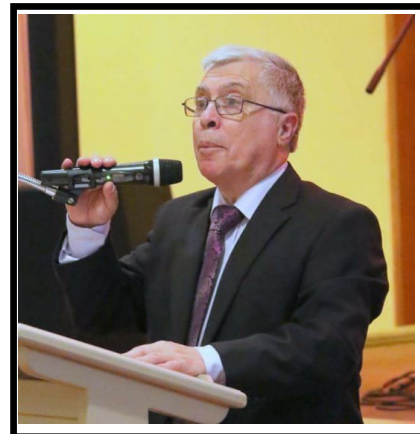


## COMMITTEE 2017—2018

### PRESIDENT

#### Executive Committee

NAME:	<b>Giuseppe (Joe) Geracitano</b>
DOB	3rd July 1948
Place of Birth	Rocella Jonica
Province	Reggio Calabria Italy
Date of emigration:	February 1958
Date of arrival in Australia	7th March 1958
Australian citizen:	Yes



#### **Immigration experience:**

My father was Nicola Geracitano (1921-20013) and mother Carmela Vittoria Geracitano nee Circosta (1926-2009).

In 1949, when I was 14 months old, my father immigrated to Australia on the ship *Toscana* and landed in Melbourne, Victoria, on 9<sup>th</sup> October, 1949. The voyage had taken 40 days from leaving Naples. Like many others in Italy after returning from World War II my father had found it very difficult to secure employment and had to embark on immigration to ensure a financial future for the family. In fact the devastation during the war was so great and the economy was so depressed that the Italian Government encouraged immigration.

On arrival in Australia my father settled in Mildura, Victoria, a country town in Northern Victoria on the River Murray which had been established by the Australian Government to settle ex-service soldiers returning from World War I. Many of the ventures undertaken by the ex-service soldiers failed and the area increasingly had attracted migrants and in particular Italian migrants during the 1930s. My father was sponsored by his cousin, Franco Circosta, and he joined his cousins and uncles, Domenico Circosta and Rocco Maiolo who had immigrated to Australia in the 1930s.

In Mildura my father was employed by the Local Council and after work and during the weekend he together with his cousins would grow vegetables to sell at the local market.

In the meantime I grew up in an extended family in my maternal grandparents' family home.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1955 my father left Australia and travelled back to Italy to see whether it would be possible to re-establish himself in Italy. I was 7 years old when I met my father. During the years he was in Australia with the money remitted from Australia we had bought a small plot of land just outside the town on which we produced wheat. However the plot wasn't sufficiently large to build an economic future for the family and since there was little opportunity for the family to advance and in particular the absence of higher educational institutions in the town my father after six months of arriving in Italy decided to re-immigrate to Australia and prepare for the whole family to immigrate. This time my father settled in Adelaide where his brother-in-law, Ilario Circosta, and uncle, Giovanni Cirillo, together with cousins were already established. He was employed by Davis Coop, a cotton mill in Kilkenny. In 1957 he purchased a property in Beverley and in February 1958 my mother and I emigrated from Italy on the liner *Oceania* and landed in Melbourne, Victoria, on the 7<sup>th</sup> March 1958.

As a child I had mixed feelings about leaving the town I grew up in and leaving my grandparents, aunties and cousins behind. I was in my third grade at school and doing very well especially in my pet subject history. During my school vacations I would live with my grandparents and aunties in the country. I was very close to my extended family.

Emotionally it was difficult for a young child of 9 years to fully comprehend what impact the act of immigrating would be. It was only 21 years later, in 1979, when I went back to Roccella Jonica for a brief visit and had to again say goodbye to my grandmother that I fully understood the emotional turmoil that every immigrant had to go through as the ship drew very slowly away from the wharf and realising that he/she might never again see the country of birth and all the loved ones left behind. I can still feel the emotions in my grandmother's voice as she uttered those final words of goodbye "I will never see you again".

