

Speech for Vision Australia AGM 2007

Dr Murfitt, Professor McCallum and other Members of the Board, Mr Menses and other members of staff, Ms Hogan and members of the CRC, ladies and gentlemen.

May I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on the south bank of the Brisbane River where we meet and thank Uncle Hughie Kirk for his welcome to country.

When I was presented with the opportunity to speak at the Vision Australia AGM here today, I thought I could best contribute by highlighting the value and richness of diversity in all our lives.

In 1954, Dr Kenneth Jernigan, then the president of the National Federation of the Blind in the United States, wrote to the Californian state legislature to encourage the hiring of qualified blind teachers in California:

"The history of mankind is the story of the triumph of reason over superstition, of knowledge over belief, of fact over prejudice, and the progress of mankind is but the result of that triumph. In every area of human endeavour, advancement has come only with the crumbling of the barriers of ignorance. It has been so with science, with religion, with industrial technology and with human relations, and it is still so today. The struggle for enlightenment and justice has been and is the great issue of the age."

Part of that struggle has been to recognise and celebrate the advantages of

diversity. In essence, the importance of diversity is the richness it brings to our workplaces, our communities, and our lives. By richness, I mean the benefits to all of us when we work in workplaces and live in communities that value diversity.

Let me give an example from my own life. Not much more than a decade ago, the prevailing attitude among some sectors of the community was that female judges should if necessary be 'tolerated'. Some would only grudgingly admit that there was no reason why women could not be appointed to the bench.

Ten years on, female judges have shown that they are more than capable of carrying out judicial duties as competently as male judges have always done. Today, there is little doubt within the community that merit, not gender, is the only relevant criterion for a judicial appointment. If women are excluded, then the gender of the appointee has triumphed over merit. A diverse judiciary creates an enriched judicial system partly because a diverse group of people bring different approaches to their work.

This is also true in the general employment market. Employees with diverse capacities bring different qualities and experiences to their work. Some people will see things that others don't; and some people will hear things that are said or notice things that are not said or smell things that others do not notice. Appreciating the richness of diversity is about honouring people for who they are and what they bring to their workplaces and to their communities.

A person with a particular attribute whether it be blindness, deafness, youth, maturity, should be valued for the particular abilities and strengths that person brings to the workplace and our lives.

I have had the privilege this year of working closely with a brilliant young lawyer, Louisa Young, who is blind and who has opened my senses to things that I have failed to hear, aromas that I can't smell and the richness of her life. She has enriched the lives of all of the people who work within and interact with the court system.

She reminded me of the French novelist, Marcel Proust's famous reflection on smell, a sense considered by many sighted people to be unimportant because they do not have the same capacities as many blind people. Proust described how the scent of a madeleine dipped in tea brought memories of his childhood flooding back to him:

"But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection."

Even within the blind community, there is a great deal of diversity as shown from the varied occupations in which blind people have excelled in, reflecting the richness of diversity within all groups in society. I think it is easy for able-bodied people to forget that the richness of diversity is still very evident within minority communities. This leads to the categorisation and unnecessary restrictions on people's lives denying society the full benefit of the individual's talents and gifts and denying the individual affected the opportunity to be respected and honoured for who they are. By failing to value the richness of diversity, we lower our own

expectations of people and deprive people of achieving their full potential.

As I mentioned, the career paths that blind people, as one example of a group within society, have followed are numerous. Some blind people have become accomplished lawyers such as Rupert Cross (author of *Cross on Evidence*); Ron McCallum (until recently Dean of law at the University of Sydney); Barry Murray (Barrister); and Graeme Innes (Human Rights and Disability Discrimination Commissioner with HREOC). Other blind people have had successful careers in politics and leadership positions such as David Blunkett (a member of parliament in the UK and the first blind Cabinet Minister); Professor Colin Mackenzie Low, now Baron Low of Dalston (member of the House of Lords and chair of the Royal National Institute of the Blind); the late Abd al-Aziz ibn Abd Allah ibn Baaz (former grand mufti of Saudi Arabia); Helen Keller (deaf-blind author and advocate); Tilly Aston (an Australian blind woman who advocated for the rights of blind people and who established the Foundation for the Advancement of the Blind now Vision Australia); Phyllis Gration (founder of Lady Nell Seeing Eye Dogs for the Blind now SEDA); David Blyth (Founder of Blind Citizens Australia - the national advocacy body for blind people); and Louis Braille.

Blind people have excelled even in areas that are still considered to be the domain of the sighted such as painting (Esref Armagan- a blind Turkish painter); Dr Kent Cullers (a blind astronomer); Ted Henter (engineer as a sighted person but a computer programmer after becoming blind - developed JAWS software in partnership with Bill Joyce); and Abraham Nemeth (mathematician and developer of the Nemeth Braille code for mathematics).

For these exceptional people to have achieved what they have, people have

appreciated the richness of their diversity and encouraged them to pursue their dreams.

I think, however, that it is important to say that not everyone can, or should be expected to, be brilliant. As Dr Kenneth Jernigan noted, “We who are blind are pretty much like you. We have our share of both geniuses and jerks, but most of us [are] somewhere between, ordinary people living ordinary lives.”

The richness of diversity adds value to our workplaces and communities as well as to the individual. The challenge then is for us to continue to actively promote and encourage diversity within our workplaces, our communities and within community organisations such as Vision Australia. This includes being open-minded about hiring people from diverse backgrounds and appreciating the abilities of people with disabilities. This includes ensuring equal access to all aspects of our community for people from diverse backgrounds including people with disabilities and respecting the value of different perspectives and views within organisations and our own community.

The challenge facing organisations such as Vision Australia is to represent the diverse needs of the blind community and to respect the richness of diversity. As we all know the potential for members of the blind community to contribute to the wider community is limitless. As Helen Keller said, "The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart."

We should never miss the opportunity to celebrate the richness of diversity.