

## Inspiring Stories

CONVERSATION WITH DR GIOCONDA DI LORENZO AND PROFESSOR NATALIE HANNAN

Transcript 15 March 2022

---

### NATALIE HANNAN

- All right. I want to start, really importantly, by acknowledging that today, I am hosting the first Inspiring Stories Webinar for 2022 on the lands of the Wiradjuri people of the Kulin nations, who have been custodians and leaders of this incredible and beautiful land and waters for thousands and thousands of years. And I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge and pay all of our respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and also to the traditional owners of the lands that you are situated on today, if they are different to those that I am. And welcome to you all. I'm really excited to be back with this year's first instalment of Inspiring Stories. I'm Professor Natalie Hannan, the Associate Dean for the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry, and Health Sciences. And many of you know, I firmly believe that we have the right to a safe, fair, and equitable workplace. A place where gender, sexuality and sexual orientation, disability, mental health issues, and an individual's background or race should not be a barrier to reaching their full potential. And we are surrounded by impressive and accomplished women breaking barriers and challenging the status quo regarding women and what women can achieve. And yet, in 2022, women still remain underrepresented at senior and leadership levels within our faculty. Although many of you will have seen our Dean's email last week, and I'm really excited to say that we are certainly reducing the gap. But we still have work to do for both gender equity and diversity and inclusion. It is my hope that by having conversations that challenge our systems and inspire leadership from within, this will not only support our talented people in MDHS to reach their full potential, but will also shine a very important light on the various barriers our people face. So today, I'm very excited to be joined in this conversation by Dr. Gioconda Di Lorenzo, as my inspiring guest. Gioconda commenced in the role of the University Secretary at the University of Melbourne in January 2015. She has almost 20 years of experience as a professional and academic member of staff at the University of Melbourne. And Gioconda was a Project Manager, then Manager of University Strategic Priorities, and Acting Director in the Office of the Vice-Chancellor between 2010 and 2014. And prior to this, Gioconda was the Executive Officer to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the Provost, from 2003 to 2009. And before commencing her career as a professional member of staff, Gioconda completed a PhD in History, and worked as a sessional lecturer and tutor. Her doctoral thesis focused on the post-war mass migration to Australia of the Southern Italian community. And Gioconda holds a PhD and a Bachelor of Arts and Law from the University of Melbourne. She's a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors as well. So, fantastic, impressive list of accolades. Gioconda, thank you so much for joining me today. You are an inspiration to so many, both professionally and academically at the university, and I'm so grateful to be able to share this really important conversation with such a dynamic colleague. And I know so many will be looking forward to hearing more about your journey. So if it's okay, if we can jump right in, I was hoping we can start today's conversation with finding out a little bit more about you and your journey so far.

## **GIOCONDA DI LORENZO**

- Thank you, Natalie, and thank you, all for having me. This is a really exciting initiative, and it's fantastic to be part of. Just wanted to say that. So my journey so far, you very nicely summarised it at the beginning, Natalie. I'm not sure I can add to it. I feel overwhelmingly very fortunate to be part of such a large and diverse organisation and university. I actually started as a professional staff member almost 20 years ago. It'll be 20 years next year. But actually was doing a lot of casual work before that, and was a student here, so I haven't really ever left. My journey's been, I think, very typical of many colleagues, in the sense that, because the university is so large, whilst I sometimes reflect on, oh, God, I haven't gone very far, I haven't left the university, I did actually have lots of different opportunities and different jobs, really, that led me to feel like I was doing something different. I think the university is large enough for that. And so many growth opportunities and development opportunities that I was really fortunate to have and to be in the position I am today. So I started in the Provost office. At the time, it was professor Peter McPhee, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, and working as a Project Officer there. And I was still doing my PhD at the time. So I was doing both, and was at a real kind of crossroad. I felt like I just spent my study life not really knowing what I wanted to do. And then I decided to do a PhD, and I still didn't know what I wanted to do. So I was thinking, "Well, really, come on, just get with the program already." I did an arts law degree. Didn't really want to be a lawyer. Loved the arts component of that, and I think I really grew to love the law part of it. By the second and third year of my law degree, I was loving the subjects and the electives. Natalie and I have spoken about this. I think I was probably a really good candidate for the Melbourne Model. I think I should have done my law degree as a more mature student. In those days, it was double degree and straight in from high school. So I got to that point in 2003 when I was working for Peter, where I hadn't really completed the thesis, but already had a sense that I didn't want to be an academic.

