from the war. Strong public support enabled the Society to erect a large hut near Adelaide railway station where these gallant women provided meals, put on impromptu concerts, and also worked day and night to make comfort packages to send to the war front. With three sons in Gallipoli, my grandmother increased her efforts, co-ordinating the Society’s eighty country branches, raising funds and instituting a local remembrance day for the fallen called Violet Day (first held on 2 July 1915).

My uncle George died at Gallipoli in his 17th year, but even this tragic event did not diminish Ina’s war effort. At the end of 1915 she arranged the foundation meeting of the South Australian Returned Soldiers’ Association (SARSA), supported by a £50 grant from the Cheer-Up funds. She became the SARSA’s first Vice-President, but resigned in 1919 to enable an ex-serviceman to take up the reins. During the Depression, the Cheer-up Hut was revived to serve up meals to those in need and my grandmother once again was a driving force. However, her health deteriorated and she developed severe rheumatoid arthritis. My grandparents retired to Kangaroo Island, where her surviving sons had soldier settler properties. My mother told me that she admired her mother for keeping her mind active by learning Italian and continuing to write poetry in her later years.

In 1941 my mother and I went to live with my newly widowed grandmother after my father went off to World War II. I only have a few early memories of my grandmother. She had a lovely face, framed by white hair, and I can picture her in a kitchen smelling of fresh bread, and sour cream turning into cheese on the windowsill. Her cottage was surrounded by a wide verandah and a wonderfully scented garden. My great aunt, an artist, lived with her sister and there were two uncles (survivors of Gallipoli), aunts and cousins to play with. I could not remember my father and asked every male visitor ‘Are you my Daddy?’ to the great embarrassment of the adults. Many years later when I was about eight years old and living in Melbourne, my mother and I went to visit my grandmother in Kingscote hospital, and I sang her a song I’d just learned, Goodbye Little Yellow Bird. I was thrilled when, with great diplomacy, she praised my ‘lovely’ voice. Alexandrina Seager died in 1950 and is buried with her husband on Kangaroo Island. Her name is engraved on a memorial paving stone in North Terrace, Adelaide.
My mother, Helen Clarine Seager, was born in Narbethong, Victoria in 1900. Significantly, her birth certificate was lost in the 1939 bushfires, and this enabled her to reduce her age by ten years in later life. She used to say that she was ‘the eldest girl and the youngest boy’ in her family. She was very close to her brother, George, and a bit of a tomboy, often getting into trouble for unladylike behaviour. When the family moved to Adelaide in 1908, she disgrace the family tradition of good horsemanship, by grabbing an overhanging tree branch and clinging to it, letting her steed gallop off. On another occasion, an old lady passing by their house had a heart attack when she saw my mother falling to the ground from a tall pine tree. Apart from scrapes and bruises, my mother was fine. Following this incident, my mother was sent to a convent to be ‘properly educated’. Alas, a few years later she was expelled for ruining the chaste, white wimples of several nuns who had made the sign of the cross with Indian ink she had impulsively put into the chapel’s Holy water.

Helen Seager

At her next school, Walford, my mother excelled in sports and one subject, English. She had a gift for storytelling and loved meeting people and hearing their stories. This led her to apply for a position on the Adelaide Register at the age of 18. It was an unusual job for a young woman in 1918, but her enthusiasm and drive led to the start
of a long career in journalism. By 1930, Helen had a by-line in the *Adelaide Mail* where she scandalised Adelaide Society by writing a weekly serial about the peccadillos of upper class families in Adelaide, from the viewpoint of a servant girl. She called it *Red Hair And All That*. It was very popular with the locals who were always sure they knew the families in her serial. She was even confronted by people who wanted to be in the next episode. Of course all the characters came from her vivid imagination, not from real life.

My mother told me that she left Adelaide and went to Sydney in the early 1930s, after meeting my father, a fellow journalist. He told her of the exciting opportunities in the vibrant N.S.W. capital. She gained a position on *Smith’s Weekly*, a national newspaper (1919-1950). She worked alongside poet, Kenneth Slessor, feature writer and humourist, Ross Campbell, and she interviewed many famous visitors to Australia. Among these were Artur Schnabel, the famous pianist, and the tenor, Richard Tauber. My parents married in 1938 and their culturally rich, almost bohemian lifestyle changed dramatically when I was born in October 1939. My mother took leave from work two days before my birth, and resumed two weeks later. I believe that Ross Campbell won the office lottery by correctly guessing my birth weight, and when he arrived at the hospital with a great bunch of flowers for my mother, he was thought to be my father, and admitted to her bedside.

