

MURMUR

ALUMNI MAGAZINE • SUMMER 2021 SPECIAL EDITION



Four Alumni heading for *distinction*



Acknowledgement of Country

Murdoch University acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the traditional custodians of this country and its waters and that Murdoch University stands on Noongar Country.

Murdoch University pays its respects to Noongar elders past and present and acknowledges their wisdom and advice in teaching and cultural knowledge activities.



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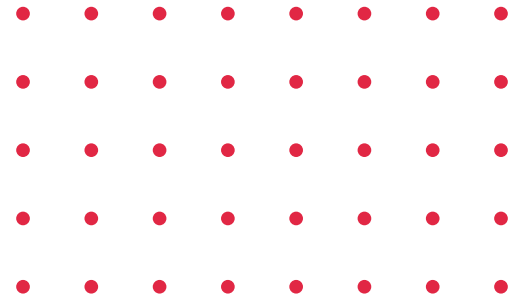
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Free your think



From the Editor

I work in the Alumni Relations team. A few weeks ago, we hosted a bit of a bash. Well, the 2021 Distinguished Alumni Awards to be fair. A moving celebration of achievement, of character, of milestones and sacrifices, and acts of service. Recipients surrounded by loved ones, self-deprecating acceptances, mums tearing up at speeches, floor decals, lush carpets, MC improv and a gin on arrival called 'A Walter's Welcome'. The latter had no ice, but was as good an icebreaker as it gets, sparking conversations left and right through a small sprig of rosemary floating in 40% scarlet sea. Yep, sometimes it's the little things.

There was technical anxiety behind the scenes. Then rehearsal tears of joy, when those unable to join us for their honour, many kilometres yonder, came through beaming, as buffer free as a laser. As a result of these four individuals being honoured by Murdoch, I got to talk to them all on Microsoft Teams for an hour. Some segments drawn to make presentation videos on the night. Strangers conversing, backdrop anxiety, questions addressed. My life just that little bit better as a result.

One of them has sought agreement in places rife with civil war. One of them ensures disadvantaged kids get a breakfast before school. Another oversees a service that can be the difference between life and death. Midway through the final interview, I discovered I was chatting to someone who was responsible for making sure 10,000 people get fed every single day. I felt a tad humbled, especially later that day, as I fed just myself too many Pringles during another YouTube rabbit hole.

The four hours I spent interviewing these Murdoch alumni was a privilege and a shot in the arm reminder of the limitless results that are possible with the blend of potential, education and endeavour. This edition of Murmur is dedicated to telling their unique stories. I hope you enjoy the subsequent tales of four of the very finest from your flock.

Season's Greetings.

Michael Sampson
Murmur Editor



An honourable evening

Diplomacy, human rights and gender equality; a prominent legal career and mentorship; stewardship of an Australian health service icon; and protecting lives during the pandemic; – these are the diverse capabilities of four Murdoch University alumni celebrated at RAC Arena in late November 2021.

Diplomat Alison Chatres, commercial lawyer and philanthropist Tony Chong, Royal Flying Doctor Service WA chief executive Rebecca Tomkinson, and Dr Heston Kwong JP, Assistant Director at Department of Health, Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, were recognised as Distinguished Alumni for their contribution to their profession and the community.

Interim Vice Chancellor Professor Jane den Hollander said all four had risen to the challenges they faced and found a way to give back and make our community a better place.

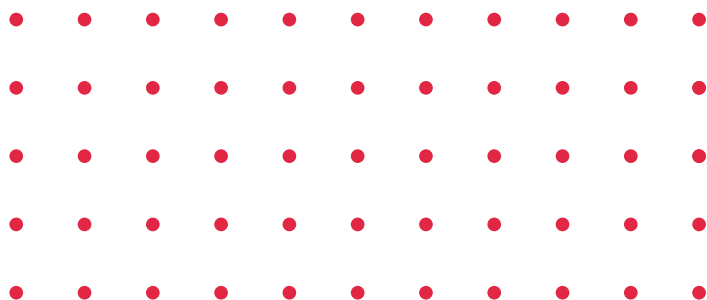
“What unifies them all is the evident application of the knowledge, insights and skills acquired to build impressive careers,” she said.

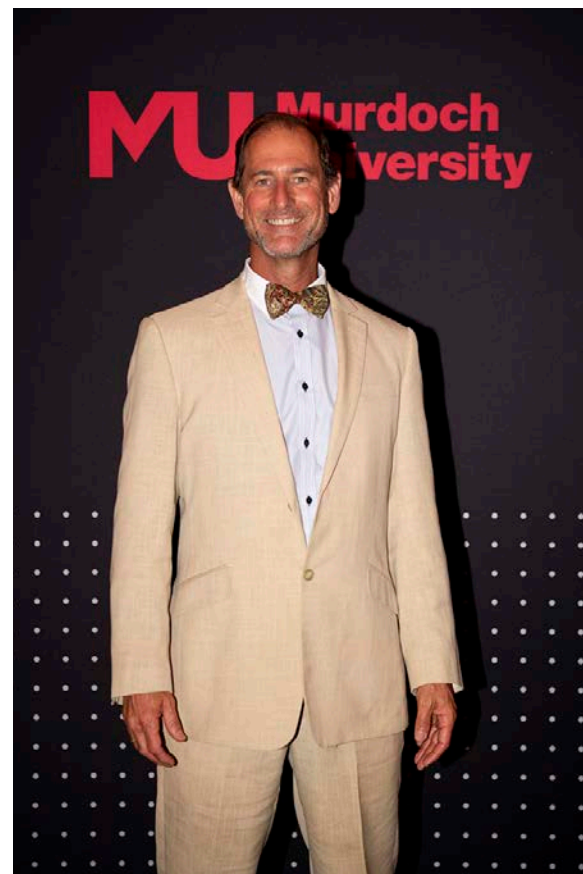
“There comes with a university education a responsibility to take what knowledge has been acquired and go out and do good.”