But I also really wanted to be here. I wanted to be part of this organisation and this community of amazing talent and people, staff and students, who were inspiring me every day. And I slowly became more self aware of my own continued need for intellectual sort of stimulation, but at the same time, not really wanting to be an academic. And the idea of higher education and its power to transform lives was really important to me. And that almost, well, still to this day, inspires me to do what I do. With my background, in particular, I feel like I had, it changed my life, my higher education. So I wanted to be part of it, didn't necessarily want to be an academic, but was really lucky to be the exec officer on the curriculum commission. So Professor Peter McPhee is known affectionately as the architect of the Melbourne Model. So he was in charge, the Chair of the curriculum commission at the time. The university was coming up with a blueprint for the curriculum reform. And I was taking the minutes running the meetings. And I just got to witness such a transformative change, generational change. Watched a really good leader had to influence. I mean, the curriculum commission was composed of Associate Deans, but really more widely, and how they did that, that group, to convince themselves that it was the right thing for the university, but then also, go out into the university and community, engage their colleagues on it. That was really inspiring to me. And that was a turnaround. I think that, to me, was, okay, I want to be part of this in a different way, but I still want to be here.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

- I'm wondering if you're happy to share a bit more about, as a young girl, I wonder what you thought, off to the University of Melbourne, but where from where you came from, was this a normal traditional pathway?

**GIOCONDA DI LORENZO**

- Not really. No. So my parents were first generation Italian migrants to Australia. So they arrived in 1968. And it was just my brother and me. It was a non-English speaking home environment, and sort of grew up speaking Italian. It wasn't even Italian, it was their dialect. I'm very fluent in. And went to Northern suburbs Catholic primary and high schools. Underrepresented at universities at the time, in particular. I was quite a studious kid. I think my parents were a bit worried about me at one point. They never put much pressure on me, but they were like, "You sure you don't want to go out? It's Saturday night." I just love learning. I think that I've carried that all my whole life. It was really important to them that I was happy. It was important to them that I had an education, and I had a job that I enjoyed later in life. So they didn't put a lot of pressure on me. I think when I got into law, they started to go, "Ooh, a lawyer in the family." And so, it was a bit hard for me to actually-backtrack.

- Yeah, it's like, actually, I might be doing this. But they were pretty good with it. But definitely coming into law school, Melbourne Law School in the 1990s, I was in the minority, culturally, at least, and found myself gravitating towards other students who were from culturally diverse backgrounds. There was a group of about 10 of us from all over the world, with backgrounds from all over the world. There were some international students that were some of my best friends. I did feel very much, for the first time in my life, like I was part of a minority. Because the school I went to, believe it or not, was 92% Italian Australian kids in Epping, in the Northern suburbs. So I thrived because they were all like me. I was the studious one, but I didn't feel any different. But I certainly felt it coming into first year. And I feel like that kind of shaped a bit of my thinking around further study and career, because, in a way, I felt bit like an imposter. Like, should I be here? And I don't really fit in, but I think I'm smart enough. It was a lot of self-doubt that really only kicked in in those first couple of years of uni.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

- I can imagine how it would've been quite daunting coming from that high school environment to the university, but then, also, all the opportunities and the excitement that was at your feet, I guess. Your thesis title was certainly interesting to me, wondering what that young woman was thinking at that time. So it's fabulous.

**GIOCONDA DI LORENZO**

- I think I did like a 360. By third year, I was like, "Oh, this is an amazing place to be." And I had some really encouraging lecturers, colleagues, people who, even if I didn't believe in myself necessarily, were really encouraging and kind of sort of pushed me to believe in myself, and pushed me, I think, to try and achieve something higher. By the latter years of university, I felt really a part of this place. I felt like I belonged. But it took a little while to get here.