The trip to Australia for me was one big adventure, exploring the ship, marvelled at new sights specially navigating the Suez Canal and seeing people with dark skins in Aden and Colombo for the first time. Watching little boats approaching our ship in the ports we visited and the natives haggling the prize of trinkets and ornaments they were selling. I remember the humid heat and strange odours as we docked in Jakarta. Our first introduction to Australia was the dock in Fremantle Western Australia. I remember my first impression at seeing tin sheds and wondered what sort of country we had come to. At least all our buildings in Roccella Jonica were made of stones. We left Fremantle with uneasiness in our hearts wondering what awaited us in the Great Australian Bite. We had heard so many horror stories of great storms and waves that would dwarf the ship. In the end it was an anticlimax as the waters were very calm and the trip was uneventful.

We arrived in Melbourne, Victoria, on the 7<sup>th</sup> March 1958 after 28 days after leaving the port of Messina, Sicily. The arrival was chaotic with just my mother making sure that all our belongings were packed. The bulk of what we brought from Italy were in two trunks in the cargo hold which would be unloaded later and sent to us but we also had 5 suitcases which we had to hand unload and pass through customs. We had heard horror stories how custom officers would empty all the suitcases on a bench and examine the contents and that if you carried too much gold jewellery it would be confiscated. My mother had sewed all jewellery we couldn't wear inside her underpants and bra, fortunately there were no x-ray machines at the ports in those days. My mother had to carry the 5 suitcases into the custom sheds which were lined with stone benches and proceeded to line them up on the benches and quickly opened them hoping that the customer officer would not put all our belongings on the benches. Luckily the customer officer must have took mercy on my mother and only lifted the corners of each suitcase without disturbing the contents and processed us.

My father and cousin Franco Circosta, who had transferred his family from Mildura to Melbourne, were waiting for us and collected all our luggage and drove us to his house in North Carlton. My cousin had bought for me a tennis racket and tennis ball which was attached to an elastic band. This was my first introduction to a foreign sport. We stayed with my cousins for two days and then boarded the *Overland* train to Adelaide. The trip to Adelaide was a twelve hour trip over night in the old red rattlers with wooden seats. It was a very uncomfortable trip, the trains we had in Italy were luxurious compared to the *Overlander*.

We arrived in Adelaide in the early morning of 9<sup>th</sup> March to be met at the train station by my uncle, Ilario Circosta, and his next door neighbour affectionately known as Uncle Ronny who drove us to our house in Beverley. The most vivid image that I recall is driving on War Memorial Drive through the green parklands. I had never seen parks of that size before.

The house that my father bought was modest but comfortable. It consisted of two bedrooms, kitchen and lounge. It had a backyard which my father had planted with vegetables and three fruit trees, apricot, peach and almond. There was a chicken shed which was stocked with chickens. The front of the house was planted with flowers, mostly chrysanthemums, which the previous owner had planted.

The day we arrived the house was full of people, relatives and friends all came to welcome us in our new land and house. We were entertained by Uncle Ronny and his wife, Auntie May, who played the guitar and sang. Listening to our entertainers was my first introduction to the English language. My father had bought a keg of beer and there was general merry making.

We had one neighbour who was Australian, Allan and Leonie Smith who had two children, a boy and girl both younger than me. They were friendly and often I would play with the children even though we had no common language. On the other side of our property facing Port Road was a caravan yard with a butcher shop and delicatessen on the corner of Port Road and Woodlands Crescent. Later on we met an Italian family from the Veneto region living a short distance away at 10 Olveston Ave and further along the road a family from the Campania region. We soon became friends with both families and it wasn't before long our language broadened to include both Venetian and Neapolitan dialect words. Also we were part of an extended Italian community which included both relatives and *paesani* and there was always an occasion to celebrate weddings, christenings, new arrivals, Christmas, Easter and so on. The weekends were devoted to visiting friends and relatives and celebrating. Although missing our town and family we left behind in Italy we never felt completely isolated because of our community.

