

Game Changers with Ilyasah Shabazz – transcript

Facilitator

Thank you so much, and welcome to tonight's Game Changer conversation. Game Changer is a part of a series of conversations that VU and Maribyrnong City Council have hosted over the last 12 months, as part of the Footscray University Town Initiative, and this is a special conversation, a special Game Changer, and we are so honoured to have the special guests that we have tonight, in particular one guest, but I'll leave the introductions to Craig. To commence, I'd like to acknowledge that tonight we are meeting on the traditional lands of the Bunurong and the Wurundjeri tribes of the Kulin nation. We pay respects to their elders, families and forebears who are custodians of the university land for many centuries and through them to their elders here with us tonight. This venue is VU at MetroWest and it's part of the Footscray University Town Initiative, and the partners in that initiative are Victoria University and Maribyrnong City Council. So thank you very much for coming to the event and you are most welcome. I'd now like to introduce Craig Dent, Chief Executive Officer of State Trustees. State Trustees have been very wise. They've chosen to make Footscray their home. So welcome Craig, and Craig will introduce our guest speaker tonight. Thank you.

[applause]

Craig Dent

I'm a bit too tall for this. Before I begin tonight, I'd also like to pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land on which we gather here this evening and pay my respects to their elders past and present, and extend that respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders that may be with us here this evening as well. Of course, I am here just for a short moment to introduce our very special guest this evening to you, Ilyasah Al-Shabazz, the third daughter of Malcolm X and Dr Betty Shabazz. Ilyasah, as most of you would be aware I'm sure, is an educator, an activist, a motivational speaker and author of the award winning publications such as the coming of age memoir entitled, Growing Up X; a children's illustration book entitled Malcolm Little: The Little Boy Who Grew Up To Become Malcolm X, and a young adult historical fiction book titled X: A Novel.

Ilyasah promotes higher education for at risk youth, interfaith dialogue to build bridges between cultures for young leaders of the world and she participates on international humanitarian delegations regularly. Ilyasah has produced training programs to encourage higher education, which have received the endorsement of New York's Office of Academic Affairs. She served for 12 years on the Executive Youth Board for the City of Mount Vernon. She has also been previously appointed as Director of Public Relations,

Director of Public Affairs and Special Events and later promoted to Director of Cultural Affairs. She was a mentor for the Nile Rodgers, We are Family Foundation, and mentors at various group homes, lock up facilities, high schools and college campuses across the world, and largely through the production of the Wake Up Tour, her exclusive youth empowerment program.

Ilyasah has retraced her father's footsteps to the Holy City of Mecca, explored religious and historical sites in both Egypt and Jordan as the guest of Her Royal Highness Princess Alia bint Al Hussein. She's participated in interfaith dialogue study programs under Rabbi Nancy Kreimer and Dr Aziza Al Hibri and has served as a member of the African Interfaith Leadership delegation that participated with the Malaria No More Foundation in Mali, West Africa. Ilyasah has also served as a member of the US delegation that accompanied President Bill Clinton to South Africa to commemorate the election of President Nelson Mandela and the economic business development initiative that was launched thereafter.

Ilyasah currently serves as trustee for the Harlem Symphonic Orchestra, the Malcolm X and Dr Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Centre and the Malcolm X Foundation. She is a member of the arts committee for the New York City Opera at the Lincoln Center and project advisor for the PBS award winning Prince Among Slaves documentary. She is not finished just yet. She's been busy. She holds a Masters of Science and Education and Human Resource Development from Fordham University and a Bachelor of Science and Biology from the State University of New York, and such is her passion for higher education, Ilyasah is currently an Adjunct Professor at John Jay College also in New York.

You're about to hear, as you would already realise just from that very short bio, the very long, remarkable life that this woman is incredible. A life influenced by the legacy of both her inspirational father and remarkable mother. She has enjoyed and does enjoy the friendship of people like Muhammad Ali, Sidney Poitier, Nina Simone, Maya Angelou, [unclear 0:05:06] and Spike Lee. And particularly, and of some revelation to many on the tour thus far, the unique bond that the Martin Luther King family shares with the Shabazz family to this very day. Hopefully many of you have had an opportunity to read The Age article written by Nick Bryant in New York, when he had an opportunity to sit down with Ilyasah before coming out to Melbourne for her week long tour. In his two and a half page interview, somewhat remarkable for Fairfax I might add - not because it's hard for them to string words together but just - I should stop there. What I liked about that article, and just to pick on a few words that Nick wrote in describing our guest, he said, "The same megawatt smile, the same lantern jaw line and much of the same passion as that of her father" and I think to have that said about you is something quite remarkable.

So before I hand over back to Peter, I think from memory, I wanted just to share with you some very quick observations over the last, it's four days now isn't it? It's our fourth day. It feels like lots more because we've done a lot, but it is our fourth. It is. We've done

a lot over the last four days. What I've observed though, which is really interesting, I found this innate ability to engage with great conviction and a strong sense of humility. Ilyasah, as you soon will hear, is an articulate, intelligent woman whose presence is unmistakable, and we were pleased to witness that on my short walk from my office to here just this afternoon when a young man sort of looked up as we were walking past and said, "Are you who I think you are?" and he just couldn't quite believe it, but just wanted that opportunity to have a hug and have a photo. It was quite special. On this tour that's not been all that uncommon. Ilyasah has a warmth and a joyfulness that children respond to and that adults seek out. She has a profound impact on all that she meets and you will see why tonight. So without further ado, enough from me, and I would simply like to fulfil a great honour and welcome my friend to the stage - actually welcome Peter back to the stage to introduce Ilyasah.

Professor Peter Dawkins

Thanks very much Craig. My name's Peter Dawkins. I'm Vice-Chancellor of Victoria University. You've whet everybody's appetite so much that I'm not going to stand here for more than a few seconds, because everybody wants to hear from Ilyasah. I just wanted to thank you for bringing our distinguished speaker to Footscray. I think this is just a wonderful example of what the Game Changer series is all about. It's bringing together people from the university, people from Footscray, our partners, the city of Maribyrnong well represented here tonight by Councillor Sarah Carter and Nigel Higgins, a senior official from the council. The aim of this Game Changer series was to get the community, to get the council, to get people from Footscray and the university together to talk about the big issues of the world and to foster a great discussion in this great place of Footscray. The fact that the State Trustees have moved into Footscray now and are helping us to foster discussions like this and bring such a distinguished speaker to Melbourne, is a great example of what we were aiming to achieve.

So welcome all to downtown Footscray, to our venue here in MetroWest. The format for this evening is that Ilyasah Al-Shabazz will make her introductory remarks and then we have two other speakers who will follow on from her, and one our own postdoctoral fellow from our Centre for Cultural Diversity and Wellbeing, Dr Mario Peucker and also the Director of the Islamic Museum of Australia, Sherene Hassan. But I will introduce them after our first speaker and then everybody will come and sit up here and we'll have a discussion with you all at the end. But please welcome Ilyasah Al-Shabazz.

