

## LECTURE IN HONOUR

# 30th National Dietitians Association of Australia Conference: Lecture in honour of Elizabeth (Bettie) Richardson OAM

### Our dietetic heritage: A shared legacy

'Life is divided into three terms—that which was, which is, and which will be. Let us learn from the past to profit the present, to live better in the future.'

William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

Reflecting on the lives of our dietetic ancestors and the paths they have taken is an opportunity for us to learn from the past. Previous presenters have noted that sharing stories from our dietetic heritage enriches our culture and fosters social and professional unity.<sup>1,2</sup> It should also remind us that we are fortunate because our predecessors have created a legacy for the dietetics profession. This is a shared legacy which we have all inherited.

### One dietitian's life well lived

In his autobiography, *A Fortunate Life*, Albert Facey describes his life growing up in Western Australia in the early 1900s. It wasn't an easy life and his tale elicits much sympathy and despair, but it also speaks of adventure, hope, courage and optimism. At the end he reflects with *I have lived a very good life, it has been very rich and full. I have been very fortunate and I am thrilled by it when I look back.*<sup>3</sup>

When reflecting on the dietetic life of Elizabeth (Bettie) Richardson there is a similar sense of 'richness and fullness'. She was one of the early breed of dietitians embarking on a career in a new profession. Bettie received a science degree from the University of Sydney in 1942, before completing dietetic training at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney, in January 1944. Like most student dietitians, Bettie recalls stories of food service dramas and special diets of the day.<sup>4</sup> It was during this time that Bettie became active in the NSW Dietetic Association, which was to be the start of her long, continuous and dedicated commitment to a professional association.

Although most women of the time stopped work when they married, Bettie moved to Darwin with her husband and became one of the early dietetic pioneers in the Northern Territory. In addition to hospital work, she branched out working with various community groups as well as writing a weekly newspaper column and doing regular radio interviews. This was quite a smorgasbord of dietetic practice for those heady early days.

In 1948, Bettie took a career break to raise three children. It was 15 years later following a move to Canberra that Bettie re-entered the dietetic workforce. This was a challenging

time as much had changed and she studied hard to ensure her competency in returning to dietetic practice. From 1963, Bettie worked at the Canberra Community Hospital, at times as the sole dietitian. She went on to become Chief Dietitian at the then Woden Valley now Canberra Hospital, until her retirement in 1984. During this time, Bettie oversaw the specialisation of hospital dietetic services and the movement of services into community health centres during the early 1970s. Bettie was instrumental in establishing the ACT Dietetic Association becoming Foundation President in 1971. The ACT Dietetic Association under Bettie's leadership was rather entrepreneurial organising conferences and writing weekly newspaper articles, allowing the ACT association to thrive.

Bettie was an astute operator who ceased any opportunity to promote nutrition and the dietetic profession. At the grassroots, she involved herself in many different organisations being Foundation President of the ACT Diabetes Association, a foundation member of the ACT Home Economics Association, a member of the ACT Branch of the Catering Institute of Australia, and a member of the Apprenticeship Board of the ACT. She co-authored *The Anti-Coronary Cookbook*,<sup>5</sup> one of the first 'diet' books which was very successful receiving a 'Bestseller of the Year Award' in 1973. Bettie was committed to growing the profession, to ensuring competence of professional practice and to the nutritional welfare of the community. This was formally recognised in 1999 when she was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for her service to the dietetic profession and the promotion of nutrition education in the community.

The dietetics profession has been fortunate to have Bettie's commitment, enthusiasm, leadership and active contribution, particularly in the ACT. Although at the national level the profession owes much to Bettie as a dedicated volunteer. This was recognised in 1987 when Bettie was awarded DAA honorary life membership. Bettie's dietetics career was 'very rich and full' and she achieved much. When I asked her recently about her achievements she simply said, 'yes it was a pretty full life'. Indeed, Bettie's career was 'a fortunate life' for our dietetics profession.

### Creating one tribe

The establishment of a single national professional association and the unity and fellowship that comes from being one tribe is a significant part of our shared legacy. Bettie knew the



value of being one tribe and she played a key role in establishing our national dietetic association.

Anthropologists talk about tribes as societies that are based on kinship. They are defined by traditions of common descent, language, culture and ideology. Taking a more contemporary view, Godin<sup>6</sup> argues that tribes are everywhere and every tribe is yearning for leadership and connection. He says it takes two things to turn a group of people into a tribe, first shared ideas and values, and second a way to communicate. It could also be argued that professional associations are akin to tribes. They share ideas and have common values and are built on a basis of communication. They provide a sense of belonging and fellowship as well as collective purpose. They recognise strength in numbers. However, the path to creating one dietetic tribe as a national association in Australia was a long and difficult one.

The establishment of dietetic associations started in 1935 with the Victorian Dietetic Association, which began for the purpose of promoting the study of dietetics, to bring about closer cooperation, to improve dietetic working conditions and to establish hospital dietetic training standards.<sup>7</sup> The formation of the NSW Dietetic Association followed soon after in 1939, and although it was set up for similar reasons there was virtually no contact between the two states until after the Second World War. It was actually the year of Bettie's graduation in 1944 that suggestions for closer liaison were initially proposed. However, there was a major obstacle of differing training standards that impeded closer contact. In NSW, a science degree or equivalent was a prerequisite for hospital-based training, whereas Victorians still had a choice of obtaining a degree or a diploma prior to hospital training. Nonetheless, there was a desire to form an alliance which led to the formation of the Australian Dietetic Council (ADC) in 1950. Formation of the ADC was significant because notionally it could promote cooperation and understanding, and increase the uniformity of practice and standards. However, the deep-seated division over training standards remained.

