

Thank you Chris, for your introduction.

Standing here today, I feel happy and honoured to have the opportunity, to tell you my story.

My family and I moved to Newcastle in July 2009.

One fine day, soon after our move, I went for a walk along Nobby's Breakwall by myself. I remember walking there as the sun was setting and all of a sudden feeling the relief and joy of realising I was home.

It was the first time in my life that a place felt like home. And Newcastle was home; straight away.

I first lived in Australia back in the 70s. My first 3 years of Primary School were spent in Sydney, in Brisbane and the last year in Melbourne.

Then, my family and I left to go back to the Netherlands. I was 8 at the time and remember feeling sad about leaving.

Back in the Netherlands, I often missed Australia. It is probably for that reason that I proudly maintained my Australian accent, to the chagrin of my BBC English teacher at High School. It was lucky that I did, because I returned to Australia in 1992 at the age of 22. This time, I moved by choice and for love.

And so for 18 years, I lived with my growing family in The Dandenongs in Victoria.

In that time, I started the process of becoming a citizen several times, but never saw it through. It felt like something I should do and should want, rather than something that was heartfelt and authentic.

And so it was that when I came to Newcastle, I was finally able to make that decision easily and authentically.

And even though it is of Australia that I became a citizen, the strong feeling of home was and is because of Newcastle. What's more... the welcome and sense of belonging I feel here..... continues to grow.

Next week, on the 3rd of February, is my anniversary of coming to Australia.

I will have been here 27 years, 9 of which as a citizen and resident of Newcastle.

It is with gratitude and the utmost sincerity that I can say that these years have been the best years of my life so far. I have made many friends, become part of the close knit Novocastrian community and I've been to uni. I have my own counselling and psychotherapy business in Watt Street and am part of a friendly community of therapists. What's more, I have the great fortune to rent a studio at the Newcastle artist hub, The

Creator Incubator, in Hamilton North. This has allowed me to grow as an artist and become part of the very exciting Novocastrian artist community.

Moving to another country from your country of birth is a monumental step, whatever the reasons are.

Letting go of the deep bonds of your community of origin to become part of a new community, is a feat of courage, willingness and openness. It brings richness to your own life and brings richness to the community you step into.

On the 10th of May 2010, when I received my citizenship right here, in this building, there were 82 other people that received their citizenship too; of 36 different nationalities!

Taking the step of becoming a citizen of Australia allowed me to more firmly put my feet on the ground, and that ground was in Newcastle. I felt welcomed by the ground; and so my life grew roots easily here and sprouted in ways I could not have foreseen. Like standing here sharing my story with you today.

And it is because I stand here in front of you, as a citizen and part of the Newy community that I can welcome you and I wish you happiness.

Thank you