

## **Chairperson report – COAPC AGM**

**Friday 4 March 2022**

Thank you all for being here for today's 2022 Annual General Meeting of the NSW Committee of Adoption and Permanent Care Inc (COAPC). The past twelve months have flown by and here we are already in March of 2022. There is no single word that could best represent the feelings of the past year. For many, it could be any or all of the following: change, challenge, heartbreak, pain, grief, strength, opportunity, exhaustion, renewal –to name a few.

We are into the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic now. 2021 began as a fresh and cautiously optimistic year with a promise of vaccines and hope for return to “normality” or of a “new normal”. But that quickly changed from June when a new outbreak in Sydney led to strict lockdowns that at times were unevenly distributed across the Greater Sydney region and the state, and for which highlighted the pre-existing structural and systemic disadvantages that inadvertently affected people more than others.

As a researcher in the topic of adoption and foster care, as practitioners in the sector, and as people who are affected by adoption and permanent care, it is clear that COVID-19 infection doesn't discriminate, but its effects certainly do. It also underscores the need for governments and policy makers to address socioeconomic and health inequalities as ignoring them will have broader repercussions for society, not just for individuals experiencing vulnerability. As vaccination levels eventually rose towards the end of 2021, with only a quick break (or barely), we were met with the Omicron variant and we are still continuing to recover from that wave.

2021 has felt particularly longer than the previous year. Maybe it was because 2020 was full of franticness and quickly adjusting to the global crises. Things were still stressful in 2021 but it was less about responding in an agile way to rapidly changing situations and more about trying to sustain those changes, keep engaged, and stay engaging. Again, it may have involved sustaining meaningful connection with clients in a virtual or socially distanced environment, and helping people manage the stress that came as they looked to initiate or maintain connection with their families.

COAPC carried on in 2021, beginning with a newly elected Chairperson, Vice Chair, Secretary and Ordinary Members in the management committee. We bid farewell to Liz Byrne (former Chairperson), Renee Carter (former Vice Chair) and Damon Martin (former Ordinary Member), who I owe immense gratitude for their contributions to COAPC that secures its current momentum. And we said hello to

myself as the new Chair, Kay Berry as Vice Chair, Katie Molteno as Secretary, and Miriam Moloney as Ordinary Member. Jacinda Wing remained our ever present Treasurer – the rock steady within the changing stream of the river.

COAPC continued its core objectives to advocate for improvements to the adoption and permanent care experiences of children and their families and build capacity in the sector. In terms of training for 2021, I am grateful to the training subcommittee (Brooke Bengston, Samantha Rahal, Katie Molteno) for their support in arranging important and informative training sessions for the sector. We began with a webinar in April on “Out-of-home care through the lens of attachment theory” in consideration of issues for practitioners and policymakers’ decision making and best practice. With thanks to my colleagues, Professor Amy Conley Wright and PhD Candidate Peiling Kong at the Research Centre for Children and Families at The University of Sydney. Then, in response to observations of how COVID-19 has changed practice, COAPC ended the year hosting a webinar with Tony Gates, Implementation Specialist from the Parenting Research Centre, on using digital technology to support clients remotely. These trainings are available on the COAPC YouTube and website: related to another key development for 2021 – continuing efforts to keep the COAPC website up-to-date.

COAPC had special guests present at the general meetings in 2021. Many thanks to Grace Kelly who relayed her experience of discharging her adoption in Victoria and her initiative in starting Crib Mates to assist others with theirs. Grace’s story spurred members of the committee to begin drafting a correspondence to the NSW Attorney General to advocate the need for reforms to the adoption discharge process in this state to recognise the support that individuals seeking them require. This will be finalised and submitted in the early part of this year.

