

Thank you for your kind introduction

I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people. I pay my respects to the elders past and present. I would also like to acknowledge any other Aboriginal and Torres islander peoples here with us today.

It is good to be here today to share a little bit of my story. I grew up in Ghana formerly known as the Gold Coast. Ghana was the first African country south of the Sahara to gain independence and celebrated its 67th independence anniversary on 6 March 2024.

I came to Australia some 40 years ago at a time when in my view Australia was still grappling with the last vestiges of a white Australia policy while also engaged in finding a fairly enduring vision of a multicultural Australia. I did not know much about Australia before moving here and the reason why I chose Australia and finally became a citizen is a story in itself.

When I arrived here it was relatively quiet. In the first few weeks and months I felt people were looking at me strangely and my early conversations with people went like this... 'Where have you come from, are you with the embassy? Are you a student? If you are a student are you studying forestry, when are you going back?'. I must say after answering these questions almost daily I developed standard answers-

For where have you come from? I answered, Curtin, before then Hughes, before then Canada. Some people give up at this stage, but a few will go on to ask, 'Where were you from originally?' 'When are you going back?'

Moving to a new country is a huge challenge for most people and is a big-turning point in life. Most people do it for a fresh start and as a chance to pursue a dream. Others do it because of relationships and others because they have no choice as they are fleeing persecution or torture.

Coming from abroad, one is normally not familiar with the way things work here and it is easy to feel alone. There are twice as many obstacles in the beginning, and one does not know who to go to for help. I spoke good English when I arrived, however I was very self-conscious as I had a hard time getting used to the Australian accent. I found myself saying 'pardon' often.

In my early days when I knew no one and did not know where to turn to for help I found an Anglican church -the Church of the Good Shepherd Curtin and being an Anglican, I decided to walk there on a Sunday with the family for worship. We felt very welcomed, and I still worship there today. At the time we had no car, so we walked to and from church. We did this for about two to three weeks, until a family who attended the church and lived close by offered to take us to and from church whenever we wanted. I was surprised to find out later that to help us they had to buy a new 7-seater car so their family and our family could go together to church. In appreciation we made the couple godparents for our daughter. We are still in touch with the couple now although they now live in Brisbane.

Getting a job was not easy. I wrote several applications but did not get a job. when I asked for feedback, I was told I lacked relevant Australian experience or that I was overqualified. The second bit was surprising to me because surely in any role you want the best person for the

job, how can a person be overqualified? To get Australian experience I took on a few unpaid jobs.

On one occasion I attended an interview for a teaching position in a school in Southport Queensland. Some of the expenses for the trip were paid for by the school. One interview question which struck me and remains with me to this day was “If you were in a class and a student called you a nigger, what would you do? My response received applause. I was told I have the experience to manage the problem, but I did not get the job.

My first job came but it was an experience in itself. Those were the days of the Commonwealth Employment Service (Ces). I went in and saw a job card. I took it to the employment officer who interviewed me and told me that the job was with Australia Post but there was a public exam at Bruce Tafe which I needed to register to attend. Getting to Bruce was a struggle with buses. I sat for and passed the exam and then started training. To graduate from the training school, I had to pass another exam. Trainees had to sort three hundred letters in 25 minutes. to pass the exam you are allowed only 20 mistakes. I had only been in the country for few months so many of the names of the towns and cities of Australia were Greek to me. I studied hard to pass the exam. it was a part-time job, so my wife had to work to help meet living costs. We would exchange our child at the bus stop. She would care for our child at home and then meet me at the bus stop with the child when she was ready to go to work. I would take the child before she boarded the bus I was getting off from.

All of the experiences I have described above, helped shaped my quest to advance and promote multiculturalism, social cohesion, security, and intercultural understanding. I was looking for a way to share my experiences and help people overcome some of the problems I faced. In Australia post I started helping my colleagues (a lot of whom were also migrants) with English and I also started picking up few words and sentences in Vietnamese so I could communicate better with them.

I think 1988 was the turning point for me. I managed to get a temporary job as a project officer with ACT Health. The project was an education program for newly arrived migrants in the adult migrant English program. There was a reference group for the project. One of the members of the reference group was the coordinator of the Migrant Resource Centre of Canberra and Queanbeyan (now MARSS). She encouraged me to nominate for a position on the board. I joined the board and later became Secretary. I helped develop a number of programs to assist migrants and also promote multiculturalism and valuing diversity e.g. one of the programs was ‘Our people, our culture’. After giving a presentation on Ghanaian culture, I received a call from a government agency that there was a newly arrived Ghanaian family if I could meet them and help them. I rushed there only to realise they were from Guyana and not Ghana, but I helped them with their immediate needs. We maintained close contact with them until they left Canberra. Through my work I became aware of services and programs that were available to assist newly arrived migrants and I was able provide people who came to me with advice or give information on where to get help. I recall that on a few occasions I stayed up until midnight helping people prepare application for a job because they were due the next day. From the people I met I learnt about the complex lives of recently arrived migrants and the diversity of their pre-migration and early arrival experiences. These helped me in my advocacy role as programs had to meet the needs of the diverse group of people.

