

Occasional Address to University of Canberra
Faculty of Education Graduation Ceremony, March 2022
Dr Caroline Hughes

Yuma Yadhung Barundu Gulangga Garuliinya – buthanjima, marinjima, galambany

Hello Good morning everyone.

I acknowledge my family - Senior Ngl Elder, my mother Loretta Halloran, Michael, Tara, Mitchell, Mark and Catherine as well as other Ngunnawal Elders and their families here with us today.

Naraganawali – in the spirit of wellbeing and coming together –I acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and our non-Indigenous friends.

It is beyond my honour to be standing here today with you all witnessing the graduation of Education students. Education is my passion and I love to see others achieving their dreams. We know that in the words of the late great Nelson Mandela: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. Critical words in this time and place.

UC Chancellor Tom Calma AO, Vice Chancellor Paddy Nixon, my friend Dan Bouchier and UC Council – Djan Yimaba - Thank you for the honorary degree you are bestowing on me today. I am truly humbled to be recognised and honoured.

To the graduates - I want to honour all of you – the brilliant and accomplished graduates who will be shaping the minds of children – for a better future for all – you’ve worked especially hard to reach this momentous occasion - in a time where our world has been shaped like a Stephen King novel. It’s completely shaken to the core of our identities. A pandemic that has made changes to the very essence of our everyday lives. However, it didn’t deter you from meeting your goals.

It’s also a momentous day for your supporters – your loved ones – witnessing your graduation – a culmination of at least three years of dedication, hard work and perseverance – smashing through barriers to finally reach today. Your supporters in some way inspired and buoyed you in minute and huge ways to reach your goals.

In order to tell my story – I need to start from before my time. Because to get to where I am today, others led the way and provided me with the spiritual, cultural and physical sustenance to want more and dare to seek more.

One of my biggest inspirations and supporters is my mother. Throughout my childhood I witnessed my mother fighting for everything in life. Mum was born on Hollywood Mission – a place that our people were forced to live and survive. A place where they required written approval from government to leave, to marry or even to have jobs.

From 1939 to 1945 Australia was at war – fighting for the liberty of the oppressed in foreign lands. In 1945 World War 2 had finally ended - Australians danced in the streets. It was a

time of great joy – the sons and daughters were returning home it was a time for freedom. A time to embrace immigration for our country. A time of unity and when people pulled together.

At the same time, in 1945 at the age of 9 my mother and her sister were forcefully removed from their family. Removed for the purpose of education – a lie. The truth was that Mum's education ended in third class. Her education was to learn to scrub floors to become an unpaid domestic servant. In the years after, she had to teach herself to read and write because she was stolen from a park by the police – taken because of a policy where Aboriginal people were treated as second rate – not even citizens in our own lands.

Like other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples - our family has stories and heartache – the impact of loss of language, Stolen children, slavery, land rights and bigotry has had ongoing repercussions for my Mum and her family – those traumas still impact our family today. However, we had much love, singing, laughter and sharing of what little was had.

For me as a child, school was a place I dreaded. I was bullied horribly. And it left an indelible imprint in my mind that has never left me. I didn't have anyone to help me or the resources to complete my homework. More often than not, it was never completed.

The library accidentally became my safe place to hide from the bullies. At that time reading was a chore. Yet the librarian had a rule – Enter the library - you must be reading.

One lunchtime, I once again sought refuge in the library. Hiding between the stacks as the librarian approached, I grabbed the first book I could. That book was Narnia. What a wonderful book to accidentally find! That day I discovered new adventures and other worlds. No longer did I need four walls - books become my safe place and the gateway for my imagination to run freely. I could carry them anywhere. At home, much to Mum's annoyance, I hide behind gum trees to get out of cleaning – so I could read my books.

I finished Year 10 with very poor results. Reading romance novels were not enough to help my literacy and numeracy levels.

I moved on to Year 11, but it wasn't the place for me. Not when academia represented failure. University was only for the academically inclined – not me.

My early work years included stacking timber in a mill and waitressing in a Chinese restaurant. When I was 20 years old my oldest sister Catherine encouraged me to go to TAFE. That was a pivotal turning point for my life.

I hated stacking timber so I went to TAFE to give up work so I could get ABSTUDY. That way I could party on weekends. Little did I know that amazing teachers would open doors of opportunity that I didn't know existed... They gave me confidence and made me feel that I belonged. I finally achieved successes. It gave me a thirst and hunger for more.

The following year I gained an Indigenous Traineeship and met my husband Michael, another important supporter in my life. Together we had two children – Tara and Mitchell. With Michael's encouragement and support I completed further qualifications in TAFE and

climbed the career ladder - gaining roles in management. Then in my 30's I went on to university – completing a Degree of Adult Education – majoring in Community Development and Aboriginal Studies at UTS, whilst working fulltime as Director, CIT Yurauna and mother to two growing children with extra curricula activities. Yurauna –meaning to grow. A place of belonging – a community focused educational college at CIT. A place where I gathered an amazing team together to provide education and student support as well as a feeling of family and home for those that were disengaged from education. And it worked and still works. Witnessing successes of others has been the most rewarding of what I do. Seeing their smiles and eyes light up when they realised, they've reached goals. It's been the best feeling – ever!

Throughout the years I've taken on more challenges and try to give to others through a number of causes. Giving and encouraging through love is what can help heal.

Being Ngunnawal isn't a 9-5 job – its living and breathing my culture. One of my dreams has been the revitalisation of the Ngunnawal language. Language sustains connection with our ancestors and with the environment. It is pivotal to spirituality, lore and law - strengthening our cultural identity and connection. Thus, a salient ingredient for positive health that encompasses the complete physical, mental, spiritual and social wellbeing of individuals, families and the collective.

Ngunnawal has always been spoken in this place. Ngunnawal were the first words spoken and human footprints on these lands. But through policy designed towards the eradication of our cultural heritage it has been diminished. With the support of linguists and AIATSIS - many families came together as a collective in March 2019 and established the Winanggaay Ngunnawal Language Aboriginal Corporation

Together, we are revitalising and strengthening it by remembering, speaking it and reinvigorating it as well as sharing it for all.

I believe that education has been the salient ingredient to all that I have been able to accomplish. I am proudly a product of the VET and then the university sectors. I know that education isn't a parallel line. Just like it has been for me – for many it's a winding journey. I also know that without the critical supporters that helped me to see and then reach for goals that I hadn't thought existed – I wouldn't be here today. Those supporters were my family and teachers. As well as the many professional mentors, supervisors and colleagues – I thank them all. I especially acknowledge my dear friend Dan Bouchier – a hero promoting a better world for our people.

To you the graduates – please if you are struggling, know that not one person has all the answers. Look to those around you for your supports. Understand that what you are providing to the children and adults that you are teaching, or supervising will be pivotal to supporting them to be the best that they can be. Whether it's a fisherman or an academic – it's about their chooses – not yours. Help them to make it a reality. You just need to give them the tools to believe that they can.

In 1920 my great grandmother Bertha Bell wrote to the Yass Chronicle protesting for the right of her son, Ferdie Bell – my grandfather, to access the education he was denied.

I wonder what she would say if she could only see me standing here today, her great granddaughter honoured with a Doctorate.