Thanks also to Lynelle Long of InterCountry Adoptee Voices (ICAV) who came to our meeting as a guest to outline a video project she led the development of, containing resources for professionals to raise awareness about the experiences of intercountry adoptees and their relevance to practice in health and education. COAPC also supported Lynelle’s project through the provision of funding to go towards accommodation costs for the intercountry adoptees, whose stories were captured in the videos. COAPC also heard from Dara Read, the author of a children’s book for adoption and out-of-home care called ‘We Love You Hundreds and Thousands’ about identity and connection. And it was a pleasure to know that Dara’s connection with the committee goes way back to when she attended a meeting as a baby with her adoptive mother. Thanks also to Jane Adams who presented a video created for the Post Adoption Resource Centre’s 30th anniversary event at one of COAPC’s general meeting.

In terms of correspondence with government, COAPC submitted a response to the Stronger Communities Legislation Amendment (Children) Bill 2021. In 2021, COAPC submitted a letter to the NSW Department of Communities and Justice calling on the commissioning and delivery of a memorial to mark the 10th Anniversary of the NSW Apology on the 20<sup>th</sup> September 2022. While the response has taken some time, it is positive to know that there are steps COAPC can take to ensure this initiative is carried through.

Once again, the shift from 2021 to 2022 has brought about change. We said goodbye to our usual meeting place at the Barnardos office in Ashfield. Unfortunately, we had fewer opportunities than desired to have in-person meetings, but hoping that COAPC will have more chances to have those face-to-face meetings again this year. I want to take this opportunity to express my deepest thanks to Kay Berry, COAPC's Vice Chair, for her contributions to COAPC and the sector over many years. Kay has resigned from her position as Principal Officer, Adoptions at Barnardos, and she wishes to pass on her regards to all Committee Members and wishes everyone the very best for all future work of the Committee.

I would also like to thank the others in the Management Committee who are incredibly supportive and responsive. Thanks to Jacinda Wing, Treasurer, who is approaching the end of her three-year term, for her impeccable financial record keeping and reporting skills; to Katie Molteno, Secretary, for taking outstanding meeting minutes and keeping us on track; and to Miriam Moloney, Ordinary Member, for vital knowledge of advocacy, engagement and policy matters. Thank you to the Management Committee for the time you have given to these voluntary roles.

2021 was also my first year being the Chairperson of COAPC and it has been a big learning experience, filling in some very big shoes. While I do feel like I am still finding my feet, I want to thank all members of the committee for their support and contributions. My knowledge and experience in this field pales in comparison to the collective practice knowledge and experience of committee members and it is that source for which I draw and rely upon to continue meeting the objectives of COAPC. I hope I can continue to bring to the table my strong planning skills and willingness to 'get things done' as well as my openness to ideas and new perspectives. As always, I hope we can continue this open communication so I can continue to accurately represent this committee's various views and experiences, and bring a stronger research perspective for the field.

COAPC is special in that professionals from all parts of adoption and permanent care work can seek the perspectives of those with lived experience. These voices are important to inform professional practice and policy. Thank you to the individual members for being a part of COAPC. Hopefully the new year will mean more opportunities to meet in-person so we can continue these important conversations. Special acknowledgement to Jenny Pickles who is ever present and brings important insights about the role of individual members in the committee.

COAPC has an important opportunity to be a collective voice of the non-government adoption and permanent care sector and to advocate for important issues of relevance to children, young people, adult adoptees, parents and families. We have a number of things to look forward to in 2022. These include in-person meetings, planning for the next Australasian Post Adoption Meeting, taking the next steps toward ensuring the delivery of a memorial for the anniversary of the NSW Government Apology for Forced Adoption Practices, and advocating for important matters such as the need for adequately funded post-adoption support and trauma-informed services, more awareness about the experiences of people affected by adoption and permanent care. In particular, I wish to see better data collected for the benefit of adopted people (and we will continue to advocate for this and hopefully see these as questions in state and nationally important surveys like the Census).

Thank you to everyone in COAPC and I look forward to the many things we have planned for 2022 as we continue our respectful exchange of ideas, advocacy for change, and provision of valuable training opportunities for the sector.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Betty Luu', followed by a period.

Dr Betty Luu, Research Centre for Children and Families, The University of Sydney

Chairperson, NSW Committee on Adoption and Permanent Care Inc.