[applause]

Ilyasah Shabazz

This makes me feel really, really tall. My father was six foot five and his shoes were size 14. As a little girl I used to stick my foot in his shoes and just kind of like clonk around. So I feel like I'm very tall and very big shoes. But I'm always humbled and honoured to be in the presence of student, community and academic leaders; humbled and honoured by

an opportunity to share my journey with you in the hopes of helping you to realise all of your promise, your greatness, your duty, your leadership; humbled and honoured by an opportunity to honour those upon whose shoulders we stand to learn about your great country, my great country, our historical contributions of the indigenous, as well as the settlers, and to further fellowship with those whom are committed to empowering this dynamic generation of leaders.

I want to acknowledge Vice-Chancellor and President, Peter Dawkins and Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost, Kerri-Lee Krause. Is she here? She's not here, because I think she said she wasn't going to be able to make it, but for your kind and hospitality and warm welcome. Dr Watson and I enjoyed meeting with you and Dr Mario Peucker, who we will hear from. Did I pronounce your name ... of course not. How do you pronounce it? How is it?

Dr Mario Peucker

Peucker.

Ilyasah Shabazz

Peucker. Dr Mario Peucker. Did I pronounce it right this time? Okay. So we met over lunch earlier this afternoon. I'm always impressed by the work that's being done, especially here at Victoria University. There is much to celebrate and you should all give yourself a warm round of applause and especially to you, Mr President.

[applause]

I also want to thank my dear friend, Mr Craig Dent, a board member of Variety charity and the Chief Executive Officer of the State Trustees, for his vision almost two years ago and organising and planning my week long tour here in Melbourne. I keep saying to - I know you know what I'm about to say - to my colleague Dr Watson, we kept saying Melbourne [pronounced Melborne], you know, because when you're educated you have to really articulate all of your letters in America. And so he kept saying Melbourne [Melborne]. I said, "It's Melbourne." So if I hear him say Melbourne [pronounced Melborne] one more time, I'm really going to hit the roof.

But you heard that I was a biology major and when I was growing up there were so many things I wanted to be. I wanted to be an anthropologist, I wanted to be a mathematician and I took math at college and there was this thing called linear math and I didn't understand that and how that was going to help me in my life, so I changed from being a maths major, then I was going to be a lawyer and then I got these big thick books and I said, "Oh my gosh, I can't read these books. They're just way too big." And so I just kept changing. I didn't know what it was I was going to be. I said, "Mummy, I want to be an anthropologist" and she said, "Oh my heavens." So I ended up being a biology major. I had taken so many biology courses from math and wanting to be a doctor, so I decided well let me at least complete my studies and become a biology major. And so, I tell young

people, "Pick a subject. It's okay, because nine times out of 10 you might not be whatever it is you think you start out to be."

So I was a biology major and one thing that I did learn is that we are not insects, amphibians or plants. Don't quote me on this, because people will say, "What is she talking about?" We are human beings of the human race. We're not insects, plants or amphibians. We're human beings of the human race. And despite our ethnic, religious or gender differences, we're brothers and sisters under the fatherhood of God. And if one of our brothers or sisters is being treated unfairly or unjust, we must stand up and right those wrongs. Are you with me human beings? I'm always reading polls and statistics on this generation of youth, and I came across one conducted on adolescents who were asked, "What would you like to be when you grow up?" and I was astonished by their answer that was quite simple and I quote, "Rich." And it touched me. What happened? What happened to our humanity, to our compassion, to our purpose? What happened? What are we teaching our children? What values are we instilling? What examples are we setting for you to follow?

We're living in a world that has the latest forms of access to networking with individuals from all around the world, through social media, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and if any of you would like to follow me on Twitter in the US, I'm @Ilyasah Shabazz. But my friend, author Ta-Nehisi Coates, said it best in his best seller *Between The World And Me*. We're witnessing brutal and senseless killings all around the world, but this is nothing new. It's simply because of our smart phones that we're witnessing it so often. Michelle Alexander writes in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, that not much has happened from the times of the 1950s and the civil rights movement in my country to today. Young and armed black youth are still being senselessly slaughtered by officers: Trayvon Martin, Carlos Mercado, Eric Garner, Tanisha Anderson, Walter Scott, and the list goes on and on and on.

However, it's this generation of young people, despite ethnic, religious and gender differences, came together as brothers and sisters. They came together and expressed discontent and skilful use to organise themselves through social media and to educate the masses on important human rights issues, creating slogans such as Black Life Matters. We're not plants, insects or amphibians. We're human beings of the human race. And our young people utilise their power as brothers and sisters in unison. And I have to ask that you give them a round of applause, because I know that there are a lot of people here who even joined that movement and campaign, Black Lives Matter.

[applause]

And so, much like the days in the 1950s and sixties where we've seen photos of younger and older non-violent organisers, protesters seeking a better life, while fire extinguishers and dogs were being sicced on helpless Americans, today peaceful organisers and protesters for the Black Lives Matter campaign are being arrested and charged with criminal acts in the US. Tragically, under the National Defence Authorisation Act, an

American citizen can now be deemed an enemy combatant and held indefinitely without charge. So I teach at home, at John Jay College. John Jay College is a college of criminal justice, so it's the reason that I mention this today. It's something that I have to share with my students. The struggles that African Americans face in the United States is not much different from the racial and religious strife all across the world, including here in Australia.

So I must ask all of you, how specifically does your life matter? You and I must come together as one and recognise the humanity in each and every one of us. Not one person should ever be made to feel less than the other. Nelson Mandela said it best, "Not until a man has done what he considers to be his duty for his people and his country, can he or she then rest in peace." My father was just in his twenties when the world would learn of him, not many years older than most of you here. Most of you look like you're in your late teens, right, or early twenties. A lot of people forget that Malcolm, Malcolm my father, was young. He was only in his twenties when the world learned of him. People say, "Oh my goodness, he changed so much once he came from Mecca." He was older, right. So my father was only in his twenties when the world learned of him, and he was 39 when he was killed, and so that's 12 years of service, of giving back and making such an impact around the world.

[applause]

While other young men and women were also organising demonstrations, protests, marches and sit ins, seeking a quality of life for themselves and their families, integrating schools, integrating public housing and segregated lunch counters, my father, just in his twenties, said "We demand our human rights as your brother. We demand our inalienable human rights ordained by God." He didn't compromise his stance for the sake of money, for the sake of simply being rich. He did not demand with hash tags and slogans and think his job was complete, that he was now a bona fide activist. He lived his entire life serving his country and serving God. He read everything that was available, so he was fully equipped to educate the masses, to inform his colleagues, to have discussions and create strategies in search of solutions to the human condition that would want to destroy his fellow brother and sister, simply because of ethnic, religious or gender differences.

The climate of our nation was hostile to the humanity of African Americans. Jim Crow's separate but on equal was the law of the land. Private citizens and organisations terrorised black people, similar tactics to what's happened in many parts of our world today, without fear of repercussion. The African diaspora was unprotected and essentially without hope for change. In a humble submission to God, Malcolm X stood up and stepped forward to lead us into an egalitarian future; a belief in the principle that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities by any means necessary, or they will persist as they have 50 years later. Not much has changed young people. The only thing that's changed is that we have smart phones and social media. Young people,

this is your time. Your time to invest in yourselves by any means necessary, with a quality education, with significant purpose to your lives, with utilising power to be your absolute best, power to come together and compare notes, compare discussions and strategies. You too are building a legacy of your own. Each of us has one. Each of us has a purpose. As human beings, each of us has that power.

