

Occasional Address to University of Canberra
Faculty of Health Graduation Ceremony, March 2022
Speaker: **Betty Kitchener AM**

Title: Where you start professionally is generally not where you end up, as you embrace new opportunities and continue lifelong learning.

Chancellor - Professor Tom Calma, Vice Chancellor - Professor Paddy Nixon, Dean of the Faculty of Health - Professor Michelle Lincoln, Members of the Faculty, Graduates, supportive family members and friends.

Thank you for the invitation to be here today to celebrate your achievements. I congratulate you on what you have achieved, and the dedication that led to being awarded your degree, and your ability to overcome the disruption of the last couple of years from the COVID global pandemic with the inability to attend lectures or 'prac' sessions - and the somewhat detached world of daily online classes. Today is certainly a day of celebration for you - as the next generation of health professionals to serve the community.

I decided that the theme from my short speech today would simply be "Where you start professionally is generally not where you end up, as you see new opportunities and continue lifelong learning". In preparation, I took the opportunity to read some of the occasional speeches given in past University of Canberra graduation ceremonies. I found that my theme is a common one. Others spoke about:

- *"Life will take you down some interesting pathways and you may end up in places you never thought possible."*
- *"Those who flourish and succeed are frequently those who are able to reinvent themselves, to take new opportunities and continue to learn."*
- *"Lifelong learning is a core component of knowing how to live well."*
- *"This is only the beginning of your learning."*

I identify with all of these good statements. I will share with you where I began with my studies and career and where new experiences and lifelong learning took me in unexpected directions.

My story starts with growing up with a mum, dad, brother and sister in Sydney. I was born in 1951. As for many of my generation, my father was a soldier in WWII. His experiences there haunted him for the rest of his life. We now recognise he had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and his very heavy drinking was probably self-medication. His behaviour was very stressful to me throughout my childhood and as an adolescent, I became very depressed. My personal experience is consistent with what research shows that adverse childhood experiences are major risk factors for mental illness throughout life and mental illness often has its first onset in adolescence and early adulthood. Back then, I did not know what clinical depression was, nor did people around me – this was the mid 1960s. I did not

receive any help. If anything, I received criticism and was shamed for not 'rising above' the depression. This only made matters worse. As a maladaptive coping mechanism, I engaged in self harm and tried to kill myself with an overdose of heavy sleeping tablets my father had prescribed for him. As an adult, I went on to have repeated episodes of severe depression, necessitating hospitalisation at times – including nearby at Calvary Hospital. When I was well, I got on with life. I loved high school - it was so much nicer than home! I was able to go onto tertiary study and was drawn towards working in the helping profession area. My first post-secondary academic qualification was a Diploma of Education from Newcastle Teachers College. I was employed as a primary school teacher in the western suburbs of Sydney for some years. I found I really enjoyed teaching, but I became aware that some of the students came from difficult family environments and had mental health problems. This experience inspired me to study to become a school counsellor so, with free university education under the Whitlam Government in the 1970s and some part-time jobs to support myself as a student, off I went to the University of NSW to gain a Bachelor of Arts with a double major in psychology. Here I met a most wonderful person doing his PhD in Psychology – Tony Jorm, who has been my friend and partner ever since.

In the mid 1980s, with 2 young children, Tony and I moved to Canberra and over the next 12 years, I returned to further my education - first at the Canberra College of Advanced Education, which then became the University of Canberra. I gained a Graduate Diploma in Special Education and then a Graduate Diploma in Community Counselling. I then worked in these areas in primary schools here in Canberra. During this journey, I had a number of major episodes of clinical depression. Research shows this can be the case, when one's first episode of mental illness is in one's adolescent years. When nursing training became available at the University of Canberra in the early 1990s, I was very interested in studying this area, due to my strong interest in health and in caring roles. I studied for a Bachelor in Nursing, followed by a Masters in Nursing by research. My thesis looked at nurses' attitudes towards active voluntary euthanasia. During this time, I also taught First Aid courses with Red Cross and tutored at the University of Canberra in Physiology and Anatomy and supported Aboriginal students at the Nggunawal Centre with their studies. I first worked as a registered nurse in Canberra Hospital and then as a Community Diabetes Educator. When I graduated and worked as a primary school teacher and then as a registered nurse, I never, ever thought that at the age of 50 years old, I would begin travelling the world, as a developer of an international community mental health education program. Nor that would I ever be giving a University Graduation speech!

I tell you all this background, as without these skills and experiences, I would not have gone on to develop a program called Mental Health First Aid, which has now been taken by nearly one million people in Australia and over 4 million people across the world. Mental health first aid is just like regular / physical first aid. It is *'the help offered by a member of the public to assist people who are developing a mental health problem (such as depression,*

troublesome anxiety, psychosis) experiencing a worsening of an existing mental health problem or in a mental health crisis (such as being suicidal, experiencing a traumatic event, having a panic attack), until appropriate professional help is received or the crisis resolves’.

The development of the mental health first aid program began with a dog walk on Coulter Drive, Weetangera - not far from the University of Canberra. My husband and I were discussing ideas whilst walking King, our King Charles Cavalier dog and came up with the idea of developing a mental health first aid course. Life then went on a different direction for me, which I never anticipated. Personal experience with episodes of mental illness; my University of Canberra education and experience in teaching, counselling & nursing; my husband working as an academic researcher in community mental health; other resources in my family members – IT skills, legal training, graphic design – all contributed to the creation of the Mental Health First Aid Program. With help from my researcher husband, I developed and launched a 12-hour Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) course at the turn of the century, which I conducted for free for the first 2 years here in Canberra. From small beginnings, I would never have imagined how the MHFA Program would spread. It was just the right course at the right time and with some successful grant applications, carrying out evaluation trials, getting very good outcomes and publishing them in scientific journals, the MHFA program began spreading across Australia and then the world.

Its international spread began in 2003, when I was amazed to receive an email from a Gregor Henderson from the Scottish Health Ministry, offering me a Business Class ticket and some payment to bring the MHFA Program to Scotland. In subsequent years, I received similar requests and I took the MHFA Program to Hong Kong, the US, countries in the UK, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Malta, the Netherlands, Bermuda and even the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The more recent spread has been to mental health organisations in France, Switzerland and Germany.

Although there have been many factors that have led to the global expansion of the MHFA Program from a small beginning here in Canberra by one woman, one man (and a dog), I would not have been empowered with capacity or inspiration to consider developing such a program, without the foundation and diversity of my studies in education, counselling, nursing and research that I gained from the University of Canberra.

Today is about you celebrating the great success that yourselves and your university have achieved in graduating during a global pandemic. Congratulations! May you all have a bright future, wherever it may lead you. Keep your eyes open for possibilities. Dare to move into new roles. Where you end up professionally is likely to be a very different place to where you are starting now.

.....