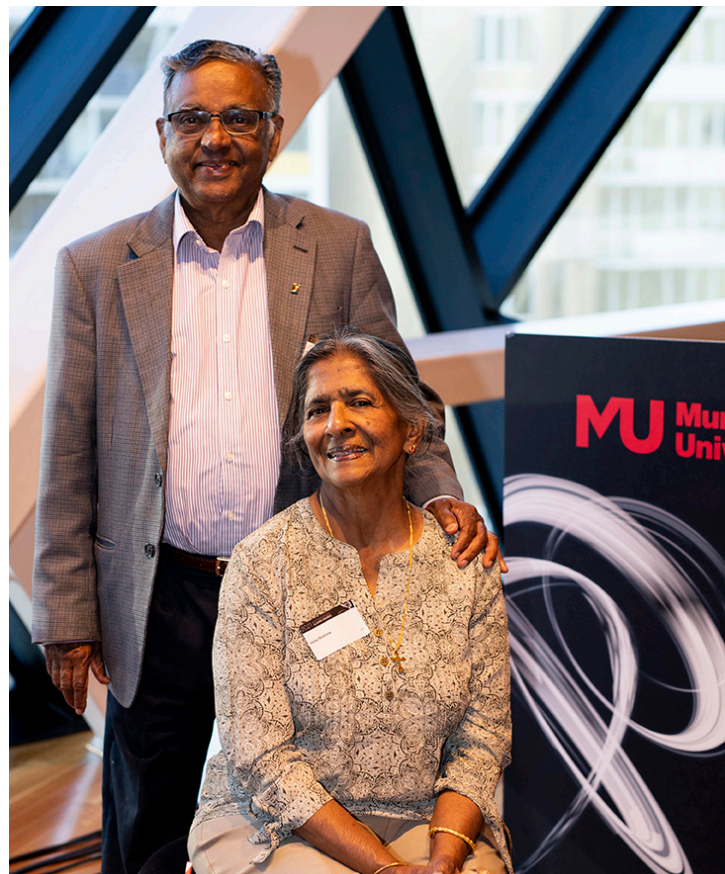
Professor den Hollander said all four had truly distinguished themselves through career achievement, service to the community, and personal integrity.

The annual Distinguished Alumni Awards honour and celebrate Murdoch alumni who have gone into the world and truly made their mark in diverse fields, with only 30 recipients since the Awards’ inception 10 years ago. These four individuals are a fitting addition to an elite group.

“ There comes with a university education a responsibility to take what knowledge has been acquired and go out and do good. ”









From The Bar to the School Canteen

Award winning commercial lawyer Tony Chong initially had no desire to join the profession.

"I come from a family of lawyers. My dad was a lawyer, my brother and sister are both lawyers, my brother-in-law is a lawyer, my wife is a lawyer and to be honest, I think my mum thinks she is a lawyer! I actually wanted to be an accountant," said Tony.

When he turned up at a Murdoch University information fair in 1990, Tony was introduced to the first Dean of the Murdoch Law School, The Honourable Emeritus Professor Ralph Simmonds. The latter bringing a persuasive pitch to the budding accountant by suggesting that if Tony completed a double degree, studying law and accounting under a Bachelor of Commerce, he would have a legal background as a secondary back up option after graduation.

With a small number of academics at Murdoch's new Law School in that period, students got to know the staff very well and Tony retains strong memories of his lecturers and the Dean in particular.

"I always found him impressive in the way that he conducted himself. The intellect he brought to the whole process. He subsequently became a Supreme Court Judge which testifies to that intellect, his vast experience and know-how."

Tony loved his years at university.

"I look back at those days very fondly. It's your formative years where you essentially move from childhood into adulthood. I was on campus from early in the morning until the evening, every day, and participated in all parts of university life," said Tony.

In addition to the academic side, Tony recalls how his Murdoch experience opened his eyes to the world.

"Looking back on it, university taught me a lot about independent thinking. It taught me about how you should conduct yourself in life. The University was, and still is in my opinion, very strong on social justice, very strong on equality, very strong on the under-privileged. Although I have ended up as a lawyer, which is a very privileged position to be in, I feel the social equality elements I was exposed to helped set me up for who I am today. When you are at university you may not think about those elements every day, but by being immersed there, through a kind of osmosis you end up with that awareness," said Tony.

Following graduation, Tony started in the legal

profession, but he did in fact subsequently embark on an accounting career, becoming a Certified Public Accountant for seven years, but in his words, was 'not that great at it' and eventually moved into the legal world.

Tony took up a substantive role with The Griffin Group, where he acted as Group Counsel. He advised the conglomerate extensively on board and corporate issues including project financing for major power plant developments.

He became a Partner at Lavan, serving as a Group Leader for Corporate Services and led its Asia Desk for eight years. He subsequently helped established advisory firm, Quadrant Advisory.

Tony is presently a Managing Partner at a global law firm, Squire Patton Boggs, acting as the Head of the Asia Desk (AU). He serves as a principal adviser to high-net worth individuals and corporate entities, specialising in mergers and acquisitions and the Asian commercial business environment.

In addition to his full-time role, Tony sits on the boards of a diverse range of organisations, something that he finds very rewarding.

They include one of Perth's largest automotive dealers, the DVG Group, the Murdoch University Art Board, and the WA Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

"The board representation allows me to learn, spread my wings and share my experience. I meet people from very diverse backgrounds. As my representation expanded, I became very deliberate in my choices. For example, choosing a role where I get to interact with the community (Chamber of Commerce) selecting one in the commercial world (DVG), becoming involved in the world of health through my role at the Royal Perth Medical Foundation Finance Committee and reflecting my passion and love for the arts through my role with Murdoch's Art Board. I enjoy all of them."

The board roles were the beginning of Tony's journey to give back to the community once he had established his professional career. But the personal gains that have resulted came as a surprise.

"You just don't appreciate how much others give to you as a result of the giving process. I don't take it for granted. You do wear different hats at different times and it's interesting to see different perspectives that develop you as a person. It also helps you develop empathy for things and resilience."

" Looking back on it, university taught me a lot about independent thinking. It taught me about how you should conduct yourself in life."