People often ask me what it's like to be a daughter - I have five sisters, I have to make that very clear, because if my sisters thought that I was here and I was the only daughter, that I left out of here and you thought I was the only daughter, they would really have my neck by the time I got home. And they're as tall as I am and they're really opinionated. So I have five sisters. My parents had six girls. And so people often ask us, but in this case, ask me, what it is to be a daughter of Malcolm X and Dr Betty Shabazz. I was raised very proud to be of the African diaspora, proud to be a woman and proud to be a Muslim. I was raised understanding the importance of education and history, the importance of humanity, the importance of leadership, the importance of self-reliance, the importance of self-respect, so that I can have respect for others, that I am my brother and sister's keeper, to be my best self so I may give of my best to my community and to our society at large; the importance of power, my power.

As a child, I recall watching my mother working in the cause of human rights. I remember her participating in the International Women's Conference that was held in Beijing, China shortly before she passed away. When I was at my lowest, after my mother passed away, writing *Growing Up X*, afforded me an opportunity to reflect on her life as a source of inspiration and empowerment. She had given so much love to me personally that I had so much love inside of me that I wanted very much to share with others. And so, I wrote *Growing Up X*, which is a coming of age memoir. With six daughters, boys knocking on our door and weekly episodes of Soul Train - how many of you have seen Soul Train? You've seen Soul Train? The 1970s, you see all these people dancing and doing the latest moves with the big afros and the big shoes. And what?

Speaker

Gold pants.

Ilyasah Shabazz

Gold pants, right. Gold pants. And the Brady Bunch, the Partridge Family, all these shows. My first book is likely not what most expect of the family of Malcolm X, you see, because most people already had their impression of who Malcolm X was and therefore they have this impression of who I would be. And so, when they found that I was this person of compassion and person of love and peace and all these things, sometimes they were disappointed because they didn't understand that that's who Malcolm was. That's who my parents were. My mother was a young woman in her twenties when she witnessed the political assassination of her husband. One week prior on Valentine's Day, a Molotov cocktail - and for those of you who don't know is a bomb - a Molotov cocktail was thrown into the nursery of my father and mother's home where my sisters and I slept

as babies. And so, my father began staying in busy hotels to keep the attacks away from his family, away from his young wife and children who were near and dear to his heart, because he was just a young man, a human being, our brother.

When my father was finally killed, my mother was left traumatised, frightened and alone. She was a young woman with four babies and pregnant with my youngest twin sisters. And I often ask myself, with six babies and the height of the social climate of the sixties, widowed and the wife of Malcolm X, the wife of the man who had just challenged a government that was historically unjust to its own people, how was this young woman, sister Betty, able to overcome such a loss and so many obstacles and still raise six daughters with the strategically nurturing environment, and still dedicate her life to significantly giving back to others, and still earn a Master's degree, because she already had a Bachelor's degree and a nursing degree when she married her husband, and get into her car once a week to drive from our home in Mount Vernon, New York to the University of Massachusetts, which was about a four hour drive at Amherst, and earn a PhD? How?

She never accepted "No" or "I can't" as an answer for herself. Sister Betty survived because of her faith in God. Knowing her rich history sustained her and because she knew the importance of self-respect, self-esteem and complete faith in God. Sister Betty was very clear that she would not just sit back, complain and think that someone else was going to resolve these issues for her. When you know your history, you understand this. You understand the challenges of injustice issues and the power you possess to invest in yourselves and your communities, to make a difference, to have compassion and right these wrongs. My mother raised six girls with the knowledge of history, education and religion as a means to develop a healthy identity, self-respect and with an understanding of our obligation to others. Forget what they say about pulling your individual selves up by your own boot straps. It does not work.

As human beings, we must find it within ourselves to subscribe to the African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child. We need one another. We need one another. We need one another. I cannot emphasise that we need one another and we must advocate as a community. We're human beings, right. We're not insects, we're not plants, we're not amphibians, we're human beings. My father's power jolted the complacency of America as he articulated the demands for freedom and equality. Fifty years ago, that could not be ignored. Malcolm's impassioned leadership still inspires us to stand as he insisted upon liberty and justice for all. He created a plan of action that would empower America to achieve her greatest potential.

In the 12 short years immediately preceding his assassination, this young man, Malcolm X, rose to the defence of African Americans victimised by race discrimination. We're human beings, so I hope that you could have compassion to understand his actions. He challenged notions of white supremacy and entitlement. He redefined the American Civil Rights Movement to include a human rights agenda for all, because people of African ancestry were not included as 100% men and women. He worked tirelessly to unite

Africa in the diaspora towards a singular international struggle for freedom and independence. He taught us that black Americans were not negros, because there is no such place as negro land; that we were African Americans from the African continent who made a significant contribution to world history; that they were scholars, these African ancestors; that they were scholars, priests, architects, farmers, musicians. Malcolm X is regarded globally as one of the greatest, the most brilliant human right strategists of the 20th century. I didn't say that, right. Google him. This is what it says. Oh listen to what she's saying. She's saying that because he's her dad. No. Failure to adopt his initiatives to end oppression, to educate a mis-educated nation about the true contributions of the African continent, has increased the economic, political and social divides worldwide. If we allow ourselves to be divided and separated and not see ourselves as one, the attack against all of our children will persist. So if we do not acknowledge that Africa has a history, has a rich history, if we cannot acknowledge or if we don't know that, we should learn it. If we can't acknowledge it, then we're going to continue to think that people of colour or people who don't look like us, that they are a problem, that they're not worthy of our respect, that they're not worthy of our righting the wrongs.

My father said, "When you teach a man, young men, you teach a community and when you teach a woman, you raise a nation" and we need everyone in this equation raising healthy children, and I hope that you understand the role of men, the role of women. If you're binary gender, I think it's called - I went to a college and I was talking about the role of men and the role of women and I had a lot of people looking at me, like what about me, because some people don't identify with being a man or woman. So for those of you who don't identify, you're included in this equation. My father, Malcolm X, was compassionate, a student, a lover of books, an excellent teacher and he stood tall to restore our identities and to help us know that long before there was a Harvard or a Yale, for example, in West Africa there was the University of Timbuktu, where black African scholars conferred degrees to citizens of the world who specifically came to the continent for knowledge.

I was a project advisor for the award winning PBS film, Prince Amongst Slaves. Prince Abdulrahman was one of the most famous African men ever captured in the history of the slave trade, and what made this documentary so powerful, is that it was the first documented history from an African perspective. This gentleman happened to be one of the greatest African rulers before the continent was cut up into small countries and colonised. And so, it was in the 1700s that Prince Abdulrahman recalled that the US was by no means comparable to the land in Africa from whence he came. And so, we need to teach this so that we understand the role that Africa and Africans played; that they weren't just down-trodden lazy slaves who did nothing; that the United States was underdeveloped; that it was a pagan society; that the homes were poorly constructed by comparison to the land over which he presided on the continent of Africa.

In the 1700s this infamous Prince Abdulrahman said that most Africans were Muslim; that they spoke five to seven languages; that thriving cultures were based upon universal spirit and intellect, God and scholarship, morale and wisdom. And it was these African men, women and children who were shipped from this first world to what would become the new world, to cultivate a barren land under such psychological trauma, however they survived. In our journey toward justice, this generation of young people have lots of work ahead of them. We must honour all of the founding forefathers and foremothers: all of the founding forefathers and foremothers. You must ensure that history properly and accurately honours the indigenous people, as well as the settlers. This is how nations construct and encourage a legacy of their people and this is how we construct a mighty legacy of our own, with intellect, compassion, fairness and morality.

