

How I became a leader, an unconventional journey

If you had asked me when I was at school what I wanted to be, I would have said that I had no idea. I didn't know what job I wanted to do but I knew I wanted to make a difference. Sometimes I dreamed of being a documentary film maker, other times a lawyer fighting for human rights, but I really had no idea. The prospect of the big bad world was both exciting and frightening. So many possibilities but where to start?

So how did I get to where I am today?

I come from a line of strong women. My mother's mother didn't go to university; she had wanted to be a nurse but had to stay at home and look after her mother in a small country town called Bingara. She, however, made sure that all 5 of her daughters, as well as her only son, went to university. This was at a time when the number of men far outweighed the number of women going to university - 77% men 23% women. It's hard to believe that up until 1966, women employed in the Australian public service had to give up their jobs if they got married.

My mother is a feminist and an activist and has been all my life. As we grew up, she stressed the importance for women of being economically independent. This was despite her world being made up of women who were very economically reliant on their husbands. In her world, women stayed at home, looked after the children, and their husbands had **the big** jobs. But my mother saw her education as a way to ensure we had a full understanding of the world around us, of politics, history and people. She taught me that women can do anything they want, that women are strong and feisty. She taught me about human rights and the importance of standing up for what you believe in. She showed me that being unconventional was something to be proud of. She used to wear these outrageously fashionable clothes to pick us up from school, where I would be both equally mortified, that she wasn't like the other mums wearing twin set and pearls, and in awe that she looked so fabulous in her flares and jumpsuits. In a conventional world, she was unique.

I spent the first 26 years of my life living in various parts of England. My childhood was spent in a leafy suburb called Surrey, where my world was white, middle class and Catholic. It was the opposite of diverse. I went to a Convent and was taught that non-Catholics were people to feel sorry for. It feels like something out of the Stepford wives! How did I escape?

I went to University in Manchester in the North of England. Manchester was everything Surrey wasn't. My introduction to the world of diversity started here. My middle-class eyes were opened and I saw the world through a different lens. The spectacle of poverty was everywhere. My neighbours would knock on my door asking if they could borrow 50p to eat. The polarity between the haves and have nots in England was shocking. Racism was profound, with my friends of Asian background targeted by police for just walking down the street late at night. I learnt about injustice from witnessing it first-hand.

My History and French degree taught me how to research, analyse and write. To debate ideas, to value the power of communicating in other languages. It taught me about the evils of colonialism and the power of ideas. However, it didn't give me an obvious career

direction. Once again, as I finished university, I had the same feeling I had when I finished school - what now? The structured world of terms and exams at the end of each year looked much more attractive than the big yawning chasm of an unknown future.

I spent a bit of time doing odd jobs and then eventually, in 1991, during a cold, miserable November, with the prospect of the UK and the US starting World War 3 over the invasion of Kuwait, I decided to leave the UK.

In Australia, I ended up working as an assistant director on films. The film industry sounds glamorous – actors, exotic locations, storytelling – and whilst it does involve those elements, it also requires ridiculously long hours, dysfunctional people, big egos and a level of job insecurity that most sensible people wouldn't endure. Stories that you hear from the #metoo movement were rife when I was working in film.

However, I also learnt some great skills - To schedule, to organise, to multitask, to get 100s of extras ready in full make up and costume by 9 o'clock in the morning and I also learnt the fundamentals of logistical planning and management with a back drop of deserts, bushland and tropical rainforests.

And I met my kind, supportive and caring husband, Stephen, which resulted in our two feisty, strong feminist daughters Latifah and Paloma who both flourished at this fabulous school.

The next stage in my journey to being a leader and to where I am now, was the Tampa incident. Only a handful of you students were born in 2001 so you may not know what the Tampa incident is all about.

The Tampa was a Norwegian ship that rescued 433 refugees from a leaky boat just outside Australian waters. The Australian government told the ship to go away and sent the army to land on the boat to turn it around. They didn't want the refugees to come to Australia, so they detained them on Nauru. This was the beginning of our shameful treatment of people who come here seeking safety and it was the catalyst to my life as a defender of human rights.

I realized I could no longer be a bystander and just watch bad things happen to good people. So, I dusted off my History and French degree and became a teacher of English as second language. That's how I ended up volunteering at the Asylum Seekers Centre. I enjoyed teaching people whose lives were so different from mine in so many ways yet also discovering how much we had in common. The richness of humanity opened up to me.

Then I started working for a Federal Politician, helping people with their immigration problems and managing the office. This was where I gathered all the skills I had learnt so far and combined them to be able to help the desperate people who walked through their local MP's door, who had nowhere else to go. This work also showed me the importance of a functioning democracy. If you don't like a policy, like the way we treat refugees and people seeking asylum or you want action on climate change, write to your local Federal MP. The

more communication the politicians get, the more likely they are to change their policy. Take it from me it works.

Now, I am the Executive Director of the Refugee Advice and Casework Service, RACS, the only refugee legal centre in NSW. At RACS we help people seeking protection in Australia apply for a visa, which lets them stay here in safety. The visa application process can take up to 30 hours and without legal assistance it is almost impossible to succeed. The form is in English; the law is complex and the interview is terrifying for someone who fled persecution.

When I read the job description, I didn't think I fit all the criteria, and the job title sounded too "impressive" but I loved what RACS did. So, I took a leap of faith and applied.

I was the first non-lawyer to run the organisation, it was unconventional, but my new approach and fresh perspective worked.

There have been times when I have been challenged as a non-lawyer running a legal centre but I have developed a strong leadership team of great people. Rather than focussing on what people are not good at, we have made a decision to focus on what people are good at.

It's important to know what your strengths are, and to remind yourself of those, rather than focus on your weaknesses. You can't change your weaknesses, but you can improve your strengths. Once you know that, it's quite liberating.

From my experience, if you find your passion, you will find your tribe. I feel very lucky to work in an organisation that is a feminist led, human rights organisation. We share ideas and celebrate each other's wins.

By working collaboratively inside and outside the organisation, we managed to help 6015 people with their protection visa applications last year. That means 6015 are less likely to be sent back to the danger they fled from.

You do need money to pay the bills, buy clothes and eat. But how much money makes you happy?

Working in a job with meaning, in a job that has purpose gets me up in the morning. I work hard and work long hours and don't really get paid well considering the hours I work, but I know that I will be able to look back on this time when our government is torturing people seeking asylum with inhumane policies and say, I did my best to stop these policies, to help the people impacted by them and didn't just stand by and do nothing. That beats a big pay check.

Whatever you do after you leave school, don't be a bystander. We live in a democracy and we can stand up and be counted. If you don't like our policies on refugees, if you don't like our inaction on climate change, contact your MP. Women are terribly unrepresented in Parliament; you are the generation that can make this inequity history. You are the hope for our future.

Thank you.

