President’s Journey
Amanda Gordon

President, 2004-2008

I was brought up to believe that we all had both the right and the responsibility to impact the world. My family conversations were passionate, well-argued, and always looked at the big picture and the role we could all play if there were jobs to be done. At my local comprehensive high school I was into everything – debating, drama, leadership. I was also a leader of a youth group and fought for the right to engage in political demonstrations (apartheid, Vietnam War, Soviet Jewry). My parents encouraged thought and action, then left us to it.

I enrolled in the BSc in Clinical Psychology at the University of NSW immediately on finishing school, having rejected medical studies on parental advice, but knowing nothing about Psychology as a career. During my studies I engaged with ideas, being particularly taken with Seligman’s Learned Helplessness studies, which showed that we can actively change emotional states. That work has underpinned so much of what I have done both professionally and personally (although I moved towards the Learned Optimism framework decades before he published it – that’s my nature!)

At University I was elected on the Student Union Council and thence truly began my political career. I continued with Student Leadership when I moved to the University of Adelaide, and then put it on hold for a while as I began my family and continued my studies in the UK. On my return to Australia I took a role as a Clinical Psychologist at the Prince Charles Hospital in Brisbane, joined the APS (and the Board of Clinical Psychologists soon thereafter) and became involved. On the Queensland Branch committee I took on roles of Treasurer and later Public Relations officer, and was invited to take up some media opportunities (both TV and radio) by the Branch as their representative ... and that was it for me – I was hooked. Over the decades since then I have taken on many roles in the media, and developed my skills in communication and understanding of the various avenues. I also was part of the push to get rebates for psychological services,
through the then Medibank (I was the Qld signatory to a national petition from the APS in 1984) and through the private health funds.

In 1989 my family returned to Sydney and not long after that I resumed private practice. I joined the APS Sydney Branch and started out on that committee, but soon found my APS niche at the Clinical College meetings. At that time, I was very involved in my own practice and keen to both develop my own skills and work to enhance working conditions for practitioners. The Clinical College at that stage in NSW was taking leadership in the fight to get rebates for psychological services from the private health funds, and that continued to be my fight for many years. By then, the APS had slowed its campaign to get funding through the Government, and our focus was on the individual funds. Many lobbying lessons were learned at that time, and we had quite a team that focused their energies on this goal.

By the mid-1990s I had found my way onto the State Committee of the NSW Section of the Clinical College, again holding the treasurer role. In the latter years of that decade, the NSW Section took over the National positions – which is the way it was done prior to the advent of the information age, which allowed for meetings by teleconference and thus better representation on National Committees from people all over the country. Over this time, I continued to be involved in the media, and was also involved in various activities outside the Psychological arena. I was Vice President of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, a member of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, Chair of the NSW Refugee Week Committee, and on the Multicultural Advisory Group to the Sydney Olympic Committee. I also was the founding President of a Bereavement support group, and was actively involved in promoting psychological knowledge to the public.

During 2000, I completed a year long Leadership programme through the NSW Benevolent Society, which increased my skills and confidence and brought me into contact with a range of movers and shakers in society generally and helped to expand my vision.

In 2001 I was invited by the then Director of Communications of the APS to stand for the Board of Directors at the end of his term. I must say that having a specific
role on the Board, which demanded a specific interest and skill set, made me more courageous to stand. It was pretty terrifying – until then, my roles in the APS had not been highly contested, and were far from high profile. I had worked closely with colleagues on projects, been independent of thought, and not really had to answer to a demanding constituency – whatever I did was better than no-one doing it, and I am quite conscientious, but there was no pressure. The Board was a mysterious creature to most of us mere members.

I was elected unopposed and then set about the steep learning curve that all Board members face. I was delighted to have the opportunity to take a fresh look at the Board’s Communication strategies, and count the inception of National Psychology Week as one of my greatest achievements. From small ambitions it has grown to be meaningful in the calendar of the APS, member groups and individual members, and from it we leverage in order to communicate to the general public and the media about our agenda. We also made the Communications budget more meaningful, ending our paid advertising and employing specialist staff to ensure a professional approach to achieving our aims.

Colleagues on the Board encouraged me to stand for the APS Presidency. I had never been afraid to express an opinion, and I had a vision for the Society which was supported by enough people that I was elected. Consistent with that vision was the expansion of the Public Interest (or Social Justice) arm of the APS during my two terms. I also had a view that was shared by other Board members that we should become more involved with other professional bodies, to expand our vision – while remaining the body that looked after Professional Standards, ethics and quality, for the profession. The paucity of indigenous psychologists within the APS was clear, and during my term we established the Bendi Lango Foundation for the provision of bursaries for postgraduate indigenous psychology students, and the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association – both of which continue to contribute to the development of more indigenous psychologists, and the wellbeing of them. The APS now acknowledges and overtly supports indigenous psychologists who are members of AIPA.
During my term, the APS also changed its governance structure, so that Directors no longer hold portfolios. I believe that change has been extremely beneficial for the membership and the operations of the APS but it is important that people with a diversity of skills and interests are encouraged to stand up and represent their views on the Board.

Under the old governance structure I was able to stand for a second two-year term as President, and I received the support of the membership to continue that role.

This has been about my Leadership Journey. The APS honoured me by electing me to the grade of Fellow, and I continue to represent the Society where I can. I continue on a Government Advisory Group regarding Immigration Detention Health issues, am a supervisor and am involved in teaching.

The rewards of the Presidency are great. I value the personal growth opportunities, the friendship, the skills I have learned – but mostly the opportunity to contribute and make a difference – the thing that was most valued in my family of origin and which means so much to me today.