Transcript of speech by Roberta Holmes, given a t the launch of the Judith Lumley Centre, 15 November 2013

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Looking around the room leads me to make a rather uncomfortable distinction. Apart from my brother I think I am the oldest person here. And I claim it simply because it possibly gives me a longer personal perspective on parenting than anyone else. My grandmother was born in 1876 and her stories of her childhood and life enriched ours. My mother, born in 1901, in reminiscing with her older sister, would often say, looking at us intently: “In those days children were meant to be seen but not heard”. Different today as I am sure all parents would agree. This is partly because of the incredible advances in technology, which have impacted so dramatically on our society. Australia was a very different place when my husband Hal and I began our family of three in the late 50-ies, early 60-ies. Indeed the world itself was a different place. That there would be a future and that it would be good, was given. No perceived threat of chemical warfare or cataclysmic climate change, though the cold war did cast a shadow. Middle class mothers rarely worked outside the home and what we did within the home was largely taken for granted. And what we did included the major task of parenting. Most of us indeed had been reared with that expectation and apart from a smouldering resentment in some it wasn’t until the second wave of feminism when Germaine Greer rocketed onto our horizons that many women began to question the sharp distinction in women’s and men’s roles. Some fathers, including Hal, did give their wives lots of help especially when families were young. But no real man then would be seen pushing a pram in public.

How we parent depends on a multiplicity of factors, ranging from how we were parented ourselves to the kind of society we live in; this latter being affected by social change, demographic factors and technology. In my grandmother’s lifetime, man got off his horse and landed on the moon. In my lifetime and some of you here there have been equally undreamed of developments, including the Internet, the contraceptive pill followed by the sexual revolution and the second wave of feminism. The downside of the Internet has led to cyberbullying, youth suicide and self-harm, exacerbated easy access to gambling, pornography and drugs, the sexualisation of children and an unhealthy focus on body image, which is also fostered by the print media. All of these present modern parents with very serious challenges. At the time, the very concept of what constitutes a family is also changing as with same-sex parenting. Intercultural marriages, which are increasing, can also present special difficulties for families.

For me, parenting has been the most disciplining experience of my life and the most enriching, rewarding and joyful. It’s helped me, too, to appreciate the wisdom behind the challenge of the Oracle of Delphi “know thyself”. For I think the more we can do this – and face up to what we discover – the better. I made mistakes, of course, and would handle some situations very differently today. I just hope my children forgive me. At the time, however, I did my best, given the then level of my maturity and know-how and exhaustion. Anna Funder’s mother spoke for many when she said “I tried my best. I couldn’t do more. But it wasn’t enough. But it could have been worse!” Being a parent is, I believe, the most important and responsible role most women and men fill in life. I believe this, because as well as trying to raise healthy and happy families to meet our own needs, we are also raising a nation’s future citizens and, in today’s increasingly globalised times, citizens of a very troubled world. Puzzlingly, there is little if any preparation for this critically important role and work – and parenting is work. Whereas whatever else we do we get some guidance, training, qualification, but not for this critical role, in which the nuclear family often struggles in isolation; the large, extended family with its help, support and advise being no longer there. We know that having a baby, becoming a parent is a life changing event, one, for which planning and preparation for the changes that will occur, including to their own relationship, would help couples. Child abuse, domestic violence often reflect the struggle some have in raising their children as Baptcare’s general manager said in 2011: “We have so many families on the edges of child protection and they end up tipping into child protection. They love their kids, but nobody has taught them how to parent“. Nobody has taught them how to parent.

How do we do this? How do we teach and reach couples of whatever sex or strata in society to parent healthy, happy, resilient children, ultimately able as adults to navigate the challenges, which will confront them here and in the globalised world of their future? Hopefully, contemporary research and resources drawing on what is already known, including from parents, would prove a good place to begin. The focus being on planning, preparation for parenthood and early parenting so that parents feel equipped and supported in giving their and the nation’s children the best possible start in life. One day we might even see enshrined in the Australian constitution: “the primary responsibility of the nation is to nurture, protect and educate its children”. There is no greater responsibility than this. And that is my dream.