

## University of Canberra - Faculty of Arts and Design Graduation

Occasional Address by Dr Maxine Cooper - 23 April 2021

It is a great honour to share your graduation with you, and also with those who have supported you. I thank the University of Canberra for this privilege.

I am also privileged to be standing on Ngunnawal land where traditional ways of knowledge sharing have taken place for thousands of years. I acknowledge and pay my respect to Ngunnawal Elders, past, present and emerging, and recognise their continuing connection to and care of, land, culture and community. And I extend that respect to all First Nations people present today.

Congratulations. May you and your supporters celebrate well. You all deserve to, especially given the impost of COVID restrictions.

As you are in the School of Design and the Built Environment, and in Canberra, I will share my first visit to our planned National Capital and the lessons I learnt that have remained with me.

When I was about 11, my Riverina grandparents and I travelled here, in an old truck towing a fragile caravan. It was a wonderful classic 1960's caravan trip but far from relaxing. There were many tricky moments caused by the truck's radiator and brakes over-heating, and the caravan having no brakes. It was hard to control, but if I gave a comment, Pop would remove the steering wheel and hand it to me and say "here, if you think you can do better". While I was amazed that he could somehow continue driving without the wheel, I soon stopped commenting and watched what he did in those tricky moments. With typical preteen cockiness, by the end of the trip I felt confident that I could manage the truck and caravan, but I did leave it to Pop, and we finished the trip in one piece.

The story of this trip, once shared, revealed that friends and family members were also experts on how to manage a cantankerous truck and caravan. Wisdom flowed.

I learnt some fundamental life-shaping lessons:

- **Take well-considered risks - they're worth it.**
- **In tricky situations be quiet, trust others and learn from them.**
- **Tell stories – they're fun and are the basis for sharing wisdom.**

While these lessons and the adventure of the trip remain with me, so does my Nana's response to what was probably my first planning question – also on that trip. While standing on the steps of the then Parliament House, looking out towards the War Memorial, I asked "Who did all this?". Nana thought for a time then said: "some very clever people". With that positive and firm answer I knew not to probe any further, but at that moment I also knew that:

- **Great urban places are designed and built by clever people.**

This may have inspired me when, years later, I headed to Perth to do a BA in planning at the W.A. Institute of Technology, now Curtin University, even though I had little idea of what was ahead as I was 'first in family' to go to university - in fact, first to fully complete high school. My family's schooling was limited, with my father only learning to read and write in his late 20's, and my mother attended classes to help her write better while I was doing my BA course.

In the early part of my first year there were many moments when my alien environment was overpowering and, thankfully, necessity made me pluck up courage to ask for help. With this help, encouragement and support I completed the course and was awarded the top student planning prize. Excelling made it possible for me to secure a planning job, as being female was a barrier – no Equal Employment Legislation then.

My first taste of tertiary studies reinforced what I had learnt from my Pop – that reasoned risk-taking is worth it. It also taught me something that I continued to do with ease even much later, when I was head of various agencies. That is to:

- **Ask for help early and persevere, as you never know what you might achieve.**

However, my studies and early career were not without challenges, especially gender issues and barriers, even though this was the period of Second Wave Feminism.

One incident, in particular, completely changed my life.

My now husband and I were both working in the same mega Department in WA when we decided to get married. Our professional lives never actually overlapped, but the Planning Commissioner called us into his office and advised us that 'one of you has to go', but also told me that if I was the one to stay, as a married woman, I would need to write a letter whereby 'I begged the Commissioner to retain my services'.

No way was I going to write that letter. Things had to change.

But change within that Department was not likely to occur soon, and neither I or my husband felt in a position to lead such change. So instead, we changed jobs, as:

- **If you don't support an organisation's values, and you can't change them, don't work for it.**

Fortunately, I secured a job designing Aboriginal settlements and public housing projects for low-income groups. I had good insight into the latter as I had grown up in public housing. However, my knowledge of Aboriginal culture was just about non-existent.

