

## **Jeannie Mok (My story)**

As long as I can remember, in my family, volunteering was something that you just did automatically. My mother Lian, was the supreme role model when it came to helping others. She was President of the Girl Guides, President of the Young Women's Christian Association, as well as the Women's Institute, and was heavily involved in any relief work when a major disaster like a flood hit the town, as my father (as District Officer of the state of Malacca in Malaysia) co-ordinated all state relief programmes, among his diverse portfolios.

Lian ran national Y-Teen Camps for teenagers at risk, judged cooking and craft at the rural women's stalls at the Malacca Agricultural and Horticultural Exhibition, and organised other multicultural functions. My sister Joan, was also actively involved with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, giving out monthly food parcels and raising funds for their various projects. Being the youngest in the family, I had no choice but to join in and, as a teenager, I helped take orphans from the Orthopaedic Home swimming, assisted with Christmas parties for disadvantaged families, became a Girl Guide Patrol Leader and generally, had a whale of a time with a marvellous variety of people.

Thus it was natural that, as a career woman, I would continue with the family tradition! As a University lecturer, I served as the University Women's Association (UWA) Secretary and member of the Executive Committee, National Council of Women's Organizations. UWA ran a non-profit Day Care Centre for children of staff and students, raised funds for key projects involving 'squatter families' and bought school books for needy children. When I migrated to Brisbane in 1981 and saw the many needs of people around me, I pitched in immediately.

As business migrants, my husband David and I set up several businesses and had many students work part-time for us. Inevitably, there were requests to help with University –related activities, as well as personal problems. Furthermore, as members of the Chapel Hill Uniting Church, we were enthusiastic participants of every charitable project and we provided our time, expertise and other resources. Of course, when sons Jonathan and Julian were in school, we were dragged in to help with the 'Herbstfest' fetes at St. Peter's Lutheran College (but I managed to avoid tuckshop duty). In 1986, I began teaching full-time at Brisbane Boys College and helped organise World Vision's Forty Hour Famines and other worth-while projects.

My volunteering efforts in Australia kicked off in earnest when the Blainey Debate erupted in 1984 and the denigration of Asian migration was an unfortunate outcome. I began writing articles in the 'Courier Mail', championing the valuable contributions that Asian migrants could make to the nation and was invited to join an Asian – Australian Action Committee to counter the negative propaganda that the controversy was producing. Events were held to rally pro-Asian migration support, coupled with campaigns to bombard the media with similar sentiments. At this time, strategic alliances were forged, which proved handy later.

From the late 1980's, our Christian commitment had manifested itself in the establishment of a multicultural church in Chinatown and we ran a "drop-in" café / community centre for migrants and 'street kids', provided free counselling, liaised with government authorities, and provided free food and clothing. Informal English

classes were organised for newly arrived migrants, sports and recreation events were organised for ethnic youth, while cultural maintenance programmes were also initiated.

When the anti-Asian views of Pauline Hanson were voiced in 1997 and reports started coming in of blatant acts of racism against ethnic community members, I realised that more militant action was needed on my part. It was then also very natural that my 'old' allies and I would get re-activated again. Thus, A-CARD (Alliance-Communities Against Racism and Discrimination) formed to act as a pressure group to ensure that the Australian government and people supported the ideals of egalitarianism, multiculturalism, human rights, and social justice. I served as Chairperson with a committee comprising Vietnamese, Filipino, Chinese, Malaysian and other Australian leaders, but our members came from over sixty ethnic communities.

A highlight of my A-Card work was the signing of a 'Joint Declaration on Multiculturalism, Human Rights and Australian Solidarity' by over fifty community leaders and politicians at the City Hall on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1997. This document was then displayed at the John Oxley Library and handed over to the Queensland State Library to ensure the preservation of this historic memorabilia for posterity on 3<sup>rd</sup> December that year.

In the lead-up to the State Elections in June 1998, A-CARD held major political forums at my church, inviting all parties to outline their multicultural policies. A pre-election multicultural rally was held at the Botanic Gardens (to coincide with the Annual Picnic in the Park) and balloons and material were handed to the thousands gathered there. Our special speaker was Rev. Professor James Haire, Indonesian missionary and the current President of the Uniting Church of Australia. Emotions ran very high during all these events and caught the attention of the national media. Inevitably, I was media spokesperson for ethnic communities for a while and, at the height of the Hanson furore, SBS flew me to Sydney for a live television debate to team up with University lecturer Robert Mann against a One Nation representative and National Party member, De-Ann Kelly.

A day before the State Elections, A-CARD published a quarter-page advertisement in the 'Australian' to persuade voters NOT to vote for any racist party. It was gratifying to know that I was part of a grass roots movement, as the advertisement (and in fact, all our campaigns) were funded by donations from people who sacrificed hard-earned income to give to that important cause. I authorised that advertisement (with Michael Choi, who in 2001 became the first Chinese Member of Parliament in Queensland) and for my efforts, received 'hate-mail' that had to be handed to the Queensland Police! Personally, I felt that it certainly was the best and the worst of times! It was heartening to see usually apathetic people rallying to fight injustice and prejudice but it saddened me to see a usually tolerant and harmonious society divided by racist attitudes.

