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SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURAL & ETHNIC AFFAIRS COMMISSION
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SPEECH

My journey involved leaving war-torn Viet Nam in a hurry in 1977, in a flimsy, leaky wooden fishing boat crammed with 41 fellow refugees, including my new wife, Lan.

After a month in open sea, we reached the southern tip of Timor, with only the treacherous Timor Sea to cross. I had the job of navigator, which often felt a fearful responsibility.

On the third day of the crossing, there was some sudden excitement on the deck. Someone had seen birds, someone had said they were seagulls. These seagulls were like angels, for they meant land!

I grabbed the binoculars and stared to the horizon, and there they focused on a most brilliant line of silver.

I can't describe the moment, the feeling. I turned to Lan and said quietly, "We are alive, look at that silver line over there, that is where our life and our future is".

This silver sliver of hope took form as we crept closer through the dawn light. It became an early morning mist across Darwin Harbour.

We chugged clumsily into the harbour. A couple of blokes in a tinny waved and one of them called out "G'day mate, welcome to Australia."

My personal navigation to Australia had been a combination of dark circumstance, accident, fear, despair, but most of all, of hope! I arrived on this silver shore with nothing but my invisible suitcase of heritage and dreams!

At another time, another place, a traveller such as me might have been greeted with fear or hostility or detention, but at that time, I was given the unfettered wish and opportunity to show gratitude.

What greeted me was a generosity of spirit.

Over the last 30 years, I've learnt something about this new culture - about the language - that deep down "G'day mate" meant something about a society that fundamentally believed in helping, in shared responsibility, ...that if we we're not actually all in the same boat, we are all in the same harbour.

Some of us zoom along, some of us chug chug in, but we are our brother's keeper.

Having just seen the stories of the three migrants in the Migration Museum presentation, I can tell you that, of course, everyone's journey is different and unique.

However, there are many similarities too:

The fear of the unknown, of stepping out of a familiar, albeit dangerous or unhappy, environment into one that, in most cases, is completely foreign and bewildering.

The vacuum of not knowing what the future holds for you.

Then there's the hope...the thing that keeps us all going...the innate human optimism that it will all work out...that somehow you'll get through it and that all will be well.

The immense relief when, after a long, hazardous journey, you reach your destination - planned or not - and ... joy ... people at the other end are warm and friendly and generous and kind-hearted.

You may not understand a word they're saying, nor they you, but the smiles and the body language and the sheer cheerfulness of the greeting lifts your

spirits and gives you renewed hope that all will be well...that you have made the right choice.

Then comes the weeks ... months ... years ... of finding your feet, of settling in to a new life in a new place, learning new customs and laws, a new language and new ways of doing things.

If you are lucky, you will meet people who, through that sheer generosity of spirit, help you and support and mentor you and your family ... purely voluntarily.

Which brings me to the second part of my talk.

Lan and I were helped - raised up - by the grace and generosity of people in the Australian society.

Help came from our first day in Adelaide, when Lan and I attended an evening mass at the Church in Woodville. The mass was conducted by Father Jeff Foals, the founding member of the Indo Chinese Refugees Association.

There we met the late Basil Sheahan, his wife Pat and their daughter Suzie. They took on the role of host family to us. They helped us in so many ways in our early days of resettlement.

Another example of that spirit came a few weeks later. I had a telephone call from a couple in Loxton - Ken and Daphne Schwartz - who invited us to spend

the Christmas season with them in Loxton. Ken was a veteran of the war in Vietnam.

It is not possible for me to mention all who helped us and who helped so many others like us. On behalf of all who come to settle here and who have been raised up by the goodness of others, I say, simply, thank you.

Our gratitude is deep.

After a while settling in and coming to terms with their new life, some migrants feel the need to express their gratitude to their new community, to give something back to the community.

I felt that need. Soon after arriving in Adelaide, I got involved in the local Vietnamese community. It was very small then, but growing fast, and I felt the need to help navigate a smooth, safe and peaceful path for other Vietnamese coming after me.