I pray that we will be fortified with the understanding that knowledge of accurate historical information prepares us for leadership in our homes, it prepares us for leadership in our communities and around the world, it fosters self-respect and then respect for others, it instils in us strength, compassion and the ability to see right from wrong, it reminds us of whom we are at our core and all of what we can accomplish together. When my father said education is our passport to the future and that tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today, we must really study what he said. This is the time of your lives. Young people, you have the ability to organise yourselves through social media all across the world. You have the opportunity to come together with like minds right at your homes or here on your beautiful college campus. You can establish clubs, meeting groups, organisations, plan, strategize, organise, seek solutions to these injustices that continue to plague our society and our children.

Speak to your mentors, your professors, your political leaders. Speak to one another and become civically engaged. Accurate historical facts lead to a clear understanding that we cannot suppress another without oppressing ourselves; that we cannot come to the aid of another without helping ourselves. If we do not know history in its entirety, then our education is incomplete and we and all the children following, will continue to suffer this disorder of detachment, separation from history, disconnection from culture, rejection of heritage and very likely, a life without true passion, determination and purpose, without ever living your life to the fullest, wanting simply to be rich, not rich in service, not rich in helping anyone, but just rich, amassing material possessions, imposing a false sense of superiority, relying on someone else to tell you of your worth without ever recognising that you already are an authentic jewel worthy of shining your own light.

As we pay tribute to the power of leadership that is within each and every one of you, may you emulate the wisdom, courage and purpose of the legacy before you to step forward and produce the best in yourselves that human kind can offer. And just as those who laboured before you, you too will set promising examples to the next generation of justice seekers. Let us look to our ancestors to truly embrace our rich heritage and fulfil a dynamic legacy, because not until then will we honour ourselves, as we also prepare the next generation by setting examples of truth and leadership, just as those who laboured

before you and as such, I promise that your blessings will rain forever. Own your power ladies and gentlemen. Own your power. Own your power. Thank you very much.

[applause]

Professor Peter Dawkins

Well, thank you very much Ilyasah for that. Very inspirational speech. We're now going to move onto the conversation that we're going to have, inspired by many of the thoughts that you've presented to us, and I should add, and I'm very grateful to Ilyasah for speaking to a group of our students this afternoon, for whom I'm sure it was a once in a lifetime experience. I think there's quite a few of them here as well who have enjoyed a second opportunity to hear the message. Can I invite two guests who are going to commence the conversation to the stage and to take your seats? Your names are on the chairs there and I'll introduce you and then you can either come up to the lectern or speak from the chair to get our conversation going.

So joining us on the stage are Mario Peucker, who recently received his PhD from the University of Melbourne, for his study on civic and political participation of Muslims in Australia and Germany. He's worked as a social researcher, both in Europe and Australia in the area of cultural and religious diversity, exclusion and citizenship since 2003 and he's carried out various national and international research projects on migrant integration, racism and ethnic discrimination and contributed to consultations with, amongst others, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Racism, the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Australian Commission for Human Rights.

In Australia, he worked as a researcher on an ARC discovery project on Muslim citizenship and belonging in Australia, Germany and the UK. Mario has published numerous articles, books and chapters and reports on citizenship, ethnic and religious diversity and exclusion and in 2014 he published his first book, Muslim Active Citizenship in the West with a co-author. We're very delighted that he's joined us at Victoria University at our Centre for Cultural Diversity and Wellbeing, and Professor Michele Grossman, the Director of the Centre is here tonight, and you can see cultural diversity and wellbeing is of course a key focus at Victoria University. So welcome Mario. And our other guest on the stage is Sherene Hassan, who is a Director of the Islamic Museum of Australia. She served as Vice-President and Secretary of the Islamic Council of Victoria, the peak body of 90,000 Victorian Muslims, for nearly eight years. She was also one of the media spokespeople of the council during that period. To date she has conducted over 800 information sessions on Islam to diverse audiences, ranging from the Flying Fruit Fly Circus School to the Australian Federal Police, and in December 2007 Sherene was selected by The Age newspaper as one of Melbourne's 100 most influential people. Sherene will discuss how the Islamic Museum seeks to encourage young Australian Muslims to get involved in different forms of civic engagement and how the Islamic Museum facilitates and promotes cross-community networks, co-operation

between young Muslim and non-Muslim people. So please welcome our two special commentators.

[applause]

I'm going to ask Mario to speak first and then Sherene and then we'll go into general discussion with the whole group. So Mario.

Dr Mario Peucker

I knew it would be difficult to speak after Ilyasah, but it's going to be really, really hard to. So when I was sitting there I thought oh my God I am going to show you how boring academia can be compared to real life. So please take this as an apology for the next 10 minutes. I'm really serious, because it seems so small what I'm going to talk about in the big pictures. I have to say this in the beginning. I feel very honoured to be here with all of you. I'm going to talk about the research that I've done the last four, five years, about civic and political participation of Muslims in Australia and a few other European countries. During that time I have learnt a lot about how active citizenship careers among Muslims start and how they evolve, how people experience their engagement, their civic engagement and what they've learnt and how they've grown as a result of it. I would like to share some glimpses of what I've learnt in these years through these very inspiring and interesting people that I was honoured to talk to.

I want to focus on the empowering effect of civic participation in Muslim community organisations, but I assume that although my research is based on this, you could apply that to many other community organisations, not only Muslims. Those Muslims that I have spoke to have been active in the political arena and in various areas of civil society, both Muslim and non-Muslim context, from trade unions to mosques, from human rights organisations to interfaith initiatives. But regardless of this great diversity of activities, for almost all of them, Muslim community organisations, grass roots organisations, have turned out to be very, very important. Many of my interview partners started their civic career, as I would call it, on the grass roots level within Muslim community organisations. It seems like this was an accessible, or was seen as an accessible, less scary way of starting their volunteering.

So Muslim community organisations are some kind of, by default, almost an entry point into an active citizenship career, and as soon as you're in this space of civic engagement, it grows and expands in different directions. So I found for example that many Muslims would start their volunteering or community based volunteering, with the idea that they would help their fellow Muslims, their community members, for example, through youth work or offering Arabic lessons, things like this. But very soon their activity focus would shift towards more cross-community engagement and activities in co-operation with non-Muslim groups, although they may have not signed up for this, but it just happened because things change, the communities change, the organisations change. So they moved into this very co-operative cross-community space where they developed networks and made new experiences. So their community based volunteering is anything but isolating

or isolated, but it is actually something that builds cross-community bridges and networks of trust and it breaks down walls of misunderstanding and ignorance. Another typical pattern of the shift within volunteering careers, is that there was a shift from civic participation in the community context, towards political participation, a mainstream or multicultural context. So Muslim community groups often seem to be like a political mobiliser or a gateway into other forms of activism. Many active Muslims I spoke to, for example, started as normal ordinary volunteers in their grass roots community organisation, then they move up into a more senior role within this organisation, take leadership roles and responsibilities, represent their organisation in the outside world, in the broader public, and then they would develop something like a public profile or reputation and this gives many of them access to media power. There's a lot we can discuss about media power. It's not the way that most Muslims would like to see it because it's often very responsive and defensive unfortunately still, but it gives them a voice in the media.