I have no real memories of those early days in Sydney, apart from one incident when I toddled after my mother to her bus stop (after locking the nursemaid in the pantry). I must have been about 30 months old. Luckily I was found by a policeman and safely returned home. Around this time my father joined up. He was 40, rather old for active service, but was sent to the Middle East, where he wrote for the AIF News. My mother decided to return to her family home in South Australia, where she did her bit for the war effort by helping to mine the aerodrome near Kingscote, Kangaroo Island, in an effort to protect its citizens from invasion by air.

When I was about three and a half, my mother and I moved to Melbourne, where my father’s family lived, and my mother grabbed an opportunity to work for *The Argus*. She was told that when the men returned from the war, she would have to give up her job, but by this time my mother had established her career, writing a popular column for *The Argus* under her maiden name, Helen Seager. Her column, *Good Morning Ma’m*, featured twice weekly for the first few years, and later expanded to five days a week. As well as her column, she continued to write stories about a diverse range of visiting celebrities, including Prince Philip when he visited Melbourne in 1945, the amazing Helen Keller who was both deaf and blind and her interpreter, Polly Thompson in 1948, and in 1950 the comedian and film star, Joe E. Brown. In 1950 *The Argus* sent my mother overseas to find stories in the United Kingdom and the Continent. I was only ten years old, so was lucky enough to accompany her. This experience broadened by mind and allowed me to store up many amazing memories.

In the 1960s, Helen worked on Woman’s Day in Sydney at first, and then in Melbourne, when she came to live with my family in Glen Waverley. Her most outstanding quality to me was her generosity of spirit, cheerfulness and her open-minded approach to life, perhaps inherited from her own extraordinary mother. She died in 1981, after a debilitating memory loss. This was a sad ending for a talented and wonderful mother.
Finding a Direction

I was born in Victoria and have lived in Glen Waverley for the past 44 years. My name is Helen Houghton I am 46 years old and I was born with spina bifida and I am an only child. My parents decided to build in Glen Waverley because there was going to be a special school built in Glen Waverley in the early seventies. This did not happen until 1979. I spent the first seven years of my school life in a special school in Malvern, called Marathon. This required a long two hour bus journey twice a day, I was picked up at about 7am from home, and did not arrive home until about 5pm in the afternoon. By the time the new special school had been built in 1979 I had already integrated into regular primary and then secondary school.

My experiences in special school were vastly different from my experiences of regular schooling. At special school I was told that I would never finish primary school and that I would probably never integrate into a regular school. The special school authorities were proven wrong in 1977 when I integrated into Mimosa Primary School in Glen Waverley in 1977. I made many friends and excelled at my lessons, something that the special school said I would never do. I am still in touch with one friend I met at Mimosa Primary.
After one term at Mimosa Primary I was old enough to move to regular school in 1978. I went to Highvale High school from 1978 to 1979. Early in 1980 my health began to suffer and specialists recommended a move back to special school to ‘have a rest’ and regain my health. The special school that I attended from the end of 1979 to 1980 did not serve me well. I was treated with disdain from both teachers and most of the students. I believe that this was because I concentrated on recovering and trying to relax instead of applying myself to work. I think they were expecting someone who had been an academic whiz, as I had attended a regular school, not someone who was ill with kidney failure. My confidence went downhill as a result.

Luckily my father had been offered a job in Port Macquarie in NSW. This was a perfect way to escape the impossible situation I was in at the special school and it gave me a fresh start in a new State. Even though I was very homesick for Victoria, the Regional School in Port Macquarie welcomed me openly. They even moved classes that were normally held upstairs just so I could join these classes. This time at Port Macquarie lasted for one year in 1981.

At the end of my time at Port Macquarie, I needed to find another school to attend. I was at the stage and age where I would be going into Year 11 for my Leaving Certificate. We found Kingswood College in Box Hill. I loved my classes and I made many lifelong friends.

After I got my HSC, I needed to find some type of training or work I ended up at a local Rehab Centre. I wanted to do typing and writing subjects and I wanted to learn to drive. I was given cooking, gardening and process work instead. I was not satisfied, I told them so by writing them a letter and I was threatened with legal proceedings if I published it.

The one good aspect that came out of the Rehab Centre was that I was offered a job at Reveille newspaper for people with disabilities, part of the then Council of Disabled Persons Victoria. I was taken on as a cadet journalist and was assigned the job of writing the centre feature of the newspaper. The articles featured a different disability every two months. My job was to contact people to interview, transcribe tapes that I had recorded of the interview and write the article. A lot of research was required because I not only had to ask questions; I also had to research the disability I was writing about. I found this very rewarding work; I think that the people I interviewed appreciated the fact that I also had a disability and they could see that I was coming from a point of view of having been through difficulties myself. It was a great buzz to see my articles in print.

