

MODELS OF ACHIEVEMENT

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ANNETTE SHUN WAH: Hi, I'm Annette Shun Wah, welcome to Models of Achievement. In this series we're exploring the successes and aspirations of extraordinary Australians who've discovered their own inspirational path through university study. These are personal stories from people of very diverse backgrounds revealing how education has transformed their lives. First up let's meet law student Katherine, who is observing greenhouse gas emissions in her role as a member of the Australian Youth Climate Coalition.

KATHERINE: My name is Katherine and this is my story. My family's from Vietnam. My parents are both from the south of Vietnam. They grew up there up until the '70s and then they came to Australia in about 1978.

Yeah, my parents really liked their life in Vietnam, I think, and my mum tells about all the time how she used to make her own dresses and she comes from a really big family. So she comes from a family of about 10 brothers and sisters and, yeah, they had - I think they had a really nice life in Vietnam and they had to leave because of the war, so that was a bit sad for them.

They don't really - I don't think they really like to talk much about that time maybe because my mum's really much about living in the present and moving on. But she tells me about how when they came over here in a boat it was really tough, you know, there wasn't much food and they didn't have access to fresh water and I think they spent some time in Malaysia as well in a refugee camp before they came here. So those times were really tough, they didn't have much money.

I think they were first living in Lakemba so they lived in, I think it was like some sort of hostel for new refugees, and that's where they started to learn English and they had a bit of support when they were first living in Australia and me and my brother were born, I think, 10 or so years later.

They started working in, I think, some factories and, yeah, just finding odd work

every now and then. Now my dad works for an energy company, my mum works for a photo company so they've moved on quite a bit.

So my early years were spent growing up here in Homebush West. I went to Homebush Primary School. It was a really good experience going to Homebush Primary School. There were lots of kids from very diverse backgrounds and I think it was a very good, well resourced school. We had teachers that were really good and pushed us to dream big. I think they taught me that I needed to work hard for whatever I wanted to do in life.

I went to Sydney Girls High School, so my mum sort of convinced me to go take the selective test and I got in and at first I didn't really want to go but I went there and I really enjoyed high school, I think, because I was always surrounded by really bright, intelligent young women and I think a lot of those experiences I would attribute to why I am where I am today because a lot of the girls there were really ambitious, competitive and a lot of the teachers as well were very, very supportive of whatever we wanted to do.

I really enjoyed legal studies, modern history and French in high school so I really enjoyed the humanity side of things. But those were the sorts of things I think which made me decide that I wanted to study arts law at university.

I applied to do an arts law degree at university but unfortunately I didn't get in straight off so for the first year I did an international studies degree and then I applied to transfer in law which I got into in second year and that's when I started doing law.

Yeah, so I volunteered with the Red Cross for about a year and a bit doing work on international humanitarian law.

Red Cross is formed on the basis of the importance of international humanitarian law but a lot of people recognise it as a charity which does a lot of community work which is also really important but the committee that I was sitting on was working at disseminating international humanitarian law all across the community and educating people about its importance and why it should exist when there's times of war.

I worked as a paralegal for the Aboriginal Legal Service for about three months during my summer last year and I worked in the criminal division and it was really - it was my first legal internship so it was really interesting for me to see how law works in the social justice field and especially when you think of law you always think of criminal law so that was very interesting aspect for me and just realising that there are lots of people who commit crimes because they're disadvantaged and because of their socioeconomic backgrounds. It was really an eye-opening experience for me. I was based in Parramatta at the Aboriginal Legal Services office and there are a whole bunch of courts there so they do a lot of court work. I saw just a whole, a whole lot of young indigenous Australians who were disadvantaged and didn't really have much going for them in life, you know, they came from really poor backgrounds, they hadn't had a very good education so really the fact that they were stealing and doing break and enters was a symptom of the fact that I think that in society we're not very good at looking after people and then we throw these people in jail and we don't really know how to deal with them.

So I got involved in climate change campaigning in 2009 just through a friend and I met some really inspirational climate change activists through that. I've been involved in climate change activism for about three or four years now and I don't think I actually realised how important it was until two years ago. I think when I think about the fact that my parents are refugees and they came to this country and they built a life for themselves and they came so that me and my brother could have access to education and all the things that we needed to succeed in life, climate change really resonates with me because it stands to destroy all the things that we hold dear like our environment and the people that we care about.

Climate change is obviously a result of the emission of too much greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and what we're doing now is that our continuing reliance on fossil fuels such as coal and gas and dirty forms of energy means that we're releasing excessive amounts of carbon pollution into the atmosphere which warms our planet which makes climate change a big issue.

We need to have conversations with people about why we need to move away from

dirty forms of energy and why we need to use wind and solar. Maybe we need to take active action against our governments to show them that there's community energy and community support for uses of renewable energy in our society.

So my current law degree is five years. I'm doing it in five and a half years because I've done a bit of part-time study so I could do more volunteer work and work a bit more. My advice to someone who wants to go to university or pursue whatever career that they want to pursue is to probably be proactive, seek out people who you think you want to be like, ask them advice, ask them to introduce you to people who you think would be - would help you along your way. Also don't let anyone tell you that you can't do anything because I think that's a really big thing stopping people from doing whatever they want to do or whatever dreams that they want to pursue.

My name is Katherine and this is my story. My parents came to Australia as refugees from Vietnam. I'm a first generation Australian. I'm currently studying law at university. I'm the NSW coordinator for the Australian Youth Climate Coalition. Universities helped to make me who I am today.

ANNETTE SHUN WAH: Besides her work in climate activism, Katherine is completing the final year of her Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Laws degree.

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