Government organisations and other mainstream organisations invite these people with public profile to sit on committees, on advisory councils and things like that. So they have access to the public debate and the political decision-making process, so through their community engagement in the beginning. These external recruitments into these advisory boards don't just happen by chance, but they rely on personal and maybe even more importantly, institution networks between these community organisations and government and other mainstream, if you want to call it this, mainstream organisations. I think another important key finding in my research that confirms what many other researchers have found in this area, is that civic participation also within a Muslim community context, has many positive effects obviously on those who are active, especially young people. They have acquired new skills, they learn new things, management, communication skills, they became more articulate, they developed social networks within and beyond the community organisations and many of my interview partners said that they have grown personally and they said they have developed self-esteem, they felt empowered, they felt like they are more accepting and tolerant of different views. So all the things that you would like to see in the development of young people. So in short, civic participation is a great source of empowerment.

So for me against this backdrop there are three main questions. The first one that might be quite obvious, but I think it's very important to us, how do we encourage more young people, regardless of their ethnic, religious or whatever background, to participate more. How do we get them into that space where they participate in a community context or public space in general? Of course, all civil society organisations should be open, accessible and attractive to all people. So that's obvious. So we need to make it more attractive, show why it's interesting, why it's actually fun to volunteer, what you can gain from it, what you can learn from it. So giving it a positive name is one key that applies to all young people and maybe even not so young people.

Removing barriers. I mean, you mentioned a lot of these stigmatisation - you didn't use that word - the stigmatisation of certain community, of certain groups that might scare many people off, and it does scare them off from participating in mainstream organisations. Removing these cultural and also practical barriers is an important point. But as I said, Muslim community grass root organisations play a fundamental role in encouraging more people to participate. They are starting points for careers that then subsequently unfold and become quite rich and diverse. This needs to be acknowledged and actively supported by the organisations, but also by policy makers and governments. That brings me to the second question. When people are in this space of civic engagement, how do we make sure that they stay there? There is, I think, a simple answer: make it a worthwhile experience. If you get frustrated because all your goals that you were trying to achieve and these goals are always defined or almost always defined in very altruistic terms, it's never about themselves. It's about advancing the wellbeing of others. If they get the feeling that they don't get anywhere, if this whole experience is just a waste of time, if this is the feeling, they are going to drop out eventually. But if you do the opposite, if you give them leadership roles, responsibility, empower them to speak up, also if it's in this end with the general political or maybe even especially then, they are more likely to stay in this area of active citizenship, then it becomes almost addictive, as many of my interview partners said. Sometimes it's so overwhelming time wise, but I just can't stop it because it's so, well it's just part of their personality and they just need to continue.

The third question for me is then, how can we maximise the individual and societal benefits of community based participation. There are many answers to this. I'm not saying that I have the silver bullet, but one important way is to build and strengthen those institution networks that I mentioned before, because then those who are involved in this easily accessible community based volunteering, they are going to build new networks, they are going to be set on a new pathway for their active citizenship. So to conclude, active citizenship of Muslims and other young people in general can be maybe described as something like a self-reinforcing circle of empowerment.

As soon as people are in that civic participation space, and it's a good experience that they have there, they are going to learn more, they are going to develop new networks, their self-esteem grows and these are factors that makes their participation more effective. They think they are getting somewhere. And if you get this sense of achieving something, then you are not going to leave this area again. So then you are going to stay there and your commitment is going to become stronger. So in this sense, community based civic engagement of Muslims, or any other group for that matter, offers an enormous and I think largely untapped potential for empowering young people and it also helps to build well connected communities and ultimately, strengthen social cohesion in diverse societies. Thank you.

[applause]

Sherene Hassan

Thank you Mario. I've been giving talks for 800 years. I mean, let me rephrase that. It feels like 800 years, believe me. I've given 800 talks. I have never ever felt this awe-struck and this nervous in 15 years. So bear with me if I struggle to get through this. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands which we stand on today and pay my respects to their elders, past and present. A couple of thank yous. Thank you to Victoria University, to Maribyrnong City Council. Thank you to Variety Victoria for bringing out Ilyasah and thank you to Craig Dent, who has not only been working on this for two years, he's been planning this for seven to eight years. So thank you so much Craig.
[applause]

Your dream has become a reality and I'm so happy that your persistence paid off. Thank you.

I'll be speaking about the challenges of active leadership for young Australian Muslims and touching on the negative impact, the device of rhetoric of some politicians and commentators has on the Muslim community and the role that the Islamic Museum plays in countering that narrative. I was once giving a presentation at a school assembly in the Mornington Peninsula in front of about 250 students and I asked them "How many of you have a Muslim friend?" and no one raised their hand. So my next question was, "Well what Muslim can you name?" and then every hand went up in the room and they all started yelling out "Osama bin Laden." I asked them to think of another example of a Muslim. I thought, Zayn Malik from One Direction, or maybe Muhammad Ali or [Usher Houlie]. No one could think of another example of a Muslim other than Osama bin Laden. And that left me feeling somewhat devastated, and I don't need to articulate what this group of students thought about Islam and Muslims.

Another example of the intolerance that I am concerned about, I'll give you this example, this has occurred at the Islamic Museum. It was waiting for a group to arrive at the Mornington Peninsula. It was a Probus club, so it's a club of elderly citizens, about 35 individuals. The bus driver took me aside, ashen faced, very tense, saying "I have been in this bus for an hour and the group have been bagging Muslims for the entire journey. They're not too pleased with your lot and good luck, because you're going to need it." But surprisingly, that group, even though they exhibited severe anti-Muslim sentiments on arrival, within 90 minutes they had completely transformed and some of them were hugging the tour guides, one woman was in tears saying "I have such intolerance towards the Muslim community and for that feeling to dissipate at the end of this visit, I can't tell you how that feels."

So these examples really highlight the negative stereotypes or the negative perception of Muslims that exists in the wider community, and sadly, this perception is quite pervasive. We are at a crisis point in our community. Never before has there been so much fear and intolerance eroding the fabric of our society. Commentators, with their devices of rhetoric, flood our newspapers on a constant basis. Extremists from all sides are forging a

battle on those of us who seek a peaceful co-existence. And I want us to think for a moment the impact that this is having on young Australian Muslims, who internalise this negativity. This is a group who have been singled out, problematized and demonised on a constant basis. Young Australian Muslims have responded to this over-scrutiny in a number of ways.

So for some, as Mario pointed out, this has provided an impetus for them to engender change and create a positive impact in society. This is evidenced by those individuals who are committed to volunteering efforts, again as Mario pointed out, but also it's evidenced by the increasing number of Muslims who have taken on professions that are altruistic. So we see an increased number of Muslim fire fighters for example, some doctors, nurses. Many of them are motivated by the Islamic teaching that Prophet Mohammed stated that: "The best of you, is the one who is most beneficial to others." Others have responded to this negativity by making a concerted effort to conceal their Muslim identity at every opportunity, and I see this at the Islamic Museum a lot. I'll be giving a talk to a private school, independent school, public school and invariably at the end of the talk, a Muslim student will come at the end and say, "I'm Muslim. Don't tell anyone. But I really appreciated your talk." Others have come up to me saying, "This is the first time that I feel proud to be Muslim."