As result of working on Reveille newspaper, I was encouraged to go out to schools and universities and interest groups to give talks about living with a disability. This gave me great confidence, and giving a talk now is second nature to me and I enjoy interacting with people. I particularly love talking to schoolchildren, because they come out with the most forthright and interesting questions. Unfortunately, after five years of working with Reveille, the paper closed down in 1989 and I had to either find other work or take up formal study. By then I had endured many years of ill health, and today have had a total of around 42 major operations in my life.
One of my goals in adulthood was to learn to drive a car. I studied the book of road rules in order to get my Learner’s Permit. This took two attempts. When I got my Learner’s, I was put in contact with an instructor who had a hand control car. I eagerly started my first lesson. I found driving very stressful and had a headache every time I got behind the wheel. I had some hairy experiences attempting to turn the corners in the back streets of Glen Waverley! I realised after six lessons, I was not getting any better. The instructor told me that I would be good at driving if I could find a straight road that went on forever, turning corners however, was another matter. The instructor told me to observe other drivers and try again later. I never did. I realised my eagerness to drive was due to peer pressure more than a burning desire to drive. I am now nearly 47 and do not regret my decision, I can get taxis and other people can drive me. It is much safer this way. I do not want to kill anyone and I realised that you do not have to achieve everything in life, some things you just have to accept you cannot do!

In 1993 my first venture into tertiary study began with a Diploma of Community Development at Outer Eastern College of TAFE, now Swinburne. I learnt to write reports, give class presentations and basically interact with a whole array of different personalities and characters! This made me realise that whilst most of the people I learnt with were great, some of them probably had a worse disability than I did, concerning their attitudes to certain issues. It was a real eye-opener!

From there I did my first Degree at Deakin University in 1998-1999 and loved it, but I had to learn to manage my time because assignments sometimes happened to be due on the same day! It was a nerve-wracking time but very rewarding when I received my Bachelor of Arts - Community Development degree in 2000.

In 2000 trouble with my health struck again, I had serious problems with my kidneys; I needed major surgery and it took me a total of about three years to recover. In 2004 I did a Certificate II in Information Technology at Holmesglen Institute of TAFE, this helped me enormously with my computer skills.
My next venture into study was my hardest by far. I decided, perhaps insanely, to attempt post-graduate study. It took a year of going to school twice a week at night to obtain my Graduate Certificate in Professional Writing. I did Editing and Publishing. They were both very difficult subjects and I have decided that I really am a writer more than I will ever be an editor! I loved the interaction with students but realised that night study just was not for me, even though I survived it!

From there I went on to do my Certificate IV in Disability Work, a course which I think that I have loved the best of all my studies. I feel as though I was born to do this course. I found students and teachers fantastic in their assistance with anything that I needed to get done. I even changed the system. I was the only person with a disability in the class and we had to go to a portable classroom to complete a certain subject. I found that I could not get into the portable because of steps. The teachers and students found this inexcusable; I even had to go to another campus to complete the subject. This sparked a lot of letters backwards and forwards to the college heads, and eventually, after I had nearly finished my course they started to build a ramp to that portable classroom. I knew that this was too late to help me, but was happy in the knowledge that because others and I had kicked up a fuss, any new students who had a disability would be able to get access to the classroom. It was a real achievement.

The most recent study I have done is a Leadership Course in Disability at RMIT (Leadership Plus) sponsored by Monash Council. This course has taught me about the sort of leader that I would like to be. I have given speeches and attended conferences as a result of this course. It has been well worth it.

I have had a rich and interesting life so far and I hope I can inspire others with disabilities to achieve what they really want out of life!
My name is Nyangak (Elizabeth) Kuoth and I was born in Sudan in 1991. I had a memorable childhood experience, until my mum suddenly died of an incurable illness. I was only turning six years old when she passed away. Frankly speaking, I don’t ever recall seeing my Dad; my three brothers and I were left feeling hopeless and alone.

Soon after that happened, I remember when my grandmother returned from the city when the news of my mother’s passing reached her. She immediately came and collected us from our relatives place we were staying with at the time, she took us in and has taken care of us ever since.

I migrated to Australia on the 5th March 2005 with my grandmother and my three brothers as a refugee. Like many other Sudanese people, the civil war forced us to leave our country, but also the hardship my grandmother suffered in order to provide for us was apparent and I personally struggled emotionally because there was nothing I could do, but interpret for my grandmother while she worked as a cleaner. Seeing her work so hard for us makes me admire her strength, but also feel sad.

This story isn’t about me, it’s about my grandmother who gave so much to my brothers and I, and left her life behind, so that we would have a future.

Unfortunately my grandmother died in 2010 from cancer. I am still devastated, but I have younger brothers who look up to me for strength, for that reason I only pray to God who has sheltered me all the days of my life and brought me into this great country that I may remain hopeful and joyful. After all I am a blessed child.