**SWiM Inspiring Stories  
Associate Professor Shawana Andrews**

**18 October 2022**

NATALIE HANNAN:

I wanted to start by acknowledging that today I'm hosting today's *Inspiring Stories* on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations, custodians and leaders of this incredible land and waters for thousands and thousands and thousands of years. I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge and pay our respects to their elders, past and present. I'd like to also acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands that you are situated on today. And I also welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders here with us today, and I celebrate and thank all of our First Nations colleagues for their important contribution to our academy. Thank you all for joining us today. I'm Professor Natalie Hannan, the Associate Dean, Diversity and Inclusion for the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. As many of you know, I firmly believe that we have the right to a safe, fair, and equitable workplace, a place where an individual's background or race, their gender, sexuality and sexual orientation, disability or mental health issues should not be a barrier to reaching their full potential. We are surrounded by impressive and accomplished women breaking barriers and challenging the status quo, regarding women and what women can achieve and yet, we still remain underrepresented at senior and leadership levels within our faculty. I'm excited to see, we've certainly started to see real change over the past few years, and we're moving to reduce the gap, but we still have a lot of work to do for both gender equity and broader diversity and inclusion. It's my sincere 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 also shine a very important light on the various barriers our people face. I am really thrilled to welcome today one of our faculty's very own inspiring women. We're going to have an important conversation.

I'd like to introduce Associate Professor Shawana Andrews. Shawana is a Trawlwoolway Palawa woman. She is the director of the Poche Centre for Indigenous Health and also an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work. Shawana has a long history working across Aboriginal communities in Victoria with over 20 year’s experience working in Aboriginal health. Beginning as an Aboriginal hospital liaison officer at the Royal Children's Hospital, Shawana co-designed the Koori Mental Health Program and the Wadja Aboriginal Family Place Acute Care Case Management Program, including a comprehensive Aboriginal child outpatient clinic, just phenomenal. Shawana has since held policy, project, management, and teaching roles across the health and higher education sectors. She's also led faculty and university-wide Aboriginal health teaching and learning initiatives, including Billibellary's Walk at the Melbourne Poche Centre. She leads the centre's signature programs that focus on Aboriginal doctoral advancement and health leadership, and she is passionate about Aboriginal graduate research, candidate experiences and social capital, place and purpose of Aboriginal health leadership, Aboriginal mothering practices and family violence and Aboriginal feminisms and gendered knowledges, and the importance in cultural practice-based methodologies. Wow, Shawana, thank you so much for taking time today out of your very busy schedule to join me in an important conversation about Indigenous health and the beneficial effects to community through supporting Indigenous women.

**SHAWANA ANDREWS**

Hi, Natalie, thank you so much. It's a real pleasure to be able to have this conversation with you today, and I might just take this moment to also acknowledge country and pay my respects to the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and in particular, those Wurundjeri community members and elders who have personally mentored me and who also support us both at the Poche and across the faculty in a very generous way. And of course, pay my respects to my own community in Northeastern Tasmania and acknowledge country from where all our guests are zooming in from.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Wonderful, thank you for adding your reflections as well, Shawana. I was hoping we might start by finding out a bit more about you, a Palawa woman. When you were a young girl, did you see social work, research and leadership as something you were destined for?

**SHAWANA ANDREWS**  
Definitely not, no, I come from humble beginnings. I grew up in the western suburbs of Melbourne. I was born on Wathaurong country but grew up on Wurundjeri country in the western suburbs to an Aboriginal mom and an Indian dad. My dad migrated from India when he was in his early 20s, so the late 1960s he migrated. Both of my parents didn't have a complete secondary education. So the idea of going off to university and having a white collar career really wasn't on the cards for me, necessarily, my own vision of what my future might hold for me. So no, social work was not on the cards, researcher, definitely not, leader, definitely not, although I've always been very bossy. I'm the eldest of four and one of the eldest of a very big mob of cousins. So perhaps it might be inevitable that I step into leadership, although I hope that I'm not too bossy and take on my leadership in a way that is collaborative, and actually I think I do lead from behind.

