

Announcement and Launch of The Geoff and Helen Handbury Fellowship Program

At CIVIC RECEPTION for visiting RMIT Council Members

Date: 27th March 2002

Venue: Hamilton Art Gallery, Hamilton.

Good evening. My name is Yaso Nadarajah. When I was requested to announce the Helen & Geoff Handbury Fellowship by the Handburys themselves, I was overwhelmed and so honoured. But I was also anxious that my being here did not symbolise or acknowledge a singular effort above others. Then it would stand against everything that I have learnt through this partnership.

I decided then that I will speak as being part of a much larger and very amazing story of a partnership between two communities. And I would speak my story as a Malaysian citizen, an Australian migrant, an educator from RMIT University and maybe too as a community member of the Southern Grampians region and surrounds. I do not live here but I have been coming up here on an average of once a month for seven years. And in that time, I have grown to respect, admire and love the people here – and have found new ways of thinking, teaching, learning and being with people from so varied a background and perspectives. I am learning how to bridge formal and non-formal education, respect methods and processes so different from mine. And I also feel so privileged because I belong to a university where I can take back this learning and thoughts and feelings and find within the walls of a large urban university the same enthusiasm and desire to connect with such a community – and a senior management within the university that

continues to encourage and support our commitment and shared purpose. And I will maybe, with as much simplicity as possible, tell you a story of which I was a part. And of the lessons I learnt about what is possible when people get together because they are driven by a common purpose and a deep trust in each other – truly enjoying working together, drinking port out of vegemite jars, speeding down country roads, talking multi million dollar dreams with a sheep dog drooling at our shoulders.

It was July 1999. In my office, staff and students surrounded me. We were talking about RICE – and where we had come. General elective subjects, links with schools, numbers of host families, friendships with local Koorie community leaders, 300 RMIT students per year in the region on visits, an international youth conference, research projects, the list could go on. And we were at the crossroads. Funding slashes across education, global challenges, local realities – and yet an overwhelming energy and enthusiasm about what we could do together as partners – a rural community and an urban university. We had also just read Regional Strategy Document that Graham Mulroneu sent us that had been submitted to Council by the then DVC, Prof. Ruth Dunkin. There was a big picture evolving within the university of how we need to better connect and learn with our regional communities – and it resonated with all that we were doing and how we wanted to move forward too. It had also captured the learning and opportunities that was happening for us too. We could hardly contain our excitement.

I sat at my desk – in the middle of all this and wrote a note to Geoff and Helen. I was driven by the energy of enthusiasm, commitment, hard work and visions of the groups in the region and RMIT that had surrounded me for 5 years; and in the solid and unwavering conviction that I was guided by RICE. In that note, I made a request for two million dollars.

When Helen called three weeks later, as she had been away, I could not pick up the phone – not because I was afraid she would say no – but because I could not believe from where such boldness had come and how preposterous and arrogant I had been. And then Helen and Geoff said yes – to first a million and then another if the State Govt put in its part. It spurred a momentum that saw us - as a large community group - tell the State Government how we needed to continue to work together as partners. It saw the development of this building to enrol the first batch of nursing students. It received an even further tremendous response from RMIT with the employment of staff and a commitment to, and gave rise to a whole new chapter that is still being told. It has also made possible the Fellowship that we will announce today. More than the money, Geoff and Helen's gift validated RICE. And in validating RICE, they had validated the RICE vision.

What is RICE? Some have asked me if it is a student exchange, or a concert? Or maybe a food exchange program? Or whether we were actually crafting a secret agenda to turn the paddocks into rice fields!! I still remember walking down the corridors of Kay House, with Prof. Tony Adams who said, "Why RICE? Who are you hoping to feed?" and I said – our souls – our capacity to act from within ourselves as human beings and for something that is more than just ourselves. Because my students had said to me after their many trips to this region –

"The people here listen to me, they want to know about me, and they teach me. And I want to do something for them. I want my life never to hurt their lives. And most of all, in what way we can both makes our lives better?"

RICE is a philosophy of partnership. It is a framework that has come upon us because of the way we have treated and behaved and respected and admired and cared about each other's difference, perspectives and way of live –whether on a farm as a shearer or in a large urban university as an administrative assistant. And simply because of that,

we have had the courage, the passion, the energy and the commitment to do so much more..

RICE is amazing because it is being written as it unfolds – and it lies within us a group on how we narrate the chapters we have written and the chapters we are now writing and the chapters that will follow. And that in the end, we might be able to leave behind a book that our children and our students will be proud to place upon their bookshelf and by the side of their bed – and that they will be able to call their own too. Not hammer strokes, but dance of the water sings the pebbles into perfection.

The Helen and Geoff Handbury Fellowship is a wonderful chapter in the RICE book – about how two enormously successful and unbelievably generous people also believe that each of us has the same capacity to be successful and generous. And, that when we embark on a Fellowship journey, we too have a commitment to the RICE philosophy and framework; and to the people who have placed their trust upon us.

It is again not possible for me to announce this wonderful story in the chapters of RICE on my own. I wonder if I might call upon the RICE Foundation members, Geoff and Helen Handbury, the RMIT Hamilton staff and our Vice Chancellor Professor Ruth Dunkin to come forward and to together launch this Fellowship. And on behalf too, of our Patron Professor David Beanland, Judy Rogers, Leone Wheeler, Margaret Hill, Sue O'Brien, the many international students – Naup Waup, Supriya Pattanayak, JB Haryanto, Gary Lee, Yemi Yemi and so many others who are not here and who continue to work so hard behind the scenes.

We proudly launch the Helen and Geoff Handbury Fellowship Program.

Yaso Nadarajah

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