A third group have responded to this over-scrutiny by becoming more reclusive and insular and less likely to engage with the wider community. The Islamic Museum in Australia, which just opened nearly 20 months ago in Thornbury, has had enormous support from the wider community and the response has been nothing less than overwhelming. The IMA seeks to encourage young Muslims or young Australian Muslims, to get involved in different forms of civic engagement, and this is facilitated by the IMA by helping to foster a positive Australian Muslim identity through the Australian Muslim History Gallery, which is one of the permanent galleries in the museum, and I was absolutely honoured to take Ilyasah yesterday on a tour of the museum. I pointed out to Ilyasah that when I was in primary school in the seventies and the eighties, thank you - should have just said the eighties, shouldn't I - we were never taught about the Australian Muslim cameleers.

I remember listening to a song by Australian Crawl called Reckless. Anyone remember that song? Yeah. And good old James Reyne is singing about Burke and Wills and camel and I'm thinking, what is he talking about camels for. I didn't know that the British settlers brought out Muslim cameleers to assist on their expeditions. These Muslim cameleers built railway tracks and telegraph lines and transported supplies all around Australia. How many people here have heard the story of the Afghan Muslim cameleer, Bejah Dervish, who saved the life of Perth explorer, L.A. Wells on the Calvert Expedition? I didn't know until seven, eight years ago the Macassan fishermen traded sea slugs with the indigenous community in the late 1600s. This pre-dated white settlement. It's absolutely essential this part of history is told. It enables Australian Muslims to feel a

sense of connection to this country and it helps the wider community appreciate the contributions that Muslims made hundreds of years ago.

The IMA also helps to facilitate cross-cultural understanding between young Australian Muslims and people from the wider community. Research carried out by Professor Kevin Dunn, from the University of Western Sydney, shows that there's an alarming rate of anti-Muslim sentiment, and I've been through this before, but I just wanted to touch on this research, where he surveyed 1300 people. What is interesting about this research, amongst other things, is that individuals who have some interaction with the Muslim community, were far less likely to have intolerant views towards Muslims. Conversely, those individuals who had no interaction with Muslims, were far more likely to exhibit anti-Muslim sentiments. So this highlights the importance of creating opportunities for individuals to get to know one another.

The IMA plays a crucial role in facilitating and promoting cross-community networks and co-operation between young Australian Muslims and non-Muslims. This is achieved in many ways: IMA events, exhibition openings, artist salons, workshops are all open to the public and therefore provides the main point of connection and platform at the museum where Muslims and non-Muslims can meet one another for a shared experience, through a shared interest. And just one example of many, and I've got a few examples, but I'll just give one example because I'm just conscious of time, but one example of many is the common ground think tank, which is an artist facilitated one day event for young people to brainstorm ideas for a larger, long term youth led mobile arts project. So it brings together participants from the Macedon Ranges shire with their young Muslim counterparts from outer Melbourne at the Islamic Museum, creatively challenging negative stereotypes and promoting friendship. The possibilities for ongoing cross-cultural understanding are endless and at a time when our world is fraught with negativity and filled with a sense of despair and gloom, the work of organisations such as the Islamic Museum of Australia, provide a glimmer of hope and helps restore my faith in humanity.

To end, I'd like to quote Adolfo Perez Esquivel, Argentinian social activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner. "We must apply our humble efforts to the construction of a more just and humane world, and I want to declare emphatically that such a world is possible. To create this new society, we must present outstretched and friendly hands without hatred and rancour, even as we show great determination and never, never waver in the defence of truth and justice. Because we know that we cannot sow seeds with clenched fists. To sow, we must open our hands." Thank you.

[applause]

Professor Peter Dawkins

Well thank you very much Sherene and Mario for wonderful contributions to this evening's proceedings. It's now the opportunity for anybody else to ask questions, make comments, and we have about 25 minutes before the conclusion so plenty of opportunity.

So please do contribute and if you'd like to raise your hand. Are we using a roving mic or are we relying on - it's not too big a room. I think we're okay are we? Just speak up. And would you like to introduce yourself when you ask your question.

Karen Jackson

Hi, I'm Karen Jackson. I'm a Yorta Yorta woman [unclear 1:08:20] black fellas over there. I'm from Moondani Balluk Indigenous Unit at Victoria University. I thank you all for talking this evening. That was really inspiring. I always worry and I try to work through with my community the issues that arise through intergenerational trauma from being problematized and labelled and put to the back of the bus and not being treated as equal citizens in schools, and I think that intergenerational trauma really plays out amongst Aboriginal people in Australia [unclear 1:08:57] and other places and I want to know if you've got any ways that you moved through those sorts of spaces, which are really hard for families and communities.

Professor Peter Dawkins

Ilyasah, would you like to have a go at that?

Ilyasah Shabazz

Yes, of course Professor. You know, I think because I was raised understanding who I am, like my parents made sure that I knew my history, so that we know that institutionalised racism exists, so that if I confronted it, it didn't affect me. I know that it was someone's ignorance. And so, I could either help shed light or pray for them and continue to do my work. But I don't think that I let it interfere with this person that I am, my development. I think it's important that we allow our children to fully develop, but that we have to help them, so that these things ...

Karen Jackson

Yeah, so the added problem I suppose [inaudible 1:10:26].

Ilyasah Shabazz

It makes it difficult. I think it's happened many places. It's happened across the continent. There are many people. I mean, people were orphaned. A lot of parents were killed. Children were left. And so, they were raised with the removal of their history. But I think we have people like Malcolm X who came along and said, "History is important. We are a human race." He didn't say, "We're amphibians and insects" and all that stuff. But we have to find the history and share it exactly. You already know.

Dr Mario Peucker

Well if I can add the boring academic side to it. I mean, from speaking to those active Muslims, I mean this is not the average Muslim, those who overcome these obstacles, many of them said that the family was very supportive. Many of them said that “I wouldn’t be who I am without my family.” So obviously, well it seems to me, that’s my interpretation, there is this resilience in the families already. It doesn’t really answer the stolen generation question. That’s different obviously. But families have a big role to play in planting that seed of engagement in young people, from what I’ve learnt.

Ilyasah Shabazz

And then there was Isaiah Washington who did say - he’s an actor in America. I don’t know how many of you know who he is, but you could Google him. And he said that our memory was in our DNA. So there are some times, you know, where we know these things and we don’t know how we know them. So thank goodness now for the internet, because it seems that we could just go on and find all this information.

Professor Peter Dawkins

Michele, introduce yourself.

Michele Grossman

Michele Grossman from the Centre of Cultural Diversity and Wellbeing at Victoria University. Also I would like to thank all three of you for riveting presentations. My question to the three of you is really about the nature of the connection to history that all three of you have talked about in your different ways. Because one of the questions that comes up for me is who gets to decide the narrative of history that we take on as our own, that we feel a sense of pride in, that we feel a sense of connection in. In other words, we certainly in the Australian context as well as the US context, there have been what you might call history [unclear 1:13:12]. Who gets to control and determine the story that ultimately becomes the one that helps us feel that sense of pride, connection, self-respect, connection to others? And I’m wondering if any, or all of you, would like to comment on how you have found it possible to develop a narrative of history and historical understanding that you feel able to take forward and how can young people do that today, because I think it’s a tough ask for them, with a lot of things happening.