I'm not one necessarily to put myself out there in the front and like to offer leadership opportunities to my own staff and to others, so very much a collaborative leadership style, I think, that I use, but no, certainly not. Look, I'm the first in my family to go to university, and as much as my parents didn't achieve a secondary education, my mum was very strong on getting a good education, and I think that reflected her bad experiences of schooling and the education system. She was very much of the opinion that I would finish secondary school. She didn't necessarily force the idea of university onto me, but she very firmly planted the idea that the next step is university and to grow your mind, grow your thinking, and do good for the world. So, that was planted there for me to take up as I saw fit. But certainly in terms of role modelling, I didn't have others in my family that I could look to who had had the experience of higher education and engaging with universities and coursework and all of that. So that was very new for me, and as a result, I did struggle a bit in my first few years of university. I think I managed to get through high school. But yeah, certainly the early tertiary years were a bit of a battle, yeah.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Yeah, and I can totally understand how if you can definitely go off to university and do those things, but how you actually do fit in and survive through those years when you're also taking on so much of that new learning in what you're there for is already daunting. So yeah, I think it's important that now we see support for people who are coming from diverse backgrounds to make sure that they're supported in their journey. Being the first to go to university for the family is always tricky, I think as well, because you don't necessarily know what comes next. I think your mum was a very wise woman, and I can tell she instilled so much into you, and I don't think of you as bossy at all. It's the same what I tell my daughter as well. We call her a leader. We've decided not to use the term bossy, because she's got leadership qualities, that's for sure. But yeah, I hear you in all of what you're saying.

**SHAWANA ANDREWS**

I think that social capital is such a given for so many and when you don't have it, at the time, perhaps when you're finding your path through secondary into tertiary and then through those years, the absence of that social capital and mentors and people that you can draw upon and from is sometimes not so evident, but as you grow into your role and you develop your own leadership skills, and you understand the notion of how you build your networks and draw from colleagues and peers, it does become a lot more evident the importance of that social capital and how you draw on the people around you.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

You can see it's a key to many people's success, and so when they don't have that network around them, it can be really, really hard, even if you've got all the grit in the world and resilience, it can be really tough. You are a highly respected leading voice in Aboriginal health, and we can see how passionately you work to advance Aboriginal health and the higher education sector, especially as the director of Poche Centre for Indigenous Health. Can you tell us a bit more about that work within Poche and beyond?

**SHAWANA ANDREWS**

I suppose my journey to where I am now it hasn't necessarily been a consciously planned one. It has been one whereby I've taken up opportunities. I've been opportunistic in the way I've developed my career. And that's just been about trying to build that social capital for myself. Very early in my career, as I mentioned, I was struggling through those early years of tertiary education, but I found some mentors, and that really set me on a path to starting to build my own personal board of directors, so to speak, and pulling in the people that I needed to help mentor me and to guide me and to draw upon when I needed. My first mentor was the amazing Lisa Bellaire when I was a student doing social work. I’d landed in social work and was really grappling with reconciling my Aboriginal identity with the profession and the profession's identity and really struggled with that. I'm not quite sure that I've reconciled that, but it fits much better with me now. And Lisa was, I think, the first Aboriginal social work student to come through University of Melbourne social work course and so she became a mentor for me and I always thought she was very cool way of going about it, but when I think back on some of our conversations... They are actually conversations that I have now with some of our students and some staff, and it really was around just being sure and anchored in your identity and not wavering from that, so not compromising your identity, not compromising who you are for a career, because it's not sustainable then. So it's those really amazing insights that help me get through those years and actually finish my degree. 'Cause I'm not sure if I hadn't had that, I'm not sure that I would've finished. And at that time, I met another mentor of mine, Angela Clark, who remains a mentor to this day. Again, just having that person that you can draw upon to help you navigate the places and spaces that you find yourself in. And so, I ended up having a career in social work, predominantly in paediatric health, but working both at the Children's Hospital and at a couple of other hospitals and a couple of stints in community-controlled organizations, but finally got to a point where I felt I didn't have much more to give, so a bit burnt out and looking for something different, and that landed me in higher education.