Our ancestors, including Bettie Richardson, recognised the value which could be gained from national unity and the creation of one tribe, so in 1972 the ADC agreed to work towards forming a national association in time for the 1977 International Congress of Dietetics in Sydney. Bettie was tasked with convening a sub-committee of state representatives to establish the national body which was to have well-defined functions and powers that would go beyond the communication role of the ADC. As a result, the Australian Association of Dietitians was formed well ahead of schedule in 1976. The official history of Australian Dietetics refers to there being general agreement that without the enthusiasm and the tireless efforts of Bettie the formation of a national association might never have been achieved in time.<sup>7</sup> This work led by Bettie was the precursor for the formation in 1983 of the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA). The creation of a national association identified our shared purpose as a tribe and is articulated in the objects of the DAA Constitution. These objects are DAA's reason for being and are an important reminder of what its members are collectively striving to achieve.

The creation of one tribe was an important step in our dietetic history and one which is significant part of our shared legacy. There is much collective 'richness and fullness' that comes from being one tribe. We have been fortunate to have had predecessors, like Bettie, who had the vision and leadership to bring us together.

## A legacy of leadership

In our professional lives, leadership is a much sought after commodity. Leadership is part of a foundation competency standard for entry-level dietitians. Leadership and influence is a practice development area linked to DAA's Accredited Practising Dietitian program. The 2011-2014 DAA Strategic Plan includes leadership as a core value.<sup>8</sup>

But what is leadership? Over time there has been much written on leadership, including within the dietetics profession, but there is no clear definition of what leadership actually is.<sup>9</sup> The Australian Public Service Commission refers to leadership as *the practice of using influence to bring about change; establish future direction, helping people to see the direction and work towards it, and developing people. The expectation is that leadership skills are relevant, and that they should be developed in everyone.*<sup>10</sup>

One leadership model is built around five practices which leaders are said to demonstrate. When leaders do their best they model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act and encourage the heart.<sup>11</sup> Our dietetic heritage is rich in ancestors who have stepped up and demonstrated these leadership practices, as do our present-day leaders of the profession. What can we learn from the actions of our past and present leaders? Our leaders believe they can make a difference. They commit to a vision and make decisions based on that commitment. They are willing to take the first steps, and by being credible and authentic encourage others to follow. They have hope and courage to embrace new direction and change, and show determination to tackle challenges and overcome setbacks. They are prepared to question the status quo and take risks when required.

Our leaders are prepared to have difficult conversations to overcome differences. Productive conflict through passionate debate is known to be important for team and organisational success,<sup>12</sup> which is why we should not shy away from having passionate debate. Our leaders know they cannot do it alone. Our past leaders knew this, which is why they worked so hard in pursuit of a national association. Our leaders seek connection both within the tribe and outside to achieve shared goals. Our leaders are focused on the future. They are able to imagine the possibilities and act on these. They remain optimistic in the face of adversity. Our leaders celebrate success and share in the unity and fellowship that comes from the profession. They seek to bring out the best in others.

However, in all this, the efforts of our leaders can be measured not so much in what they achieve at the time, both past and present, but also by what they leave behind which can be built on in the future. Our dietetic heritage is proof of

there being a pedigree of leadership in the profession. A legacy of leadership is part of our shared legacy. Leadership theory tells us that leaders aren't just born.<sup>13</sup> More often, leadership is learned and therefore everyone has the potential to be a leader. But leadership involves discomfort, because it is uncomfortable to propose an idea that may fail, or to challenge the status quo, or to face a passionate debate. It has been argued that leadership is scarce because few people are willing to go through the discomfort required to lead and this is what makes leadership so valuable.<sup>6</sup> Being uncomfortable can create the leverage that makes leadership worthwhile.

So what can you do to foster the legacy of leadership within the profession? Like Bettie Richardson, use the opportunities and experiences afforded by the 'richness and fullness' of the dietetic landscape to grow and develop as a leader. If you are not feeling some level of discomfort in your work, perhaps you are not reaching your potential as a leader. Or when you find a dietetic leader who inspires you, become an enthusiastic follower. By riding their wave with them not only will you make a difference through collaborative effort, but you are likely to learn a thing or two for your own leadership toolkit.

## Our shared legacy

A legacy is a gift, a bequest, anything handed down by an ancestor or predecessor. The dietetics profession has inherited a legacy that comes from the achievements of our predecessors such as Bettie Richardson. This is a legacy which we all share. But having been gifted with this legacy, we also have a shared responsibility for its safekeeping.

We are the current custodians of the profession's legacy. Our actions like those of our ancestors should be aimed at building the legacy for the future. For this reason ask yourself what you can do today so that the next generation of the profession can continue to reap the benefits that come from our shared legacy.

'The future depends on what you do today.'  
Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948)

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