Tony chatting to Murdoch Kulbardi staff at a Murdoch alumni event.





Tony with family at his 1996 graduation ceremony

Although Tony completed his studies at Murdoch in 1995, he has stayed very connected with the university, a relationship which he has strengthened over recent years. The catalyst for this was a sad event that hit the Chong family unexpectedly.

"It began with one very significant event in my life which unfortunately, was the passing of my father. I took the opportunity three years after his death, in 2007, to set up the James TF Chong Memorial Scholarship, which is to provide funding to a Year 12 student who wants to study law. One who has the aptitude, but just doesn't have the financials to study law. I took the opportunity to start the scholarship as a marker to end a three-year mourning period. I guess this process appeared as an opportunity for me to move on, but at the same time honour his name and establish something in his memory."

It was through the scholarship that Tony began working more closely with his alma mater, a relationship that has deepened in subsequent years with his work with the Law School Board and Art Board.

"Murdoch University is a special place for me. It has given me every opportunity that I have now in life. So now I'm in the privileged position of being able to give back, I like to support the University from that viewpoint. Hence setting up the scholarship. Hence setting up other programs that I'm working on now to provide similar opportunities for others particularly for others."

This altruistic drive has also seen Tony act as a mentor for many young people. The more mentorships he does, the more he feels he grasps the essence of the role. For him, the keys to being an effective mentor are the ability to be an active listener, talking less, and listening more. Secondly, to have strong empathy, but principally it's to have a willingness to really understand what motivates and drives the mentee. He feels that only if there is true understanding can you actually help guide a mentee. Similarly, the mentor is not meant to advise or give specific direction and instructions to the mentee. It's more to guide the mentee in whichever direction they wish to go.

On occasion, Tony also returns to the campus to speak to students.

"You just don't appreciate how much others give to you as a result of the giving process. I don't take it for granted."

"It's nice to be in a position to be able to share experience and help those that follow. I strongly believe that you don't need to shout any of your thoughts and perspectives. If they want to learn, if they want to listen, they will. I always specify that these are my thoughts and my experience. The students will have their own thoughts and experience. It is just about bringing a new perspective to whatever topic is being discussed and trying to prevent others making some of the same mistakes," said Tony.

During an in-depth interview following notice of his Distinguished Alumni Award, Tony shared some of his thoughts about being a lawyer.

He feels all lawyers need to be technically strong, creative, and good at problem solving.

"Paring everything back, to be a really great lawyer, that is effective, you must have a willingness or desire to help people no matter what the issue, or problem is," said Tony. He believes this is why most people join the profession in the first instance – the desire to seek justice and help others. It is something that often gets obscured once people get immersed in the business of law, but reminders often rear their head.

"We are always reminded that we are Officers of the Court, that we are here to serve the community. That's the number one thing and justice is paramount. I acknowledge that we have a lot of justice issues. The legal system is not perfect, and I think it's incumbent on all lawyers and people in certain positions to try and help to resolve those things. Legal systems can be expensive, and they can cause a lot of emotional distress. But at its heart, the system is there to try and find some justice and fairness for people."

This view was at the centre of Tony's thinking when his story was featured in the 'Lawyers Make a difference' – the Law Society's campaign that aims to challenge perceptions, break down stereotypes and tell powerful, positive stories of lawyers and their important work in the community.

“In the future, what I really would like to achieve is to help others to fulfil their own potential. The number one thing that we all can be is happy. Happiness is a choice. And helping others is a choice of mine.”

“As lawyers, we are subjected to all kinds of jokes and that’s fine. But if you think about it, who do you call when you are really in trouble? It’s the lawyer. At the end of day, it’s the person that can help, or be there to help you get out of a situation. Many people view lawyers as sharks. In my case, personally, I hope they see me as a shark with a heart.”

Discussion swung to what exactly it is, in his opinion, that elevates the cream of the crop within the legal profession. The leading lights such as 2017 DAA winner and fellow Murdoch alumnus, The Hon Justice James Edelman, who became an Oxford Professor before the age of 35 and a Justice at the WA Supreme Court before the age of 40. Tony believes there are a couple of elements that are unique to the elite.

“One is a very, very high intellectual capability that is just beyond a lot of peers in that space. An intellect that is consistent and brought to everything, with the utmost integrity. In all High Courts it is consistent across the whole bench. In addition, I think it is the ability to look at a problem and dissect it to its simplest elements. All the very top lawyers have an ability to think through a problem and dissect it to its core. They can forget about the forest, all the dense and complex detail, and go straight to the little needle at the heart of it. They clear the forest, clear the noise. That’s the key thing,” said Tony.

When pressed if he had encountered such a leading mind, Tony said just in a couple of instances during his whole career.

“I was once in front of a very senior Barrister regarding a tax matter. I’d been working on a very complicated tax issue for months and I sought out his counsel for a second opinion. Literally within probably an hour of me talking, he not only understood the full complexity of the issue, but fundamentally shaped the question I should be asking to resolve the issue. He gave me another perspective that I just never saw during months of analysis. And that’s the difference. I’m still humbled today by that kind of experience.”

In recent years, Tony said many of his most rewarding moments had come through his not-for-profit work. This has been centred primarily on the homeless and disadvantaged children. He became involved with an

organisation called Manna Inc who ensure at-risk children receive a breakfast before attending school for the day.

“The key to the Breakfast Programme is that kids who go hungry cannot study well. They often become truants. Many only get to eat once a day. So, the whole idea is to provide them with a breakfast and a hence a greater chance to concentrate during the school day. Hopefully they can then experience all the same opportunities that other children enjoy,” said Tony.

As he enters the next phase of his life, Tony is clear about where he sees spending increasing time and where he feels he can be most of service.

“In the future, what I really would like to achieve is to help others to fulfil their own potential. The number one thing that we all can be is happy. Happiness is a choice. And helping others is a choice of mine. It drives me, it helps me grow as a person and satisfies me in multiple ways. That is what I want to do. I am very honoured by the career achievements and accolades that come my way, but ultimately, I am most rewarded by being able to help others grow.”