My mother was a devoted catholic and would attend church every Sunday. In Italy I was an altar boy and knew the mass by heart. Our local church was Mater Dei in Beaufort Street, Woodville Park, to which was attached the catholic primary schools, Whitefriars. We would attend mass every Sunday and even though we could not understand the sermon which was in English at least the mass was still in Latin like in Italy. Religion had been a very important part of our lives but in Italy it was not just devotion to the scripture but it also included social activities such as the annual feast days celebrating our saints which was an opportunity to revel in the local *fiara*, music and fireworks. All of that was missing from our Australian religious experience. There were annual feasts of *St Hilarion*, patron saint of *Caulonia*, and *Madonna di Montevergine*, from the *Campania* region held at St Francis of Assisi church in Campbelltown but because we had no transport and it was too difficult to catch two buses we never attended in those early years. It wasn't until the feast of *St Hilarion* was transferred to Mater Christi church in Seaton that we began to attend regularly. The other issue was that although we were used to donating money to the church through the collection during mass the idea of planned donations towards the upkeep of the church building was completely foreign to us as the church was supported by the State in Italy. The idea of allocating 10% of our income to the church was a concept not easily accepted by Italian migrants.

The other issue that migrants had to face was the lack of familiar ingredients in the local shop to cook the food that we were used to. The number of continental shops in the late 1950s could be counted on one hand and the fruit and vegetable stores stocked very few of our familiar fruit and vegetables. The lack of fruit and vegetables was solved by planting in our backyard those items that we were used to such as tomatoes, eggplants (*melazzane*), capsicums, broccoli, beans, and so on. The seeds were often smuggled in when immigrating from Italy and it wasn't uncommon to share the seedlings with friends and relatives. Also, like in Italy, we would band together with relatives and produce our own olive oil, make our salami by killing the pig in June every year, and make our own wine. Buying other food ingredients was solved by making a monthly trip to our closest continental store which was *Star Grocery* on the corner of Morphett and Hindley streets in Adelaide. The shop was owned by a Greek family and stocked all the ingredients that we were familiar with such as pasta produced by *San Remo Pasta Company* which had been established by the Crotti family in the 1930s, spices and smallgoods. We would place the order and it was delivered by truck to our home. Meat was purchased from an Italian butcher shop, now known as *Lupoi Meat Store* on Findon road Findon who would offer cuts of meat with which we were more familiar. Bread was purchased from an Italian baker initially from *Champion Bakery* but later, because my mother was not completely satisfied with the bread, from *Perry's Bakery* located in Ferryden Park which still supplies our bread 60 years later. The Australian sliced bread just did not appeal to us because it was undercooked by our standards. There were foreign foods such as *vegemite* and *gravy* which would never grace our table. However we did introduce new foods in our diet which included *Pumpkin (Queensland Blue)* and *Carrots* with which we were previously unfamiliar.

After a week arriving in Adelaide my father enrolled me in the local catholic parish primary school, *Whitefriars* in Woodville Park. The school was staffed by the Josephite nuns which had been established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Saint Mary Mackillop to teach the poor. The nuns were predominantly of Irish catholic background who had little or no understanding of other languages and cultures and were not highly educated. They certainly were not trained to deal with the multitude of foreign languages and cultures which flooded their schools in the post war period.

I was placed in grade three because of my age and the fact that I was in grade three in Italy. In Italy I was doing well at school and in some subjects like History I was at the top of the class. None of the teachers spoke a language other than English and I was introduced to Josephine Alvino who was a grade ahead of me and whose family immigrated from *Caulonia* and spoke both English and Calabrian dialect to act as my mentor. Until I went to school I had not been exposed to any English at all and one could imagine the bewilderment of a child of nine being placed in a class that was English monolingual. I was unfamiliar with the language, I was unfamiliar with the subjects taught apart from arithmetic and there was no one to explain it to me. There was no assistance with learning English and we were expected to sink or swim. In fact on the second day that I attended school I was expected to line up in the morning and read to the teacher from the school reader. Of course I couldn't read the language and the teacher proceeded to smack the back of my hand with a ruler.