Soon after I started in the new job, I was handed a return air ticket from Perth to Derby and told that the engineer would meet me at the airport and drive me to Fitzroy Crossing, then to a proposed Aboriginal settlement site. I asked, 'who is in the design team?' The response, 'you, the engineer and a surveyor'.

Thanks to the Aboriginal community's support in showing me how they wished to live spatially to reflect the fact that there were multiple mobs involved, a design evolved whereby houses were in clusters off a big, big ring road.

However, the Perth-based Board's response to this design was along the lines of 'it needs to be designed like a conventional suburb'. I was instructed to do a conventional design, submit it to the Aboriginal community and report back on the community's response. Which was a polite 'Nice design. We are not going to live there.' I conveyed this to the Board, who after much discussion, decided to build the community-led design.

This work had a profound effect on me in two major ways.

Firstly, I felt completely deflated and saddened by the way Aboriginal people were treated. Many things were not right. For instance, I would spend all day with the communities but after work there was to be no contact with them – social segregation. This, with other unwritten and unspoken norms guided behaviours. While I knew this had to change, I felt powerless at that time.

- **While some things may be changing now, more is required to respect our First Nations people.**

Secondly, this experience exposed my lack of broader environmental knowledge, and fuelled my desire to foster working in what is now called "interdisciplinary" ways.

I scanned the world and found that the University of Calgary in Canada offered a professional master's degree in inter-disciplinary planning-environmental and sustainability studies. I was fortunate to be offered a place and secure a scholarship so headed off for three years. It was a fantastic experience all round.

All skilled-up, I returned to Perth. But this was in the middle of a recession and I couldn't get the type of work I had been trained for in Canada. After persevering for a time, I moved with my husband and Canadian-born daughter to Melbourne, where I did my PhD at Melbourne University. My research focussed on multi-disciplinary ways of working to better manage the environment.

It still took me some time, and several changes of job and a couple more inter-state moves before I secured a job where I could truly use an interdisciplinary planning-environmental approach. Fortunately, the then NSW Roads and Traffic Authority knew that 'things had to change' in the way they worked. This traditional engineering organisation hired me to lead its community engagement and integrate environmental planning with engineering considerations in its designs and programs. I seized the opportunity and pushed boundaries, such as including local Aboriginal people, and public artists, in design teams for major freeways. On one occasion an artist discussed the option of building a major freeway that was wrapped in plastic. This was a step too far for the road engineers, but they and the artist persevered in working together. With others such as a landscape architect, an acoustic engineer, and an urban planner, they designed the Gore Hill Freeway to minimise its impact on adjacent communities, and to include artist-designed images in its concrete sound

barriers. This work won a Banksia Award - a major environmental design accolade - that reinforced for me the value of having a diverse team.

I have also been privileged to work here in Canberra, in many diverse roles, to advance sustainable practices. For instance, following the 2003 bushfires I led teams that designed and implemented transformative recovery changes. Then, as head of a water security taskforce in the continuing Millennium drought, I led team to effect adaptation actions to respond to our changing climate.

I found that:

- **While university education opened doors, the on-going love and support of those around me gave me strength to keep knocking on doors until they open.**
- **When a door opens, take the opportunity and be bold.**

COVID is teaching us that we can make bold changes, and so, perversely perhaps, it provides optimism for implementing transformative actions to be sustainable in the way we live; and to also truly respect and support our First Nations people and the wisdom they can bring to bear on this and other challenges.

You are graduating in a time of transformative change. Hold the lessons from this, be bold in using your knowledge from your degree, and work with others from many different disciplines to forge creative solutions. Of course, also make sure you learn from the Nanas and Pops in your lives, as valuable knowledge comes to us in many different ways.

Finally, remember:

- **The future is not some place you are going, it is something you are creating.**

I wish you all the very best in your endeavours.