### **NATALIE HANNAN**

- And so, on that, then I'm wondering if you are able to think about and share what drew you to the role of secretary. I mean, that's huge, an important role for the university. And, I guess, thinking about where you are at in your earlier part of your career to more recently, what was it about the secretary role that drew you, do you think?

### **GIOCONDA DI LORENZO**

- Look, great question. I never imagined I would do this role. In fact, I had a very archaic preconception of who should do the role and what the role was about as a younger professional staff member. I did a lot of support roles, obviously, executive support. So working for the Provost and the Vice-Chancellor was my job to try and do the background research to anticipate anything. It was a fully support role. Governance is a bit different. You've got to be more independent. So you're kind of sitting between management and governance, and you have a really big responsibility around ensuring that that relationship runs smoothly. and there's lots of communication, and everyone's working well together, but at the same time, can't really represent management, even though I am technically employed by the university. And also, there is council business that remains council business. I just need to be conscious that my role is much more independent. I'm kind of the queen of the process around decision making. So that's the bit that is really important to me. So when the role was advertised and a couple of colleagues suggested I go for it, I really didn't. I was typecasting myself as a support kind of person, but then, also, had these notions that, oh, but you have to be really old to do that job, or you have to really know the place or have been here 40 years. And there was one other university secretary before me who was a woman. So I knew that that wasn't going to be different, but I did feel like I was coming in a bit young and I just wasn't fitting the mould. But as I was applying for it, I actually did think about, maybe you don't want to be that version of a university secretary, and maybe this is an opportunity to shape it and to do something different. And in the last 10 years or so, practice leaders, governance, managers, university secretaries at other universities in the sector, it's become a much more kind of professional role.

Whilst it is really important to have someone who understands the culture, because you are translating the culture, sometimes, for people around you, particularly, new council members coming in. They need to understand the business and the organisation. So it's good to understand and having been here some time to be able to work with that. But you're not necessarily, many organisations or universities have, it's a much more professional outfit governance. It's really about decision making and optimising decision making, putting the structures in place to manage risk.

### **NATALIE HANNAN**

- So it sounds like there's obviously important challenges there, but what were the major challenges do you think you face, either in a daily basis, or maybe you reflect on? And do you think being a woman has affected, or do you think there's more barriers in place for a woman being in the role of secretary?

**GIOCONDA DI LORENZO**

- That's a really tough question. So I don't really know what it's like to be a man.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

- I guess with your preconceived perceptions of what the role entailed. Certain characteristics.

**GIOCONDA DI LORENZO**

- I certainly got people saying, it doesn't happen so much anymore, but the first couple of years, it was like, "Oh," when they met me, "you're a bit young." Couple of meetings, they thought I was a student rep. I'm like, "No, I'm the secretary." Not on council, I have to say, but other committees. Like I said, it doesn't happen so much. I think it's probably 'cause I've been in tole a bit more, but I certainly got that, "You're not old enough." I don't know if that was a younger man in my role that that would've happened, I'm not sure. There's was a kind of a liberal tendency to just talk about my age. People just felt comfortable doing that. A lot of the challenges I face was more about my own self belief. Just going back to that imposter feeling. Not necessarily believing in myself enough.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

- I think many in the audience will probably also have that. It's not a lone feeling. A lot of us tend to not put ourselves forward to things. It's sometimes really hard to stop listening to those voices in the head, and just actually believe in ourselves, particularly if we see a job description and we think, "Yes, I actually can do all of those things. So what am I holding back for?"

**GIOCONDA DI LORENZO**

- Yeah. I think that's absolutely right. Earlier on in my career, and I didn't realise I was doing it at the time, but upon reflection, I was encouraged by some fantastic colleagues, mentors, to do things, to go for things. And I wasn't really motivating myself, and I didn't believe it. I was happy to stay in a role if I was enjoying it and not necessarily push myself, because I couldn't quite see myself in those management positions. As I started to be more kind of self-aware and to reflect on my career path, which I wasn't really doing in younger years, but I started to realise my own behaviour was impacting. Why does it have to be that this lovely person over here suggested I go for this role? Why didn't I think of it for myself? Why don't I believe I can do this? That's taken a while to address myself. And I feel much more confident about pushing myself to do things, to step up, rather than waiting for someone to say, "Hey, you would be good for that."