The lack of English impeded my education for many years, in fact almost to the end of my secondary school. The fact I finally mastered the language and was able to advance to tertiary and finally to teach at both secondary and tertiary levels was the result of determination, hard work, and a desire to succeed. The steps in learning a language is the ability to understand the language, both orally and written, then to reproduce it initially verbally and finally written. As I progressed through my education so did my English language skills which resulted in better grades. However, despite this I found it difficult to master the English language and because of this I was not considered to be a good student. In fact, even though I managed to pass my public exams at both Year 10 (Intermediate) and Year 11 (Leaving) the Principal of the school, Brother George, advised my father that it would be better to make me drop out of school and seek work in an unskilled occupation such as the assembly line at General Motors Holden. My father refused and I became even more determined to succeed and study harder. Up to that point I was doing reasonably well in mathematics and science which didn't require complex language to express myself but poorly in English and to a less extent History. What the Principal didn't realise was that during my Year 10 I set myself the task of reading in my own time a book a week in addition to my school work. It took two years before the language that I had exposed myself to would translate into writing complex sentences and which would eventually unlock my ability to express myself fully in written work. The result was that during my Year 12 I was able to top the College in Humanities and did very well in my Year 12 exam (Matriculation) and as a result I was accepted by the University of Adelaide in the Bachelor of Economics. I was able to gain both my degree and Diploma in Education with credits and distinctions and was accepted to enrol in the Masters of Education.

Throughout my years at school it wasn't so much a question of overt discrimination, especially at primary school most of the students were of migrant background and the largest group were of Italian background, it was more a structural discrimination that undervalued our existing knowledge and assumed that we were empty vessels waiting to be filled with Anglo-Saxon values. The education system expected us to become Anglo-Saxons overnight and there were no structures to help us to make the transition. Lack of ability to expressed yourself in English was equated to lack of intelligence and educational ability.

In 1974 I began my teaching career at Adelaide Boys High School (now Adelaide High School) teaching Economics, Accountancy, and History. The school at that time had a large proportion of students of Greek background and many of them weren't expected to succeed in their Leaving and Matriculation exams. I knew exactly how they felt and instead of accepting the general view I set myself the task of preparing them for their exams. I knew that it was not just a matter of learning the subject matter but also to develop skills in expressing themselves to answer the questions in clear English. Much of the year was spent in practising English writing so that by the time the exams were due only one student out of the whole class was able to pass their History and many were able to continue with tertiary studies at the South Australian Institute of Technology. During that year I was studying towards my Masters in Education degree and at the end of the year I was invited by the University of Adelaide to take up a position as Tutor in Sociology of Education in the Department of Education.

Throughout my years at University as an undergraduate I never stopped to think of myself as an Italian. I lived my life surrounded by an Italian family, relatives and friends, eating predominantly Italian food and attended all the celebrations associated with my Italian community. My friends at University came from a variety of backgrounds and ethnic groups and I belonged to a number of student related associations including the Italian Tertiary Students Association which was largely regarded as a marriage bureau with most female students of Italian background hoping to meet a medical or engineering student of Italian background as a future partner. My main concern during those years was to study hard and making sure that I was successful in reaching my goal to get my degree and becoming a teacher. This took a dramatic change during my Diploma of Education year when the question of ethnicity and its influence in education became a central point of my studies in Sociology. My lecturer in the subject was Dr. George Smolicz, who was later to become my mentor, a Polish refugee whose research centred on the concept of a multicultural-multilingual society and believed that education was the key to develop a more accepting society. I devoted most of my Sociology study to this concept and did all my research work to discover the concept of multiculturalism. Suddenly I found an explanation for my own struggles throughout my education and I resolved to dedicate my life to initiate change so that future generations would not be forced to be in a system which regarded them as failures because of their ethnic background.

I seized the opportunity of becoming a staff member of the University as a vehicle to continue my work in ethnicity and to influence the attitudes of future teachers to be more tolerant and accepting of diversity in their classrooms. Being a member of a University had many advantages in propagating new ideas since the ideas were more readily accepted and institutions were more likely to listen. During my time at the University of Adelaide I was also subcontracted to lecture in the Diploma of Interpreters and Translators at the Adelaide College of Advanced Education and preparing Social Workers at the South Australian Institute of Technology. I wrote articles on multiculturalism and multicultural education, wrote letters to the *Advertiser*, our daily newspaper, and addressed conferences.