Tony with mentee Blair Strickland



From Perth hills to International Summits

Teacher, librarian, foreign correspondent, and flight attendant. Just some of the roles alumna Alison Chartres envisaged herself doing as she contemplated future life as a grown up. The last two were clear evidence of a yearning for travel, which Alison Chartres has fulfilled perfectly during her career as an Australian diplomat.

Initially, her higher education choices were shaped by her home environment. Growing up in the Hills around Mundaring, Alison has always had a love and respect for the natural world.

"My love for the bush and the natural world is something that was first nurtured in myself and my brother by our parents," said Alison.

"I was also influenced by spending a year after school as an exchange student in Thailand through a Rotary exchange program."

Seeking a course to match her emerging passions, Alison was drawn to a Bachelor of Science that majored in population, resources and technology.

"It balanced a whole range of subjects that I was interested in, plus as soon as I stepped on that beautiful Bush Court, with its relaxed natural environment, I felt instantly at home."

Despite having a public reputation around the late 1980s as being a little radical, Alison felt drawn to Murdoch's contemporary approach.

"My love for the bush and the natural world is something that was first nurtured in myself and my brother by our parents."

"I felt it was bold and different in many respects. I chose my degree with that major because I felt it engaged with modern issues of the time. Looking back, I think Murdoch seemed to be a step ahead, unlike the more traditional universities, and it was one that was offering students quite different courses to study."

Reflecting on her university days with fondness, Alison also recalls another element that helped cement her decision.

"The diversity of the staff, tutors and students appealed to me and I think that diversity has only increased since I studied there. I remember having friendships with people from such varying backgrounds and cultures and I'm delighted to have friendships that have endured to the present day."

Crediting an infamous Murdoch chocolate zucchini cake that helped get her through her degree, Alison also reflected on some of the learnings outside of the academic sphere.

"I recall that phrase about how university is about how you learn, more than what you learn. As I left and entered the workforce, I felt that was so true."

The skills I learned at Murdoch have carried me through my working life and provided life skills too, and I think that's what's so terrific about university. It's a bridge between school and working life where you learn about independence, self-discipline and how to manage your own time.

You also learn how to conduct comprehensive research in response to a hypothesis perhaps, or a discussion point, to analyse and to build an argument. University teaches you critical thinking and improves your written skills. All of which is a great foundation for your professional life."

When Alison graduated in the early 1990s, Australia was in a recession and jobs were scarce. With many graduates competing for few positions, she recalls going into the Murdoch Careers Centre and flipping through a book that listed all the Federal Government agencies.



Alison dances with community members at the Mustard Seed Institute – a community based social enterprise in rural Rwanda (2019).

"I was looking for potential agencies where I could submit my application including the then Department of the Environment, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) where I am currently. One caught my eye in particular – the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB), which later became AusAID. It was a stand-alone agency for international development.

Thinking it would be an interesting place to work, and a great opportunity to get to know how government works, Alison applied for a graduate placement and was ultimately successful. She decided to take the plunge and cross the country to Canberra. One year became two, and soon four, and ultimately a posting in Papua New Guinea. Subsequent, highly rewarding postings confirmed that she had made the right career choice. During her posting in New York, Alison marked 20 years of service with AusAID.

"I was actually serving at the Australian Mission to the United Nations in New York when the former Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, made the decision to integrate AusAID into DFAT, the department leading on foreign policy and trade issues. So, in 2013, I became an employee of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, where I have remained until the present day."

Alison's time at DFAT has further broadened her skills and experience.

Prior to her current role as Assistant Secretary of the Africa Branch in DFAT, Alison served as Australia's High Commissioner to the Republic of Kenya and held non-resident accreditation to the nations of Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda. She was also

accredited to the East African Community, a regional intergovernmental organisation.

Alison was also Australia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT).

Before taking up her East African posting, Alison was Assistant Secretary of the Development Policy and Education Branch in DFAT.

The role of a diplomat is often presented ambiguously, an approach familiar to Alison, who says that when she visits her father he still occasionally asks – what do you do exactly? She has subsequently developed a good summation of the tenets of the profession.

"Ultimately a diplomat is advancing their country's national interests. In my case it's about advancing Australia's interests in our engagement with the world and building support for Australian positions on key issues. You may be doing that bilaterally with a specific country, or multilaterally with a wide range of countries.

It frequently involves commercial and trade interests, but can also involve human rights and advocating Australia's values. A diplomat must create a network and develop working relationships that are deep enough and broad enough to be able to prosecute the national interests," said Alison.

Now an experienced diplomat, Alison outlined some of the skills she felt were essential for success in her vocation.



Alison with Turkana women on the shores of Lake Turkana in northern Kenya (2019)

“Certainly, you need to be an effective communicator, both orally and in the written form. You are constantly engaging with people. I think you need a degree of patience because you will be working very long hours in negotiations with a whole range of countries that may be approaching an issue from a completely different perspective. Empathy and interpersonal skills are essential, as well as analytical skills. You need to assess how another nation may feel about an issue and its own history in the space, as this will help inform the optimum way to present the Australian position. I’ve also found that you need to have a deep knowledge of the Australian perspective – Why does Australia want to advance this objective? Why does it feel like that? What history or evolution have we had as a nation to arrive at this position or belief etc.”

DFAT seeks to diversify Australian trade and investment in overseas locations, including by helping companies enter new markets. They can also support their engagement with governments, and awareness of the regulatory environment of a country.

“As diplomats we can help organisations by making introductions to key government officials, and advocate to reduce tariff barriers, or regulatory hurdles that may be hindering their ability to operate.”

Alison considers Australian companies generally have a very good reputation internationally for the way they go about their trade, operations, and investment. Local communities usually form a view of Australia through those companies.

“In my experience the Australian companies have been very cognisant of the grassroots work that needs to be done in communities to ensure that there is a win/win with international investments. They are very aware of the critical need for shared value and local content, including by employing local people as much as possible, as well as empowering communities and local leaders. Companies also need to have a solid communications strategy with communities and governments,” said Alison.