That November, I received a Multicultural Service Award from Premier Peter Beattie and was invited to speak in Parliament on behalf of all recipients. In March 1999, I was appointed to the Premier's Council For Women, representing all the ethnic women in Queensland. Our brief was "Women and the Workforce" and I (with my indigenous sisters from Mt Isa and the Torres Strait Islands) had to continually remind

the Council that ethnic and indigenous women were having problems getting employment or qualifications recognised in the first place, let alone worry about 'above award' remuneration and child-care facilities!

The Premier's Council set up a 'Women and Work' website to assist women to gain employment, funded several projects that included a kit to combat workplace bullying, and a major report, 'Beyond The Pink Collar' which made several key recommendations to government, which I am happy to say, are being implemented by several departments. It also highlighted the plight of the ethnic women as being some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised in Queensland society, especially in the field of vocational training and information technology. I was privileged to represent the Council at the Year 2000 International Women's Day celebrations in Charleville, where I had a special meeting with women from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD), listening to specific issues faced by these 'country women'.

I knew that what I was doing was important for all the ethnic women in Queensland but, as I had also become Foundation Principal of the Asian Pacific Institute in 1998, juggling duties and volunteer activities became quite a feat! The volunteering work had increased greatly as our church (the International City Church) had now relocated to its own building in Fortitude Valley and my brief was to set up the Multicultural Community Centre (MCC). When MCC was officially incorporated in 1996, we were finally in a position to apply for government funding. Thus for three months every year, grant submissions occupy much of my time.

To date MCC has run hugely successful projects funded by Arts Queensland, Multicultural Affairs Queensland, Brisbane City Council, Department of Families, Employment and Training (DET), Education Department, Jupiters Casino Trust Fund, and the Gaming Machines Fund. Key projects have included an annual Art Show ("Unity In Diversity", "Multicultural Women's Business", "Looking For One's Roots") targeting ethnic and indigenous artists who do not pay any commission for works sold, multi-media youth workshops, a Senior Citizen project involving also the cross-cultural training of Nursing Home staff, a Sport and Recreation Programme for families, and a Multicultural Women's programme where marginalized women come into the Centre for 'Life Skills' workshops and to form social networks.

Being an ex-academic, my passion has been the empowering of disadvantaged people through training and obtaining government accredited qualifications that ultimately lead to jobs with a career path. Hence at present, my 'pet' project focuses on vocational training for CALD men and women in 'high demand' areas, that is, Aged Care and Hospitality industries that are requiring more multicultural staff. Thus I help supervise a 'Community Training Partnerships' project - a Certificate II in Hospitality (in association with Hospitality Training Association) and Certificate III in Aged Care (with South Bank TAFE). Cultural maintenance is also high on my agenda and I assist



*Jeannie and David Mok with the Governor and Mrs. Arnison at the MCC Art Show 2002*

a team that runs a Community Language School every Saturday, teaching Cantonese (Kindergarten – Grade 6), three Mandarin classes, and English for refugees

and new migrants.

Being able to influence policy in the interests of multiculturalism has resulted in my serving on several government boards, including the Board of Psychologists Queensland, the Royal Children's Hospital District Health Council and Foundation, Community Learning and Skilling Committee of the Board of Employment and Training and the Community Consultation Group (Multicultural Affairs Queensland). I have just been invited by Premier Beattie to serve on a new four-member Multicultural Women's Advisory Committee for the next two years.

For the past two years, I have also served on the Evaluation Panel for the Education Department, choosing finalists for its 'Awards of Excellence'. I was also thrilled to be part of the Public Libraries Advisory Committee of the Queensland State Library for sometime where I lobbied on behalf of the multicultural clientele (alas, it was recently re-structured), and also served on the Queensland Reconciliation Committee. A highpoint was when I represented the state with Uncle Bob Anderson at Corroboree 2000 at the Sydney Opera House, and we both placed our palm prints on the historic Reconciliation Document now housed in the National Museum.

It has taken much time, energy, money to do all the things that I have done; my efforts would not have possible without the many tremendous volunteers from my church and community centre who donate money as well as 'hands on' help. Indeed, my husband has been my chief supporter and financial backer. David does not believe that our Christian commitment allows us to sit still when there is injustice, or when so

many are in want. Thus my sons Jonathan and Julian take it as a 'given' that Mum is constantly 'out and about' endeavouring to enrich people's lives and to give them hope and a voice in Australian society. But I know that it has been MY privilege to benefit the most –there is nothing so rewarding as to be able to 'love' someone through a crisis, and to see tears give way to smiles and joyous laughter.