Ilyasah Shabazz

Let’s see. So she would like me to go first. It seems that whoever is in power controls the history, but I think that when you look at the monuments, the artefacts that architects are continuing to uncover, history is there. So I know for me, it’s not fictitious. The history of Africa, the history of all of who I am is there. So it’s real. My parents made

sure, and I'm so grateful, that I had access to this. And so, I think it's very important as parents and adults, that we make sure that our children have access to history, but it has to be accurate, because if it's not accurate, then what are we doing. We are not allowing our children to fully develop. We're not allowing them to have compassion if something is wrong. Instead, we are teaching them that you should feel that you are better than someone because of their ethnic background, or because of their gender, because of so many things instead of allowing everyone to fully develop.

Sherene Hassan

That's a really good question, and I struggle with that question a lot and obviously clearly those in power write history, but I think it's really incumbent on us to encourage our children to read, to get involved in story telling, because if we're not going to tell our stories, then nobody will. And I just wanted to tell you one quick example. There's a spoken word poet, she's an African spoken word poet, at the Islamic Museum of Australia. We play her video on loop. Her name's Alia Gabres and she does this compelling poetry about civil war in Africa and the trauma of losing her mother in war. She performed this to a group of politicians, and that was the trigger that started the conversation happening in terms of looking at our national curriculum and what is being taught. So I think we really need to revive the act of story telling and encourage our children to get on board.

Richard Symon

Hi Peter, Richard Symon's my name. I'm chairman of Variety and I welcome Ilyasah and Mario and Sherene for joining us and for Craig Dent particularly for pursuing Ilyasah for over two years. So my question actually relies on a quote from Ilyasah that it's in context of the issues that we've done as a charity, that it seems to look after disenfranchised, disabled, disadvantaged children. So through this process, we've been wondering about the type of publicity that we're going to try and maximise the potential opportunities of having these conversations with situations like in Bendigo recently where we had sort of riots by some, call them Nazis if you will - and I apologise for using the wrong name - but certainly very fascist type individuals who are quite confronting. And so when I take Ilyasha's quote that by any means necessary, where and how do we go through the process by any means necessary, that process that actually takes some tension out of the processes, creates some ability to discuss the issues at hand and actually do what your father would have liked, to leave us a legacy.

Ilyasah Shabazz

I think actually you answered that, but I want to say, by any means necessary, you know, investing in ourselves by any means necessary, learning by any means necessary, making sure that we have a quality and accurate education system by any means necessary. All of

these things are so important and the only way they're going to be done by any means necessary is when we all do that and we recognise that we're not insects, amphibians or plants. We're human beings. Sounds like little nursery school, right?

Dr Mario Peucker

Well I am going to say something that is not very nice. I think that our society has to unfortunately live with, there is a small group of people who will never get it, and they still think some are, you know. And I mean, this is a very unfortunate truth, but I think it is something that needs to be seen as the reality. We can't change everyone's mind unfortunately, but we can strengthen those. I would say there is this hard core group that cannot be changed, but there is a big group, a big segment of society that has this dignity and this human dignity sense very much in them, and there's a group that doesn't really know where to go and we just have to make sure that we don't lose any of this group to that idiotic side. Education is just a very important way to do that. But I mean, there are other things. I mean, when I come back to volunteering, give them a sense of self-esteem, a sense of achievement. Get them into something that they like. I mean, it sounds all very simplistic, but we can't afford to lose not a single person from that group that is not already in that pocket.

[applause]

Sherene Hassan

I just wanted to share something that my father taught me at a very young age. It was a verse in the Quran in chapter 41 verse 34 that states: repel evil with good and you can turn an enemy into a friend. So repel evil with good, you can turn an enemy into a friend. So when I was [unclear 1:20:31] I used to be bombarded with lots of nasty hate mail. The really dangerous stuff would go to the police, but the nasty stuff I'd always respond to. Craig, I remember, if you can remember those times, good old days in the ICV, and I'd always respond to these letters and emails. There was one guy, his name was Dave, he sent me this horrible email, "You bloody Muslims. Go back to where you came from. We don't want you. You want to do this, you want to do that." "Actually Dave, well I don't want to do any of those things and this is what my religion's about."

So we kept emailing and each email he was still nasty and aggressive, but a little bit less nasty and aggressive, and he stopped emailing me and I'm thinking, oh thank goodness, this is exhausting. And then I see his name in the inbox and I'm, oh do I need to open this. Yes, open it Sherene. Goodness. I'm bracing myself, open the email and it's two puppy dogs with love hearts and it said, "You're one of my dearest friends. Send this to six of your dearest friends." So I just about fell off my chair, and that really made me realise that there are a group of people out there who are basically trolls, who are angry at the world, who knows what injustice they've had to deal with in their own household, in their own families, and they're lashing out in anger. So I agree with Mario, there is a

group of people who, whatever you say to them, will have no impact, but there is a group who are just angry and just want a bit of love and compassion and attention. So I think we can work on those people.

[applause]

Robyn Broadbent

Hi, I'm Robyn Broadbent. I head up the Youth Work discipline group at Victoria University, so thank you for all of your commentary. I think there's two parts to what I'm thinking. One is about the fact that Australia I think is experiencing a moral panic in relation to the Muslim community, and particularly with that link to refugees, and I'd be interested in your comments in just how we actually stem what I consider to be just a moral panic, where people are frightened and they're very ill-informed. And I think the other part of my thoughts are that the impact that has on the family. I rarely, as a youth worker by trade, talk about so much about context, you know, the young person, but the impact on the family to actually be able to do exactly what you say, to be proud of their identity, to actually manage the dominant culture that's coming at them, particularly a frightened dominant culture, must be incredibly difficult. I know from the research that, as Ilyasah has pointed out, that aspirational parents can make enormous differences and negate most of the, or many of the issues, other barriers that young people face if they are aspirational for their children. So I think they started with some comments on the moral panic and how we all can contribute to that, because I think that's the state that we're in in Australia, and really to assist families to hold that very strong line of being proud of your identity.

Professor Peter Dawkins

Would anyone like to respond to that one?

Ilyasah Shabazz

No, I'm going to let you guys do it.

Professor Peter Dawkins

Sherene, you go first.

Dr Mario Peucker

Well I think the moral panic definitely describes it quite accurately. This is always so difficult, because so many factors play into this and one influences the other. So obviously you have the media in mind, political rhetoric in mind. It's hard to blame one, because then the media say, "We just report what the politicians say", the politicians say "Well we

have to look after our constituency”. So it is awfully confusing. The media have become better, but only some. So there is some progress there. Up until the recent federal elections, I think Australia was on the right path. I think when I spoke to people, I mean you would know that better than I do, because you have [unclear 1:24:53], there was a general idea of we can co-operate with this government. It was good. The media started to have less food for this inflammatory reporting. But then it all changed. I mean, the circumstances changed, but especially the government’s approach to these circumstances changed, and it has thrown the Muslim community into the deepest water. I mean, as you said before, it’s just hard to describe how horrible it is. The future will tell. It is definitely a combination of both. Political rhetoric is key, but it doesn’t change like this, so it has to rebuild the networks that multicultural Australian politics have actually established. They are weakened now. They are faltering because of the political climate, but they are there. They can be reactivated and then we have to start again. It’s a constant work and then the media will always jump on bad stories. We just have to become more receiving to that and know better by being educated, as you said.