I have held various positions on the board of MARSS, Chair, Deputy Chair Public Officer, and Honorary Adviser 2022.

In 2005 MARSS organised the Harmony Ambassador Program. I led a group of 15 young (16–18-year-olds) newly arrived migrants on a tour of several towns in southwest NSW spreading goodwill and promoting multiculturalism. The backgrounds of the group members were diverse with some members originating from the south sea islands, Ukraine, Tonga, Eritrea and New Zealand. The tour enabled me to visit places like Gundagai and learn about sheep breeding. The group visited various schools sharing their experiences and learning from the people they met. The program reinforced my belief that there is more that unites us than divides us and that we should all make the effort to understand and embrace each other's culture acknowledging that it is not always easy.

In 1988 I secured a temporary job as project officer with ACT Health. This role was also to open another door leading to me becoming a founding member, foundation chair and later life member of Companion House.

This is the story. The Ginninderra Branch of Amnesty International was organising a workshop to assess the need for a service to assist survivors of torture and trauma in the ACT. There was a service in Victoria and New South Wales and none in any other state or territory. I was asked to attend on behalf of ACT Health as I was the Migrant Project Officer and (fortunately or unfortunately depending on how you see things) I found myself chairing the afternoon session of the workshop. The meeting resolved that there was a need for a service. a committee was set up to progress this and I was given the lead role. I helped draft the first constitution, we named the organisation Torture Rehabilitation and Network Service ACT (Transact Inc) and proceeded to incorporation. We applied to the ACT Government for a grant and were lucky to receive a grant of \$20000. I found an office space in the old Griffin Centre. The service employed the first project officer. we developed policy documents, and the service grew. When the telecommunication service Transact was set up we were asked to change our name as we had not reserved the name so Companion House was born.

I note that by this time there was a growing vibrant and diverse African communities in Canberra covering countries like South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Mauritius, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Uganda. I suggested we bring the diverse groups together and so a few of us got together and the African Australian Association became an incorporated organisation. The objective was to bring people together, reduce social isolation and ensure that the newly arrived have a better experience than we experienced. I found myself advocating for the elderly from Africa leading to my appointment on the ACT Government Elder Abuse Committee.

I promoted African culture and programs at every opportunity. I also assisted other newly arrived African community groups to come together and become legal entities. I am also a founding member of the African Australian Council ACT Inc, which was set up as an umbrella body uniting all the African communities. My role was to prepare the constitution and help with all the legal processes.

In 2000 I suggested that the Ghanaians here organise themselves and incorporate and from this process the Ghana Australia Association was born. This group to me, symbolised what can be done when people come together to drive important causes. while the name would suggest it was a group for Ghanaians only, the struggles faced by Ghanaians in Australia are

not unique to them, cancer, poverty, family violence does not see colour or race or background. for this reason, we raised funds for a number of important causes and organisations including the act brain tumour alliance, act cancer society, Hartley House, Heart Foundation, organ donation act, Orthopaedic Centre, Nsawam Ghana. We also provided funds to orphanages, including providing a borehole for water for Chances for Children, and money to a domestic violence organisation in Ghana.

We sourced hospital beds through my contacts on ACT Health boards and managed to send over 45 boxes of medical supplies and equipment to Ghana. Somehow the items got lost and I travelled to Ghana at my own expense to find them. The search led to a tv program eye on Ghana's port. I also managed to get ventilators to send to Ghana which were handy during covid.

While my passion lies in promoting multiculturalism, I wanted to be of service in other areas so in 2005 I was appointed as at the legal member of the Psychology Board of the ACT, and in 2009 as community member on the Podiatry Board. From there I joined several health professional boards. My role on the board was to provide another viewpoint in the board's decision-making. I was not the representative of any particular group. my responsibility was to ensure that in any decision-making there is input from a community and multicultural perspective. it was to make sure decisions take into consideration the diverse cultures in Australia.

I established Radio Ghana Hour - a program on community station 2xxfm which is focused on Ghanaian life and culture. I still serve as program coordinator and one of the program's three presenters. The program serves as an information service for the Ghanaian community, providing useful tips on various services, while also inviting representatives from various groups to speak on a range of topics. While the program won't be rivalling the top ranking 2GB morning show anytime soon, I think if even one person learns more about Ghanaian and African culture or one newly arrived migrant from Ghana feels less alone as a result of that show, then it has done its job. If in the process, I get to prove to my children that as a bona fide radio DJ 'I'm now a little bit cool, then that's the icing on the cake.

At times I found it hard to do all the above and on many occasions felt like giving up or taking a back seat, I knew I couldn't. While it was hard work, it was fulfilling, important work. To give people a helping hand and help them get over those familiar feelings of isolation and helplessness and being a friend when in need

I have tried in a small way to make the migrant or refugee experience better for some people than I experienced, and I hope I have helped some people to achieve their potential and played a small part in the multicultural journey.

Finally, my experience in life and work in the community has made me realise that our unity and cohesion as a multicultural country is precious and so let us hold fast to it and continue to work on it.