I became one of the founding members of the organisation now known as the Vietnamese Community in Australia, South Australian chapter.

I have been involved, in one way or another, in supporting, promoting and advising on Vietnamese culture in South Australia for a long time.

At the same time, while studying at University again and building a life with Lan, I became quickly immersed in the already diverse South Australian society.

I met and mixed with people from a wide range of backgrounds, and came to realize that many of the issues the Vietnamese community faced - barriers presented by language and cultural differences - were also experienced by other migrant groups.

I saw that a person's looks, an accent or different customs and norms could result in discrimination. Sometimes on purpose, but often just the result of lack of cultural awareness and understanding.

Twelve years ago, I was approached to join the South Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission. The Commission is made up of 15 community-based individuals who, though they come from a range of backgrounds and experiences - are there to give advice from a community perspective, not to represent just one ethnic community.

In a fashion, being on the Commission is the ultimate level of volunteering in the multicultural sector. I have had the pleasure of being Deputy Chair and, for the past two years, Chairman, of the Commission.

My appointment this year as the Lieutenant Governor was a wonderful surprise. I still don't really know why, except I gratefully and humbly accept the Premier's high praise that I have become a community leader.

I also accept the great responsibility that this new position brings.

This new vice regal role enables me to continue to be a spokesman for diversity, because I am a beneficiary of great cultural richness.

It also allows me to fulfil one of my dreams - that is, to be a link between South Australia and the world. Because I have been a victim of war and conflict, I will be an advocate for peace and friendship.

Because I have been a victim of destruction and chaos I want to be a proponent of the constructive, of building up.

Because I have known poverty I hope I might be able to help build bridges to economic prosperity,

And I will continue to be a symbol of multiculturalism in South Australia. My appointment is recognition of many migrants and refugees who have been quietly contributing to the society.

Now I come to the third part of my address - volunteering with and by people from culturally and linguistically diverse background.

In my swearing-in speech in August, I sincerely said:

“The first task I would wish to give myself in taking up this role, is to be an Ambassador and advocate for the dispossessed, the disadvantaged.”

Not all people from migrant backgrounds are dispossessed or disadvantaged. However, those that are, need the support and help of others in their community more than ever. And the help and support of other South Australians.

Volunteering with an organisation that supports new migrants is one of the most rewarding and enriching experiences one can have.

There are many agencies and non-government organisations represented here today who recruit and train volunteers to support new migrants.

They all do a great job introducing new migrants to services, to the communities in which they live and, if they want, connecting them to their ethnic and religious communities of choice.

Very new arrivals, particularly the refugees and temporary skilled migrants with little English, are usually preoccupied with English language classes, housing, getting their children into school, figuring out how to get around.

Volunteering is not high on their list of priorities.

Sooner or later, however, new migrants do learn to stand on their own two feet and may want to spread their wings to soar further into the community.

When they are ready, many show an interest in volunteering, in giving back to the community in which they have settled, to the people they have come to live among.

When they are ready - and for some it's within a few weeks, for others it may be years - many will become volunteers in their ethnic communities, helping those arriving after them to find their way around, figure out the system.

... just as previous migrants have done, like the Italians, Greeks, Germans and other Europeans in the 50s and 60s, and we Vietnamese, Cambodians and other Asians in the 70s and 80s, the Bosnians, Serbians and other former Yugoslavian, and former Soviet Union, migrants in the 90s.

And now, of course, we see great demand for volunteer support workers among the Middle Eastern and African refugee communities, who largely have little or no English when they arrive.

... and among the more numerous skilled migrants from India, China and other South Asian countries, many with spouses and children with little or no English.

Then there are the 20,000 international students in South Australia each year, many of whom are crying out for support and for help connecting to the wider community.

But volunteering just within one's own ethnic or religious community is not everyone's cup of tea.

Almost all new migrants are keen to get employment as soon as possible. Volunteering in a setting where they get real work experience, where they receive proper training and support - and aren't replacing a paid position – provides them with invaluable work experience.