**NATALIE HANNAN**

- Yeah. And I think it comes back to this competency trap. So we've become experts in something, and we're good at it, so we just keep doing that. Whereas, we're probably, now with this experience and this competency, it's probably time for that challenge. So I wondered, and I'm sure there's many audience here that are keen to hear about, and I think you've touched on it, but how in your own development that you decided I'm actually gonna step forward, or step sideways, or step up to that new role 'cause I believe I can do that?

### **GIOCONDA DI LORENZO**

- A little bit of it was a necessity. So you can imagine the roles I've been in. There's a lot of emphasis on attention to detail and to writing. And I love writing. I know it's sad, but I don't get to write minutes a lot these days 'cause I have team members who do it. But when I have to, I get really excited. And necessarily, I think the secretarial roles require you to be very detail focused. And even in a leadership position in a secretariat, I have to make sure the council papers are in order. I need to go through it really, really, like with a fine tooth comb. But often, as you say, Natalie, if you're not careful, you get stuck in the weeds a bit. I think I spent the first good part of my first term, as university secretary, not going above that. I think just in terms of workload, the coverage of things that we need to do now in the office necessarily had to, almost necessity, force me to step up. And I can't be across everything, I have to understand that. I have to be more of a leader, and work with my team, and encourage them to thrive. I don't have to be the one looking at all the detail all the time. It's a bit of a bit of a balance that I need to do on a daily basis, but I feel like I'm better at it now. To think more strategically about the direction that we want the secretariat to go in, I was really conscious coming into the role that there was a perception of us just being, not just, but minute secretaries, managing meetings. It is a lot more than that. It's about being trusted advisors around governance, providing advice on everything from decision making pathways, to aspects of our regulatory framework, and how to interpret, how to navigate through very complex structures sometimes, decision making structures. So, basically, trying to work with my team to lift us out of that. I almost did that with myself too.

### **NATALIE HANNAN**

- Yeah, that transition to the leader, isn't it? And really learning how to embrace that, and also supporting others to step up with you. As you step up, step your team up with you so that they can take on some of the things that, I guess, you were really competent at, but now can't, have to do new things, new roles and responsibilities. So before we open to the audience, I just thought I'd another quick question while the audience start thinking about any questions they might have. I'm thinking about equity, diversity, and inclusion being critically important now, as we try and plan forward for the university strategy towards recovery beyond the pandemic. And do you think there are key things that the past two years have uncovered or taught us that we should not lose, and make sure we implement them into our practice, be it research, or teaching, or academia, or professional staff, in that space?

### **GIOCONDA DI LORENZO**

- What I've noticed in the last two years, despite everything, the absolutely extraordinary nature of what we've just lived through, I've been at this university a long time. I've seen a way more focused push to improve diversity and inclusion at the university than I have ever witnessed in my 20 years here. Really, really passionate. People are putting their money where their mouth is. I think the work is happening. I still think we've got a way to go, but it is a really positive. To be able to think that we were doing that through a pandemic, I like to think, well, when things do one day get back to normal, if we're not in a pandemic environment, or an environment where we're just feeling unsafe physically, we're just going through a massive, just an extraordinary set of events, what could we have achieved even with, what's possible in the future when we're not focused on these other things? So I'm

positive about it. Whilst sometimes it can get really, you can have days where you think, "Oh, this is never gonna change." But it will, and it will turn around. It will probably turn around very slowly, but we are on our way. We just got to be consistent and persistent, I think.

#### **NATALIE HANNAN**

- I think persistence is the key, and not getting derailed, that's for sure. All right. It's time now to open up to the audience. Now, if anybody feels that they would like to, and we very warmly encourage you to either unmute, or you can use the reactions button to raise your hand and ask a question, you pop your camera on if you feel comfortable. But also, you can pop any questions in the breakout room, sorry, in the chat, and I can read those out to Gioconda as we go. While we wait for that, Gioconda, you mentioned mentoring before, and we've got a really important mentoring program in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry, Health Sciences for promotion. But on the point of mentoring, what's the best mentoring advice do you think you've been given that perhaps you might not have realised at the time that you needed to hear it?