I spent some time doing some project work, then eventually landed a lecturer's position, which was in health sciences, so a full turn, coming back and teaching in, among other disciplines, but teaching back into the social work course that I was in all of those years ago as a student. And so again, interesting dynamics to manage and navigate there. And yeah, so look, a couple of years ago the opportunity to move over to Poche was made available, and whenever there's an opportunity available, I just take it, regardless of how anxious I might feel about it, whether I feel like I can manage the role or not. I just think back to a lot of the words and insights that my mentors have shared with me to say, look, just take up these opportunities, you'll grow into it and use your networks and your social capital that you now have to help you build your confidence and your skillset and your sense of belonging and being a part of this environment of higher education. So, that was a fantastic opportunity that I couldn't let slip and I was in the midst of my PhD at the time.

It was an interesting period, and that was the end of 2019. Then we also went into COVID lockdown. So, the last couple of years have been a bit of a whirlwind, but I now have the privilege of leading just such an amazing team at the Poche Centre. And yeah, do you want me to go into talking about the Poche, itself? I think that was probably a question, but-

**NATALIE HANNAN**  
What you've shared is really great for the audience. They're listening to a bit of a spiral academic career, but first on the ground in one space and then coming back full circle back. I think it's brilliant, and I think also your advice, or I guess your comment that you just sometimes, even though you might feel nervous about something and daunted, you know if an opportunity comes your way, you're going to try your best to take it, so I think that's exactly what I was hoping that you'd be able to share with us, because I've watched you throughout this last few years do all of that and finish your PhD, and I just think it's incredibly inspiring. And sometimes we do hold our own selves back, not being good enough or not knowing how to do it yet. But many of us who take on these leadership positions, know you don't have to know exactly what you are meant to do until you get in there and then give it a crack really, and make it your own identity, which you certainly have done, so that's brilliant.

I've recently been inspired by was a wonderful story about four women graduating from their PhD on Yorta Yorta country out at the Department of Rural Health, so Dr Raylene Nixon, Dr Tuey Crumpton, and Dr Sharon Atkinson Briggs and Dr Karen Ferguson. I know you were there. Can you tell us about the importance of supporting these women, and aside from their important academic contributions, the impact that these women now with a PhD, will now go on to have in their local communities?

**SHAWANA ANDREWS**

I wasn't a part of Poche in the early years of their candidature, but certainly in the later years. I have in some ways traveled alongside these women doing my own PhD, so I've engaged with them right through and just watched them thrive throughout the process and now come out the other end doing amazing things in their community. But what that story tells us, some really important areas that in fact, some of our research is also telling us, which is the importance of that social capital and building it and developing it for ourselves and for subsequent researchers and generations coming through, the importance of the cohort experience, so having others to travel with, to celebrate with, to cry with in those dark times and just to bounce ideas off.

In fact, across the faculty, we have round about 30 Aboriginal PhD students, give or take, and we've got several cohorts within those, and just like the women from Shepparton, those cohorts and the ability to travel through with a cohort just offers so much by way of that social capital, friendship, someone to journey with, and that it really does help to overcome that imposter syndrome stuff. We have conversations about the fact that we've all worked really hard as Aboriginal women to be here, and we deserve to be here, and there is a place and a space in academia for us. Sometimes it's challenging and difficult to find that space and to own it. That's again, a part of what I think Poche can offer, just building that confidence and building that place making process through that doctoral journey.