It's also a great way to improve their English language skills and feel a part of the whole community.

For these and many other reasons, some new migrants are keen to volunteer in so-called mainstream settings.

When they are ready, many new migrants willingly join school councils, sports committees, associations, clubs, perhaps even high-level advisory boards like the Commission.

Many new migrants will be interested in volunteering with a charity, an environmental group, perhaps in a youth or women's organisation.

Organisations that offer volunteering opportunities can benefit greatly from recruiting volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Volunteers from diverse backgrounds enrich our society. They generate new ideas and approaches to issues; they come up with new ways of doing things.

Organisations that welcome culturally diverse volunteer participation are challenging discrimination and are more representative of society; they are sending out positive messages that will reassure the community.

An organisation that displays — and is seen to value — diversity, will be more attractive and welcoming to volunteers, client groups and the general public. As a result, it will attract more customers and service users, and have more positive outcomes.

When organisations recognise, celebrate, and value diversity, they can respond to the needs of their local communities more ably.

Organisations that traditionally have not recruited many culturally and linguistically diverse background volunteers need to look at why not.

Is it that they - the people running the organisation - have never thought of taking on volunteers from beyond their traditional base?

Is it that they are afraid that they may do or say something offensive to the would-be volunteer?

Is it that they have some pre-conceived ideas about people who look or sound different to the rest of their volunteers and don't know how to get past those stereotypes?

If any volunteer-recruiting organisations have answered yes to any of these questions, all is not lost!

There is help - in the form of cultural awareness training for administrators and staff.

The South Australian Government has recognised the need for more cultural awareness training in the public sector to ensure it is ready, willing and able to deliver to new migrants the services and support to which they are entitled.

To this end, it has appointed a panel of cultural awareness training providers that can be used by government agencies to further strengthen the cultural competencies of staff responsible for the planning, development and delivery of services.

These trainers - and others - can provide services to non-government organisations too.

Cultural awareness training is not the only answer to the question of how we recruit and retain volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

We heard earlier that the Office for Volunteers is working on a project to encourage volunteering by new migrants.

That project's preliminary findings confirm what many of us have been hearing from communities for many years:

... many don't know where to find out about volunteering opportunities;

... many don't understand the processes involved in becoming a volunteer; and

... many lack experience in formal volunteering programs.

Many volunteer centres offer volunteer training. Modifying this general training to suit migrants – making the training culturally appropriate – is another great idea being put forward.

I'm very interested in hearing more on these ideas, and other ideas, from this forum.

... ideas from volunteer organisations and from culturally and linguistically diverse background volunteers alike.

I will be more than happy to support the Minister, the Hon. Jennifer Rankine, in considering those ideas and how they can be turned into strategies to encourage volunteering with and by new migrants.

The outcome will be mutually beneficial - organisations will get more volunteers and it will help new migrant volunteers settle and integrate.

In concluding, I would like to repeat some of the statistics that the Minister mentioned in her address earlier and add some others of my own:

- Almost 600,000 South Australians – 40 percent of our population – were either born overseas or have one or both parents born overseas.
- In 2006-2007, more than 10,000 *permanent* residents arrived to settle in South Australia.
- Of those 10,000 settlers, 7,000 were Skilled or Business migrants; 1,500 were Family migrants and 1,500 were Humanitarian migrants.
- Less than 15 percent of new migrants to South Australia are from a refugee background. More than half of them are under 18.
- In 2006-2007, there were about 150 migrants from Sudan. There were 10 times as many migrants from India, and nearly eight times as many migrants from China, in that same period.
- China and India are consistently the top source countries of Skilled and Business Migrants and International Students, and are high up in the Family stream. Next are Malaysia, Korea and the Philippines among skilled and family migrants, plus Vietnamese and Thai among the family migrants.

So you can see that, among our new arrivals who might be in a position to become volunteers, the adult refugee or humanitarian migrants are very small in number compared with skilled and family migrants.

I am sure you will keep this in mind during the rest of your deliberations today.

I look forward to receiving the report of this Congress.

Thank you.