To influence change the development and communication of new ideas is fundamental but it was also important to organise the community to express their concerns and promoting solutions to solve what they saw as injustices. Therefore I immersed myself in existing Italian groups and help to develop new ones to address specific concerns. In most of these associations I became part of the executive committees and in some cases was elected as president. I was also very prominent as a postgraduate representative on many University committees and worked on many government working parties to advance the multicultural concept. These included the development of the South Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Commission, The Migration Museum and was a member of the State Library Board. Some of the Italian organizations I was involved in included the Italian Education Movement responsible for the introduction of Italian Language programs in primary schools and the initiation of community based Italian language radio programs; the foundation of the South Australian Association of Teachers of Italian; Italian Festival (later to be called Carnevale); Co-ordinating Italian Committee and the Dante Alighieri Society.

At the end of 1980 I was invited by the Catholic Education Office of Victoria to fill the newly created position of Ethnic Schools Liaison Officer. The position was made possible by money allocated from the Report on the Review of Post-Arrival Programs and Services to Migrants (Galbally Report). There were vague guidelines as to what the position entailed so it was left up to me to define my own role. As the majority of ethnic students in catholic primary schools in Victoria were of Italian background and as the Italian Committee of Assistance (Co.As.It.) had already established a model of Insertion Classes in primary schools, I took the opportunity of organizing schools and the parents to access funds to introduce Italian language classes in their school. The model was based on utilizing both Italian and Australian government money to fund the position of Italian teacher and to expose the whole school to the program. This was a variation to the normal after school language programs offered by the majority of groups. During my initial four years in the position I was responsible for the introduction of 27 Italian language programs in catholic primary schools in Victoria concentrating heavily on regional centres. My role involved not only to organize funding but to assist schools to develop Italian language curriculum throughout the school. The majority of my time was spent visiting schools and working with the staff in developing the curriculum

. In one of the school that I visited, St John's School in Koo-wee-Rup, I was fortunate to meet the love of my life, Jenny Interlandi, an offspring of Italian-Australian background whom I married in 1984. She was at the time employed as a school librarian.

In the final three years at the Catholic Education Office I was attached to the Research and Development department and I was responsible to devise a study of students of ethnic background in catholic primary schools. I devised the questionnaire and the computer program to analyse the data. I was also involved in carrying out research in Insertion classes for the Commonwealth Government and advise the Schools Commission on the allocation of funds.

After we got married, having decided to start a family early and that the children should be raised by the mother rather than attend a childcare, we developed a home based small business to increase our income making natural home fragrances and gift toiletries which we sold in the local weekend markets. The products were so well received that we were approached by wholesalers to supply them and soon we were swamped with orders which necessitated me to make a decision to continue my employment with the Catholic Education Office or go into full time business. We decided on the latter and in 1988 made the decision to relocate ourselves to Adelaide where we had property and my parents would help to look after the children. For the next 18 years we concentrated on raising our family and developing our business.

In 2006 I was approached as a Foundation Life Member of the Dante Alighieri Society to join other members to revive the Society which had ceased operation. I joined the committee as Vice President and spent the next three years rebuilding the Society.

My real passion was to research and document the experience of Italian immigrants in South Australia. I became aware that there was little in the archives on our existence and realised that once we no longer existed history had very little to say about us. I also became aware of how new technology made it possible not only to document our experiences but how it could preserve our own voices for the future. I discovered the Oral History method, the existence of an Australian Oral History Association, and the repository in the State Library of South Australia charged with the task of preserving oral histories.

I spent the next four years upgrading my research skills utilizing the Oral History method and familiarising myself with the equipment required to produce recordings which would meet the requirements of the International Council of Archives. I also spent the time to develop the framework for the collection of the stories of the experience of Italian immigrants. I realized that the Oral History method to record the experience of Italian immigrants that arrived in South Australia in the 1950s and 1960s was the most appropriate method since many of them came from a non-literal background. I also came to the realization that it was a huge task and a very expensive undertaking even if I planned to donate my own time to the project. In order for the project to succeed and reach its full potential there was a need to involve both the community and government and to build a financial platform. In 2014 I invited a few close friends who shared the same passion to form a committee and revived the Italian Historical Society which had become dormant since the 1990s. The first meeting took place on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2014 and we have spent the last four years building a strong association and sensitising the community about the project we have developed.

I'm proud to be an Australian of Italian extraction. I will never forget my origins and I love the town I was born in but I have embraced the land that has given me a comfortable living standard and I'm passionate to make it a more tolerant and accepting society that values diversity.

G Geracitano  
September 2018