I think the mentorship also that happens among peers, but also what it can generate within communities once cohorts move from the beginning to the latter part of a candidature, and we've really seen that with the women in Shepparton. We've actually got one new PhD student who has seen these four women complete their doctoral research and graduate, and actually they've all gone on or are going on to a postdoctoral fellowship whilst stepping into some significant directorship and teaching and learning roles We have a new PhD student who's based in Shepparton who has now decided to follow, and we have probably about two or three who are considering. So, they've been able to watch and learn and feel confident in following in their footsteps. What's really exciting is that we've now got four brilliant women who have put their hand up and said, "Look, we're willing to mentor." So, we've got some formal mentorship happening now for this one PhD student, but also for any others who come through, and they don't have to travel to Melbourne for that. It's there ready-made within the community, and it's generated a whole heap of fantastic work that can happen because it's a very mobilised community. It's very driven and really doing some amazing ground-breaking work in terms of community leadership. They've also got some very well-qualified, Indigenous researchers and leaders now who can help drive that work, and it might be such that they're sharing the load too. It doesn't fall on just the one or two elders or leaders now. They can share that and things like the data governance and sovereignty of the community, and the data that are generating through multiple projects that are happening. They've got people who can manage that now and drive that and be real research leaders in that space. And so the benefits are significant.

**NATALIE HANNAN**  
That’s incredibly important to think about the impacts, but also the fact that you can spread the load now and make sure that it's not on one or two people, but you've got more and more and that growth potential and more coming through with mentorship and support and being able to see it's possible. I just think it's just so inspiring, and I wish them all really well, and it made me feel really happy to look at their graduation and what that would mean to their community as well.

I know you're also very passionate about Aboriginal mothering practices and family violence, and I was looking at your wonderful work in your PhD thesis, entitled, "Cloaked in Strength and Exploration of Aboriginal Mothers’ Experiences of Family Violence and the Role of Cultural Practices" as a Tool of Engagement, Resilience and Resistance." And the work's incredible, but some of the images are amazing also, looking at these beautiful cartoons where you can see the backs of people and beautiful cloaks, which I guess is where your research, you use the demonstration of the possum skin cloaking methodology to frame important engagement with Aboriginal women, and this was very special. I'm just wondering, did you draw those wonderful images?

**SHAWANA ANDREWS**

Yeah, I did, I guess that's my little side gig. We've all got to have a hobby or something that helps us during our downtime and so drawing is mine, and I struggle to... I don't call myself an artist. It's just something that I do on the side, but yeah, I think, well particularly in the PhD, we engaged possum skin cloaking as a methodology to engage women, and it was amazing what that fostered, the creativity, but also the enthusiasm with which the women who were involved in the research wanted to engage with the research. Not only were they keen to engage in a form of cultural practice and learn about that, but that allowed them to find a space within which they could freely share their experiences of family violence. So it was able to facilitate a really amazing context with which to explore family violence as lived experience of Aboriginal women. So the creativity and the way we think about lived experience and how we reflect on some of the really incredibly difficult times that many women live through without support, without access to healthcare, without access to legal representation, really sitting and living outside of the so-called support systems, and so we found lots of different opportunities to engage, not only in the possum skin cloaking as cultural practice, but to engage in other ways and forms of art and expression as well. So many of the women were able to reconnect with their totems and work out how to draw them and put them onto their own cloaks that they made through the process. I was privileged to be a part of that and to share in that, so that's where some of those drawings came from.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

We are just so lucky to have your contribution and I know that you're living through that with them and trying to support that. I think for us as well, if anybody hasn't had a look, I really encourage people to take a look at that work and what came out of it, but also those beautiful drawings. I think that you are an artist, and you just maybe might not need that extra title right now 'cause you're very busy, but I think some of those are incredible, so I encourage you to keep that up. Shawana, thank you so much for joining us today. It's been a wonderful conversation, and I think we've talked about important things, so I'm really grateful for your time, and I just want to thank everybody else who joined us today, and I'm hoping you can join me in November where I'll be joined by the Provost, Professor Nicola Phillips. I'm sure that'll be a brilliant conversation and enable us to get to know Nicola and her incredible story a bit more. Huge thanks Shawana. It's really been great.

**SHAWANA ANDREWS**

Thanks, Natalie, thanks so much and thanks everyone.