The great variety of approaches between nations unsurprisingly brings complexity, and it is not all smooth sailing when Australian companies are looking to establish themselves somewhere for the first time.

“Not all jurisdictions have a large open-door policy. Most understand trade and investment is a path for their prosperity. However, there are a range of regulatory environments, and differing views of, for instance, the share of revenue a government gets from an activity such as mining, or what benefits will accrue to the local community. But it’s no different to what we’d expect if a company was looking to expand into Australia – adhering to our regulations, paying appropriate taxes, and involving the local community where possible in the decision making. Our role is to help companies, both big and small, navigate all this and understand the local context.”



Throughout her rich and varied career, Alison has been a constant promoter of gender equality and used her platform as an International Gender Champion to promote egalitarianism. She has had many rewarding moments, both in terms of witnessing the impact of funded programs on the empowerment of women and girls, but also by providing a platform for women to have a voice and connect with each other.

"I remember visiting a women's disability group in Dares Salaam in Tanzania. The group had been identified by Tanzanian alumni who had studied in Australia, as worthy of support. I visited their new shoe making enterprise in a large marketplace with a colleague. It was wonderful to see the women, with various types of disability, taking pride in their new enterprise and having jobs from which they could earn their own income."

Another highlight was being able to support Sadia Hussein, a survivor of female genital mutilation (FGM) who has become one of Kenya's most powerful and persuasive advocates for the eradication of the practice. Alison was honoured to help Sadia launch her book on her very personal story, and to meet many other African women and men striving to eradicate both FGM and the practice of child marriage. DFAT also partnered with UNICEF on a large campaign on these issues that reached communities across Kenya in 2017.

"I also had wonderful engagement with many women in Bougainville in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the late 1990s. Amazingly courageous women who were leading a drive towards peace during the conflict of that period."

It was in PNG that Alison recalls learning some key early lessons from mentors and superiors. One supervisor in particular provided many invaluable insights.

"PNG was my first overseas posting and my supervisor, Cynthia, who remains a mentor and dear friend, taught me so much in terms of how to communicate, engage and negotiate."

Her mentor also gave great instruction in how to deal with programs and initiatives that were outdated, or simply not working as originally intended.

"We had a particular program that had stopped being effective. She convinced me that sometimes it is not enough to make tweaks or minor adjustments. With programs, or any public policy in fact, it is ok to stop, shift gears and change things fundamentally in order to respond to a changed context. It was an early lesson that has stayed with me."

Working as Assistant Secretary of the Africa branch at DFAT, Alison is tracking many issues as the year draws to a close. With 54 African nations under her portfolio, there is always something developing and never an ordinary day in the office.

- Looking back on her 28 years as a diplomat, Alison feels very fortunate and can recall numerous stand out moments.

"One very special one was joining colleagues in the UN General Assembly Hall when Australia was voted in for the UN Security Council term for 2013-2014. So much work goes into those campaigns for countries to take up a seat so to be in the Hall for the vote was incredible," said Alison.

There have been a lot of pinch-yourself moments, such as the day she delivered a statement on behalf of Australia at the infamous podium in that same UN General Assembly Hall.

It is the most recent overseas posting however, that retains a special place in her heart.

"I have to say that being Australia's High Commissioner in Eastern Africa just has to be the highlight to date. It was such a pleasure and such a privilege to serve in that role."



Alison delivers a statement on behalf of Australia at the UN General Assembly in New York.



Alison with Kurt Fearnley and Ruben Centre staff, students and supporters at the opening of the Kurt Fearnley Special Needs Unit at the Ruben Centre in Nairobi, Kenya (February 2019)



Public Health in his Hands

As a young man, Heston Kwong had a big fork in the road. He felt his career path would lie in either the medical or engineering field. His main driver was to find a vocation that helped people, and both industries met that calling. He studied advanced mathematics in high school and made his ultimate decision of medicine at the beginning of his university years.

Completing a medical degree, Heston left the University of Hong Kong as a qualified doctor working in public health. Within months, he was strengthening his skillset and extending his qualifications.

"I needed to equip myself with epidemiology skills and public health skillsets and I had an opportunity through the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region ("the Government") to attend the National University of Singapore to complete a Masters Degree of Medicine in Public Health. When dealing with the whole population you must equip yourself with a lot of skills. In addition to epidemiology skills, you need to learn the handling of data, leadership skills, how to manage an organisation and how to communicate with people with different skillsets, or from different disciplines."

Believing he needed further growth, Heston embarked on a Masters in Health Planning at the University of New South Wales. Then he extended his skillset yet further, completing an MBA with Murdoch in Hong Kong.

"I feel university gives a very good exposure to my growth and to my career. When considering personal development and university qualifications, I focus on three areas – knowledge, experience, and network," said Heston.

It was the network element that was integral to his decision to complete an MBA with Murdoch University.

"It gave me a unique exposure to the business world. I was able to meet a range of entrepreneurs from China and Hong Kong. They were very proactive in their field and I was able to learn from their skills, vision and own development journeys and it provided me with an incredible network of skilled professionals," said Heston.

It was in this same period that Heston was involved with his first public health crisis. In 1997, a type of avian influenza broke out among domesticated poultry in Hong Kong and then infected a small number of people, killing some of them.

Heston was a Subject Officer working in Epidemiology at that time and responsible for tracking the source of the infections.

"I had to look at the connection among the cases, map out the roots of the transmission and finally the factors, we call them determinants, the risk determinants. I had to investigate every case of Avian flu, map out the outbreak and impose some interventions to break the chain of transmission."

The Health Department where he worked during this period invited experts from the United States' Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

"They were very renowned epidemiologists, and I had an opportunity to work hand-in-hand with them and learned so much," said Heston.

As he continued working in the public health arena around the turn of the millennium, Heston found that IT skills were becoming more and more critical with increasing digitalisation and all the data and modelling required when mapping and tracking disease trends and outbreaks. So, he added to his already formidable CV, through a Masters of eCommerce and Internet Computing from the University of Hong Kong.



