

Occasional Address

University of South Australia, Whyalla Graduation – 9 May 2025

Ms Lee Martinez

Rural Mental Health Teaching Academic, University of South Australia Department of Rural Health

Thank you to the Vice Chancellor, Pro Chancellor Mary Pateteos, Distinguished Professor Marine Hughes-Warrington AO, senior management and staff of the University, graduands, friends and family—
Good morning, everyone.

I, too, pay my respects to the Barngarla people, on whose land and waters we gather. I honour their Elders past, present, and future, and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. I also extend my respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.

It's a great honour to speak with you. I was born and have lived and worked in Whyalla and surrounding regions—Flinders, Far North and the West Coast—for most of my life. Currently, I work part-time for UniSA's Department of Rural Health as the Rural Mental Health Teaching Academic. I've spent over 25 years in this field and continue to learn from those with lived experience of mental illness. Walking alongside them has shaped my passion and purpose.

To our graduates—congratulations. Completing a degree is always a major achievement, but doing so at a regional campus brings its own set of challenges and strengths. You've lived, worked, and studied rurally—this lived experience gives you a valuable lens. Rural communities are practical, resilient, and strong. These are qualities our future workforce in health, education, and social services desperately needs.

I have fond memories of my own nursing training. I began my career in the early '70s at Whyalla Hospital, then a bustling regional centre with 200–250 beds and resident specialists. Much has changed. By 1993, nursing became a university-based profession, and in 1991, UniSA began its presence in Whyalla after merging with the SA Institute of Technology and the College of Advanced Education. This year we celebrate 60 years of the campus on Nicholson Ave in Whyalla.

Having a university in Whyalla changed lives and continues to do so—mine included. I was the first in my family to attend university. In 1993, I enrolled in the Graduate Diploma of Health Counselling. Evening classes made it possible as a working mum. We had incredible lecturers who inspired me to keep learning—Professor Maureen Dollard, Ms Sofie Diamandi, the late Dr Nancy Cooper and Dr Brian Trainor.

I went on to complete my Bachelor of Nursing in 1999 and have worked across general nursing, theatre, primary health, women's health, Aboriginal health, youth services and, most enduringly, mental health. I've also held leadership roles, including Director of Operations for Country SA Mental Health from 2007–2014, helping establish mental health services across rural SA.

In 1997, I was part of the early days of the South Australian Centre for Rural and Remote Health, now the University Department of Rural Health. It's since evolved, and as we move toward the formation of Adelaide University in 2026, new possibilities are emerging. My career has been shaped by meaningful collaborations between rural health and universities—and today, I continue that journey two days a week with UniSA's DRH.

Looking back, I've worked with many inspiring people. In community health, I collaborated with two remarkable Aboriginal women to help create the still existing Aboriginal Women's Health Clinic, now based at Whyalla Nunyarra Aboriginal Community Controlled Health service. I learned humility, respect, and the value of truly listening. Geraldine, one of the community leaders, said to me: "Look, listen, and learn." Those words continue to guide me.

Graduates, you are more than your profession. You are future leaders, change-makers, and voices for your communities. As you move forward, I encourage you to:

Look, listen, and learn.

Remember your rural roots. Stay curious, stay connected—and if you can, stay rural.

Thank you.