#### **GIOCONDA DI LORENZO**

- Yeah, absolutely. It goes back to that. I hate to be banging on about this. I really sound like I was like walking around in self-doubt for the whole time. But one of my mentors, actually, we were talking about my PhD. And I was 90% there, but I've been distracted by, I did have a very rocky, one of my supervisors passed away, and it was some extraordinary events. I was almost there and I wasn't getting across the line. I was working almost full time as well, and I was using that as an excuse. But the mentor said to me, my mentor said, "You're not finishing this because you don't believe you deserve to have a PhD. You just don't believe you can ever have one." I was first in family to do a PhD. I didn't even know what it was when I started, really, fundamentally, what I was getting myself into. And I don't feel like I ever believed it was possible to make that leap. As soon as we had that conversation, he must have seen a light go off, like, "You're right, and I'm embarrassed to say that you're right." And then it was like, okay, for the next two weeks, just bring me a chapter. Yeah, and I did it. I think we had a conversation in May, and I'd handed it in by late June. So it was a bit of, yeah, some lessons I had to learn very early in life about the things that I was doing to myself which were holding me back, I think.

#### **NATALIE HANNAN**

- Yeah, such incredible important advice at a time you need it, I think, it sounds like it. And I get it too. Sometimes it's about also giving yourself permission to buck the trend. Maybe it wasn't in the stars, but it's what you ended up doing yourself anyway, and I think it's very inspiring. And I'm sure many in the Zoom room and in the faculty in the university will love to hear more of these stories, because I actually think many of us experience this. And if we could just normalise it and talk about it a bit more, it probably would help a lot. But as you know, Gioconda, I like to end Inspiring Stories with two questions for all of our guests. And the first is, do you have any final advice that you would like to impart, a takeaway pearl of wisdom for our audience?

#### **GIOCONDA DI LORENZO**

- Look, I think it just goes back to the main theme of today, which is believe in yourself. I know it sounds cheesy, but actually, for me, it really does make the difference. And don't wait for somebody else to tell you you can do it, and just ignore the little monster in your head. Sometimes just take the plunge. And even if it feels scary and like you could never do it, you only really learn once you've jumped off the cliff sometimes. So I feel like that is something that I've come to realise myself over many years, and made a difference when I did Twig.

#### **NATALIE HANNAN**

- No, that's a really great pearl of wisdom. I love it. So, finally, if you wake tomorrow and you're now the boss of the university, what is one thing that you would change or do to truly enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion?

#### **GIOCONDA DI LORENZO**

- Okay. So I had a bit of a think about this, and there's many things, but I think the thing that could potentially do, could reverberate, really, across a little bit more, would be, I would, on every decision making table, no matter how high or how low in the organisation, I would aim for a diverse group of people around that decision making table. So any meeting situation, I would try and be as representative as I can of the university community in those forums. So that's everything from a small team meeting through council, really, that's what I would try and do. And it's not just about being representative. So not just to have people there as a token, because that person represents female student body or a particular cultural background, but because I truly believe that you will make the decision for the greater good of whatever you're doing, but you bring a unique voice. And the more diverse those voices are, there can only be better decision making as a result. I really believe that. So you can only have better decisions and more robust decision making frameworks with a diverse pool of people around the table. So that's what I would try and do. It's a huge place, so it'd take a long time, but that would be the aim.

#### **NATALIE HANNAN**

- I wholeheartedly agree, and I think that would be a fabulous boss of the University of Melbourne. So thank you so much for sharing that. Thanks so much for joining me today, all of us, actually, and sharing with us your story and your journey from where you've come from, but also where you are today. It's been so inspiring to hear from one of our incredible professional staff leaders. And I can see some of our amazing professional staff in the room at the moment. And I'm sure that they really loved hearing a bit more about your story and your journey. We look forward to bringing our audience more and many important and inspiring stories throughout 2022. And next month, I have the privilege of hosting Professor Sandra Eades, our Associate Dean Indigenous, who I'm excited to say, has returned back to our faculty. And we'll be holding that session on the 26th of April. Thank you, again, Gioconda, so much. It's just been great conversation, and I'm really grateful for your time.

- Thanks. Thank you, all.