Master of Medicine (Public Health) graduation, National University of Singapore.

“ The IT infrastructure even enabled us to identify a risky area or building beforehand, which enabled us to promptly implement public health measures to cut the transmission chain. ”



Social distancing. Not easy in one of the most densely populated places on the planet.

The decision proved timely. Within months, in November 2002, an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) began in China's Guangdong province, bordering Hong Kong. In February 2003 a medical worker who had been treating SARS patients in a hospital visited Hong Kong for a wedding and became the index patient bringing the disease into the territory.

The SARS epidemic in Hong Kong had three phases. The first was an explosive outbreak in a teaching hospital, affecting a large number of hospital staff and medical students. The second phase was an outbreak in the community because of the spread of infection from the hospital to the community. This reached its peak in early April 2003 when the disease affected a housing estate known as Amoy Gardens. A total of 329 residents in that estate came down with the disease and 33 died. The third phase began in early May, with continuing occurrence of the disease in eight hospitals and more than 170 housing estates throughout the city.

Heston and his team immediately had to map out the infection with the variables of place, person, and time. With hundreds infected, it meant contact tracing thousands of pieces of information. There was no way the data could be handled manually, which meant new IT infrastructure was urgently required. With his health, public health and IT credentials, Heston was asked by the Government to build the IT architecture.

The system had to connect with all major stakeholders such as the Hospital Authority responsible for all public hospitals in Hong Kong, the Health Department and other government agencies. It had to have real time connections, with data able to be analysed immediately.

Heston worked closely with the public health experts and IT professionals, and provided a solution which drew on an existing government system that was actually being used to track criminal activity. He was able to use their data mining methods to build a clear picture of transmission routes, sources, and the context. It enabled the team to immediately map out clusters within the territory. With COVID-19, the public is much more familiar with terminology and tracing requirements, but in 2002 IT in health was new and pioneering work.

“The IT infrastructure even enabled us to identify a risky area or building beforehand, which enabled us to promptly implement public health measures to cut the transmission chain,” said Heston.

By June 2003 the epidemic was under control. The Government felt it was very important to share their experience with the world and as part of the process, submitted their unique IT infrastructure for a Stockholm Challenge Award.

The Stockholm Challenge Awards could be summarised as a ‘Nobel for IT’ - a platform to promote leading edge, innovative use of IT within different areas that benefit people, society, and the environment. The submission, entitled Policing Disease in Hong Kong, was victorious and subsequently drew widespread interest from around the world.

With real life experience of a major outbreak, Heston and his fellows at the Centre for Health Protection spent many years training and preparing various government departments and community stakeholders for various kinds of epidemic and pandemic scenarios. A government contingency plan was prepared for three levels of response actions namely alert, serious and emergency levels and responding accordingly to threat level. Between 2013 and 2019 almost thirty different exercises were completed to help prepare Hong Kong for the possibility of a future major outbreak.

A key element of the team preparation was to involve not just multiple government departments, but also different sectors of the community that could be key in the event of an infectious disease. This meant involving sectors such as garbage collectors, shopping mall proprietors, and property vendors who may be pivotal resources in any escalation protocol.

It was of course, not too long before all this preparation would be fully tested following the COVID-19 outbreak of early 2020, by some distance the biggest challenge of Heston's professional life as a public health official.

Through the established surveillance and notification systems, Hong Kong was informed of an outbreak of pneumonia with unknown infectious agent at the beginning of 2020, which subsequently evolved into the pandemic of COVID-19.

"It is very difficult to ascertain an emerging infection of a new infectious agent in the very beginning. First of all, you have to have a postulation and a tool to identify a new strain. Then you must relate this strain to the cases or symptoms that you are facing at your clinical setting. You have to relate these two things together and develop laboratory tools to identify the strain. By strain, I mean genetic composition, not only identification, but mapping out the genetic sequence of the infectious agent. These steps take time, but through close work with our counterparts, we could deal with the outbreak quite promptly at that time."

Heston's job is to manage emergency response and Hong Kong progressed through to emergency phase in January 2020. There were two main areas of responsibility.

The first of those concerned the epidemiology and investigation side – finding the cases, contexts, source and identifying the chain of transmission. This responsibility is managed by one of Heston's colleagues.

Then you have the public health response side, where he held responsibility for all quarantine measures, and other responsive and intervention measures.

"In order to break the chain of transmission you have to quarantine people and we opened the first quarantine camp on 23 January 2020. There was no way this would be able to cope with subsequent numbers, so the Government also had to source other accommodation. We recruited five buildings from a public housing estate and soon had capacity for 5000 people, but very soon that was full," said Heston.

Heston's responsibilities included logistics and his team were charged with equipping rooms properly at the quarantine sites and ensuring residents had access to food and everything required to live autonomously.

At the end of 2020, the public housing had to be returned to residents and Heston was forced to source a new quarantine location before the Government's decision on settling in Penny Bay, a 4000-capacity residence purposely built and used for close contacts near Disneyland on Lantau Island.

In addition, there is all the logistics concerning the return of HK residents from overseas. Heston is responsible for contracting hotels for quarantine arrangements for all inbound travellers.

"At the moment, we are in the fifth cycle of hotel quarantine arrangements. Each cycle we basically have around 36 quarantine hotels. They are almost full, and we have approximately 10,000 residents that I have to take care of – feeding them and looking after them for a period of 21 days. While they are in our care, I also have to arrange Covid testing for them too."

With many coming from high-risk countries, the testing is very thorough, with up to six tests conducted on residents during their hotel stay. The tests and subsequent collation and processing of testing results is also handled by Heston's team.

This alone may seem a colossal task, but Heston's responsibilities do not end there. Not everyone is happy about being in hotel quarantine and Heston has been involved in the management of escape cases and cases not complying with infection control measures. Not just in terms of the electronic tagging required to ensure escapees can be traced and returned to quarantine, but also the actual legislation involved.