Sherene Hassan

Just a couple of things. I think there’s obviously a couple of things that we can’t change. It’s very difficult to change the narrative. But what we can try and do is change what is in our power. So, it’s in our power perhaps to change the discourse at dinner table, in our workplaces. If we can try and have a commitment that us as a society will have zero tolerance to sexism, to racism, to injustice towards any marginalised group, and if we can start at the grass roots level and then I think we’ll get the leadership we deserve. But what I’m seeing now over the years, ever since Pauline Hanson made her maiden speech in parliament, it’s almost like it’s just this low level racism is so widespread and we just need to harness this debate and say, “Hang on a second, no. Absolutely not.” And even for me as a Muslim leader, it was really important to try and speak to Muslim youth and say, “Look, I don’t want you just concerned about the Muslim community and the injustice that’s being meted out towards them. I want you to be just as concerned about the injustices that the indigenous community have to be concerned.” So let’s not just worry about our own, let’s worry about anyone that’s going through that.

[applause]

Professor Peter Dawkins

Ilyasah, did you want to comment on that now? I think we’re coming towards an end.

Speaker

My name’s [unclear 1:27:33] and I’m the president of the student [unclear 1:27:35] at Victoria University. As a modern day Muslim, so my background is Fijian and I grew up

in Borneo. Through the years I've copped discrimination or racial comments for my skin colour, from where I am and I can definitely, getting back to your argument when students say that they don't tell people they're Muslim. I'm proud of who I am, but because of what I've been through and what I've seen my parents go through in this country, I don't like to bring it up or I avoid admitting that I am Muslim. So I guess my question to you is - well also that I have other Muslims who question my identity and whether I really am Muslim or not, because as I've admitted, I'm a modern day Muslim woman. So I guess my question to you guys is what advice or suggestion do you have for someone like myself, and I'm sure other Muslim students my age out there could say back to people that question them.

[applause]

Sherene Hassan

Again, that conversation that we need to start having within the Muslim community, just stop being judgmental, and whatever you do is between you and God. No one can judge who you are, apart from God. This is something that we are taught. We are taught as Muslims that we shouldn't be judgmental. There's a story about a woman who was a prostitute who used to feed starving animals every day and she was guaranteed heaven. So there's so many stories in Islam that teach us that whatever we do, and the most important aspect of our faith, is how we treat others. And that's the most important thing. And I always, when I speak to Muslims I say, "Well you know, the head scarf might be mentioned twice in the Quran. It's mentioned 72 times to be patient. You're not being particularly patient with me." So I think just education and just trying to highlight that importance. I really feel for you, and this is something that I've been trying to lobby for so many years. I'm sick to death of people attributing so much importance to the head scarf. I'm not saying it's not saying that's important to me. It's important to me personally, but the paradox is by me wearing it am I emphasising that importance, and that's frustrating. I think we need to continually, as a Muslim community, continue to have this debate and say, you know, "Let's stop talking about macro issues and stop talking about microfiber."

[applause]

Professor Peter Dawkins

So, it's now my job to draw the proceedings to a close. I'm going to ask Craig in a minute, and Kerri, whether they want to say anything, but before I do that, I just want to say I think this has been an outstanding Game Changers event and we've been extremely privileged, Ilyasah, to have you visit us here in Footscray and at Victoria University today for a very inspirational speech. I can tell from seeing everybody's faces as the evening's

gone on how significant an event this is. So first of all, if you could all join with me in thanking Ilyasah for being out here and speaking.

[applause]

And Mario and Sherene, thank you very much for getting our conversation going this evening, which really touched on some extremely important and big issues in contemporary Australia and it's been a very good conversation with the whole community of people here tonight. So please join me in thanking them for their contribution.

[applause]

Craig, would you like to come to the lectern?

Craig Dent

Thanks Peter. Just a few quick thank yous before we wrap up tonight. I should acknowledge and thank Porter Novelli, who have been a PR firm who have helped us attract and secure a huge amount of media in preparation for this tour and completely exhausting our guests in doing it all, but it's been terrific to have it all done, so I wanted to certainly acknowledge them. All jokes aside about Fairfax, we should acknowledge them. They have been tremendous to deal with actually in relation to getting a very large interview done and published in a national magazine on a Saturday. That's no mean feat. So a huge thanks to Nick Bryant, who was the journalist who came to New York to interview you, and their editors and executive producers for allowing the article to be published in its fullness. It was important that that be done, so we should thank them and acknowledge them.

The Islamic Council Victoria, Nail Aykan, is here tonight. We should acknowledge them because they are one of two incredibly important partners for this tour. Without ICV's involvement, this tour wouldn't have been possible, so we'd certainly like to thank them. And a most prominent partner, in fact, is Victoria University, who without your support, this certainly would not have happened at all. And your particular involvement, your particular energy around this, your team, Tara and Rachel and the whole group that came together to make this together have just been absolutely outstanding.

[applause]

Two last things, Variety, Richard, it's courageous for any non-Muslim organisation to bring in a prominent Muslim. Variety was the only organisation courageous enough to do it in this state, so congratulations to you and the board.

[applause]

The shameless plug now. Friday night the Islamic Council of Victoria, which I should declare I have sat on the board of, along with Sherene, and we sat through some interesting times with the Muslim community. I particularly like to go back to where you came from narrative, because that means I need to go back to Preston, which is

always a fun conversation to have as you could imagine, and I have it many, many times. So the ICV's having an event on at Melbourne Town Hall Friday night. It's \$25 a ticket. If it's not sold out, it's pretty close. So we expect to have nearly 1000 people in Melbourne Town Hall Friday night to hear our guest speaker speak. It's going to be a phenomenal event, 6.30. I would encourage you to get online and get a ticket.

And of course, the last event that anyone has to hear our guest speaker speak in person is the Variety Gala Dinner, Saturday night at the Sofitel Hotel. A nice, relaxed three course wonderful meal and a fantastic environment hearing our guest speaker speak at length, MC'd by Tracey Curro, the previous 60 Minutes reporter. There's going to be some terrific Australian talent presented on that night, so if you can get along to that and visit the Variety website, go onto varietypresents.org and secure your ticket for that, that would be tremendous. Thank you all for your time tonight. It's been a pleasure to have this panel here. Particularly proud of all of you. Thank you.

[applause]

Facilitator

Thank you very much Vice-Chancellor and Craig for your participation tonight, and special guests and all of you. It's been very much an honour to have this very special Game Changer in downtown Footscray, and so that you've all come here and participated and every day, one of the great things about Footscray, is the wide range of people who live and belong here and this is an ideal location for such a special event, so thank you very much Ilyasah for coming to Australia. We're going to have another Game Changer next Monday. This one was one that we snuck into the agenda and it will be Green is Good and it is looking at the social and economic benefits for industry of investing in a green environment in the west of Melbourne.

So if you're free, please come along and look to our new agenda of Game Changer events that we are starting to plan for 2016. It's going to be an even bigger year. If you want to eat some of the great cuisine after this event, in Footscray we have some great African, Vietnamese and other new kids on the block that are in the streets around here and some of the team from MetroWest can give you some advice if you want somewhere to go after this event. So thank you and good night and we hope we'll see you again.

[applause]

Video ends

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