"When they escape, we have to impose the law in order to be able to put them back into the quarantine location. The Government have prepared several pieces of legislation during the past two years and I have been actively engaged in preparing the provisions of the law. We call it Chapter 599 – the legislation for the control and prevention of communicable diseases," said Heston.

Social distancing is another important measure for which the Government consults. The recommendations come from a group of epidemiology, microbiology, and public health experts. Guidelines have been fluid over recent months, harsher when variables such as the Delta strain emerged, but softer during other periods. Heston took part in the preparing of related legislation and enforcement.

Another public health measure under his jurisdiction is vaccinations.

"I am also responsible for identifying and procurement of vaccines for Hong Kong, a very serious job. In vaccine selection we have to ask the pharmaceutical developers for all the data and study results and then I collate scientific documents for the government experts to evaluate and consider. For this, I need to maintain information on all the developers worldwide and there are currently 121 companies involved in vaccine development with approximately 36 currently at stage three clinical trial stage."

An additional responsibility under his portfolio is the vaccination program itself. One that is divided into four elements. Firstly, there are 29 community vaccination centres set up that are open from 8am to 8pm every day. The public simply book their appointments on the internet.



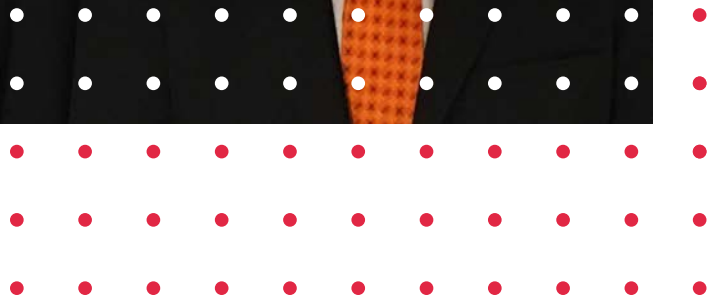
Heston and his family.

Secondly, special provisions have been established for the elderly and senior citizens, the high-risk group. Thirdly, Heston's team has recruited 1600 GPs to administer the vaccine through their practices and arranges the delivery of the vaccines.

And finally, there is the public hospitals and arranging all supplies so vaccinations can be administered in their clinics.

At the height of the pandemic Heston was working through until 11.00pm every single day. He feels that a lot of the successes were as a result of being able to draw on a vast network. In particular, he has been able to put in place trusted colleagues to manage some of his operations. This has frequently involved many former executives who have come out of retirement to assist.

A retired senior public health official from the Health Department came back to work under Heston and manages the quarantine centres for him. Retired policemen are coming back to handle the legal cases for those escaping from quarantine. Retired ambulance staff have returned to lend a hand with the health and medicinal appointments needed by citizens who are locked in quarantine. Even a retired Chief Pharmacist has returned to work to assist Heston with research and procurement of COVID vaccines.



"These people are very knowledgeable and have great experience in the relevant industries and it's a case of mobilising resources where I can. There are many retired civil servants also coming back to lend a hand, and people are helping part time and full time where they can, from all walks of life in Hong Kong," said Heston.

As an expert in the field, Heston doesn't see an end to all of this coming soon. With monumental responsibilities that would make a regular citizen dizzy with fear, Heston is aware of the need to take care of his own physical and mental health and all the people in his teams. For Heston, it is a surprisingly simple daily moment that he feels sustains him for the greatest challenge of his professional life.

"I wake up at 5 o'clock and I walk around the pond near my residence, around 6 kilometres each day. At that time, it is very silent and peaceful and that is the most relaxing time for me."



Rebecca with Erica Smyth.

Pioneer's stewardship of an icon

Rebecca Tomkinson grew up in Karratha and WA's Wheatbelt and feels the realities of regional life helped her build the skills that have served her well as she leads one of the most trusted brands in Australia, the Royal Flying Doctor Service WA (RFDS WA).

"As a regional kid, when you encountered a problem, there usually wasn't anyone there to do it for you. You had to work out your own solution. For example, if the water pump wasn't working you had to work out a way to get water to the plants or animals. There was no back up and so you had to develop a problem-solving ability. I also think there is a work ethic that develops from those situations too."

Rebecca's higher education journey began at TAFE. Not achieving the TEE score she wanted, she studied a Diploma which got her into university to study an undergraduate degree in Community Development. Looking back, she feels her Diploma in Welfare studies was among the hardest studying she's ever completed.

"I worked really hard to have that initial university experience and it was an important milestone for me," said Rebecca.

"As a regional kid, when you encountered a problem, there usually wasn't anyone there to do it for you. You had to work out your own solution."



RFDSxRioTinto at the arrival event of the first Rio Tinto LifeFlight PC-24 jet in December 2018

A few years passed before she completed her first postgraduate qualification, when she came to Murdoch in 1998 to complete a Postgraduate Diploma in Public Policy.

"I have some great memories from my time at Murdoch. I actually got to be at a Kim Beazley Lecture Theatre presentation by Gough Whitlam, which was just an extraordinary moment."

The famous Labor leader gave an inspiring presentation and spoke to students individually.

"He actually stayed back and took the time to speak to anyone who wanted to say hello which you can appreciate was quite a time commitment. Given his stature, and philosophy around education being accessible to everyone, what it meant for future generations and how important it was to give people a chance to study etc. listening to him was an amazing experience."

The accessibility of education was particularly resonant with Rebecca, who commenced her studies while pregnant with her first child.

"I remember some of the excursions that we undertook. We did a particular placement in the South West looking at regional communities and I think it was an eye opener for some students to have an obviously pregnant person studying among them," said Rebecca.

After Murdoch, Rebecca began building her career, taking on increasing levels of responsibility. She became Director Government Relations at UnitingCare Australia, a Community Partnerships Manager at Bankwest and the Chief Operating Officer at Baptistcare. The professional ascension coincided with an expanding awareness of what leadership entails.

"It taught me the need to foster collective capability. Having a diversity of ideas, complimentary sets of skills and enabling people to bring their best ideas into action. Naturally, it's important to be accountable and make difficult decisions, but a great deal of leadership is about supporting and developing teams to help them bring about results of benefit to a wide community.

We are at our best as a team when we look to each other to find a solution. We don't always have a clear solution, but I know that by us working collectively through the different components of the challenge that's in front of us, we will find the way forward."

This empowering and collegiate approach clearly helped Rebecca secure her current role of CEO of Royal Flying Doctors Service WA.

"It's an incredible honour and very humbling. I have the great privilege of representing the extraordinary people who work for us, our nurses, doctors, pilots, engineers, logisticians, accountants, our marketing and finance team and team members across the State. Everywhere I go people share stories with me of how the RFDS has touched their lives, or how we have helped at a moment when people least expected it."



RFDS WA services the largest health jurisdiction the world. In addition to the 2.646 million square kilometres of the State, the service covers Christmas Island and The Cocos Islands, the latter being 2,932 kms from Perth.

The service is funded by the Commonwealth and the State of WA as well as corporate partnerships and philanthropy. Fundraising ensures this vital service continues to be available to all Western Australians throughout regional and remote WA.

"We have 17 Pilatus PC-12 turbo prop aircraft, 3 Rio Tinto LifeFlight PC-24 and two EC 145 helicopters. When you combine those assets with my interstate partners, we are the third biggest airline in the country. We do around 28 flights each day but unlike Qantas and Virgin, we don't know where we are going."

Founded 93 years ago by an Australian Presbyterian Minister, the Rev. John Flynn OBE, the first air ambulance service still uses an idea he came up with for stabilising patients in the field before help can arrive.

"He came up with the concept of a medical chest. It has a series of medications, tools and equipment in it. They are all listed the same way, with each item numbered so that our doctors can talk through what to do in the first instance with someone over the phone. For example, there may be a fracture and the doctor will ask if a bone is protruding and then say 'Ok you'll need to grab item number 22 first and complete this action'. The numbering system enables systematic and direct instruction which saves lives. These medical chests are all over the country and we still distribute and maintain them today."

The organisation has a comprehensive list of all the airfield assets in WA. Once location is ascertained, if there are no airfields nearby, the team will look for the nearest location they can land safely. For Rebecca, the RFDS is quintessentially Australian.

"It gives a great sense of what it means to be Australian, both in the past and today. We don't send a band aid, we send a plane, to some of the most remote areas anywhere in the country. It echoes our nation's sense of adventure and the money raised annually by West Australians reflects their generosity and support for an organisation they know is vital to so many communities."

Rebecca is very active both on community groups and through board representation. She is a Chair of the Wheatbelt Development Commission and Regional Development Council, Board member for Infrastructure WA and the Regional Australia Institute and sits as President of CEDA's WA State Advisory Council. Coming full circle to her study days, she has just finished a three-year tenure as a member of Murdoch University's Senate. A role which broadened her appreciation of the higher education sector.

"It was wonderful to be a part of the governance structure that was tackling some of the recent challenges for the sector. I'm incredibly proud of the work that the university has done in being able to embrace the changes that needed to be made to online learning platforms, the well-being program for supporting students and the reaching out that was done to understand the impact of public health measures on students, staff and faculty.

It also gave me a much deeper understanding of the academic curriculum and the research component, how they come together, and certainly an increased sense of how important collective strength is in being able to advance the university and take bold steps into new and emerging industries."

In parallel with the challenges faced at Murdoch, Rebecca was tackling the considerable challenges that arose at the RFDS due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It necessitated a complete overhaul of practices, to guarantee the safety of patients and everyone on the RFDS team, and brought incredible challenges in terms of modifying a fleet of flying hospitals accordingly. The RFDS continues to be part of the national pandemic response, working closely with the Commonwealth, Aboriginal Medical Services, Primary Health Networks, Local Hospital Districts and WA Country Health Service.

In January 2018, Rebecca, though modest about it all, was understandably proud to become the first female CEO in the history of the RFDS.

"I really do stand on the shoulders of people who've come before me. Certainly, my mum and dad raised us saying that if you worked hard, you could achieve anything. They didn't really define roles by gender. Some exceptional people came along the way that have enabled me to be able to step into that space. To be honest, it didn't really occur to me at any stage that I wanted to be the first of anything, I just wanted to be able to contribute. I was very soon followed by Meredith Staib, who became CEO of RFDS (Queensland) six months after my appointment and yes, it is exciting to see this evolution at the leadership level."

She believes the leadership journey she has been on was opened through the gateway of higher education.

"I'm among the first in my family's generation to go to university, and without that university experience, I wouldn't hold the role that I hold today. I had the opportunity to learn, and an opportunity to spend time with other professionals developing their skills, which ultimately has led me to the organisation that I now have the privilege to lead."



Rebecca and trail-blazer Ann McLeish, who has raised over \$250,000 for the RFDS over the last 13 years.

Although these last few years have brought Rebecca some incredible opportunities, there have been a few unexpected moments.

"I've had some absolute 'pinch me' moments. I got to see the Queen in Parliament House. I've met the Dalai Lama, got to show the Governor around helicopters and hosted a ball where the Perth Symphony Orchestra played David Bowie. Some truly extraordinary moments."

The thing that really motivates Rebecca though, is the ability to help others achieve things that they didn't see possible for themselves.

"Being able to hold the role that I do, the true career defining moments have been where I've been able to have members of my team go on and reach the milestones they wanted to achieve and to know that I've been a part of that journey is very special."

As she continues to lead the historic RFDS WA and ensure it keeps apace with new health threats, rapid technological change and shifts in how we all live, Rebecca manages to stay true to her childhood thoughts growing up in Karratha, when she set a personal goal to contribute to communities and do work that would help them thrive.

"The RFDS holds a very special place in the hearts of West Australians and one that we absolutely look to enhance any way we can, to ensure that we are able to support people whenever they might need us, even in the most improbable of circumstances, and to let them know that we're going to do our very best every day to provide the services that they need."

" It gives a great sense of what it means to be Australian, both in the past and today. We don't send a band aid, we send a plane, to some of the most remote areas anywhere in the country "



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