ACA Victoria Executive Board Nomination 2026

Nominee: My Lien Tonii Tran

Service Provider: Starfish Early Learning Centre

Bio:

Tonii deeply values belonging, leadership, growth, collaboration, and joy, I strive to develop strong team ethics. She believes that innovation and continuous improvement are the keys to my success, and I take a conscientious approach to branding our centres within the community.

In terms of Tonii's skills and experience, She holds a Bachelor of Business (Banking and Finance) and a Graduate Diploma in Education (Early Childhood). As the Founder and Chief Visionary Officer of Starfish Early Learning, she oversees the management and leadership of her six centres. Being an Approved Provider, she is dedicated to providing regular professional learning opportunities, mentoring, and supporting her team. She takes great pleasure in the pedagogical coordination of our educational programs and collaborate with various professionals to ensure our centres' success.

She has also completed additional learning programs such as LaTrobe Business School's Leadership Professional Development Program, Brene Brown's Dare to Lead program, Dattner Group's Life Style Inventory Program, Zones of Regulation, and Collaborative Proactive Problem Solving. Tonii represents ACA Victoria at various forums and workshops, and is member of the UNHCR Founding 50 women. Additionally, she is the Vice President of the Springvale Asian Business Association and have knowledge of Assessment and Rating, Science of Learning and Development, and the Victorian Educational Leaders Program.

Describe your experience in the early childhood education and care sector.

I own and have operated the Starfish Early Learning Centre group of services since January 2009. I am the sole Managing Director & "Provider" of the group. We currently have five services, all located in the Eastern, South Eastern and Northern districts of Melbourne. I have a Bachelor of Business (Banking and Finance) 1996, Certificate III in Children Services (2008) and Graduate Diploma in Education (Early Childhood) 2011. Initially I managed the Blackburn South Centre for 2 years then I transferred to the Camberwell Centre and managed that for 3 years, until we sold it in early 2015. My current role is to oversee the management and leadership of all the services, provide professional learning opportunities for all staff, mentor & support the management staff regularly, mentor & coach the Lead Educators on a quarterly basis, research and development of the early childhood education theories and approaches, financial management and viability, budgeting, some marketing, social media posts, be innovative and represent our Brand in a community conscience way.

Tell us what makes ACA Victoria's mission meaningful to you.

The mission statement ties closely to my values as I have travelled through the early childhood education field. I have been promoting the values of education for our young children in my services over the past 18 years and would like to further this advocacy work with the ACAV's mission. I have also become more interested in creating partnerships with ACAV's members to lobby for our sector and assist with leadership or mentoring opportunities.

Describe any Board Leadership experience you have had to date.

I have been with the ACA Vic board since late 2018. I was the secretary for 3 years, nominated to Co-Vice President role in Oct 2022 and became President in March 2023. I have really enjoyed my time with the organisation and have taken an active role in the board. I have represented ACAV at various forums, workshops and working groups in such topics as Assessment and Rating, 3yr old kinder professional learning, science of learning and development, Inclusion, ChildLink implementation, BSBL, Child Safety Rapid Review and DET stakeholder meetings. One of my greatest roles in the board is co-hosting the regular Provider's network meeting that took place over the pandemic where we discussed current topics, answered questions, and shared ideas and stories from the field.

This networking group continues to engage members with various members of the Board hosting it. However, the role of the President has taken over and provided more opportunities to advocate for our sector in ways that not only include work with Victoria and Tasmania but also Nationally. I can only attend to these networking meetings once or twice a year. My role as President also includes assisting with the organisation and hosting of member meetings, professional development, our annual conference. I have also taken a major role in connecting with Ministers of Parliament and Department forums to advocate for our members and the sector as a whole. I have been a Melbourne Co-Convenor for the Reggio Emilia Australia Information Exchange for a few years but have since stepped down. I am also a member of the UNHCR Founding 50 Womens Fund donor where we support and fund relief for Syrian refugee women. I am the newly elected President of the Springvale Asian Business Association where we promote small business in the Springvale area and organise the yearly Lunar New Year festivities. Community representation is extremely important.

Outline any skills, connections, resources, or expertise you can provide to improve the services ACA Victoria offers to its members.

I have a Bachelor of Business (Banking and Finance) 1996, Certificate III in Children Services (2008) and Graduate Diploma in Education (Early Childhood) 2011. I am quite skilled in financial management and budgeting. In terms of the early childhood field, I am skilled in researching, developing training packages and mentoring.

I also have extensive experience in human resources from the development of my own ELCs and 150 educators. I attended conferences from various organisations such as ACAV, ECA, ELAA, REAIE, Reggio Children Italy, Reconciliation Aust, and I've completed various professional learning opportunities such as the LaTrobe Business School's Leadership Professional Development Program, Brene Brown's Dare to Lead program, Zones of Regulation, Collaborative Proactive Problem Solving and the Power Collective with Kemi Nekvapil. I have connections in HR, law, digital marketing, UNHCR and various other sectors.

Confirm that you can commit to the time required for meetings and other duties as outlined in the Executive Board Position Description.

Yes, I can confirm my commitment to ACAV as I have done in the past.

What are your thoughts on the key challenges and opportunities facing the Early Childhood Education and Care sector?

The most important opportunity at the moment is assisting services to navigate the new child safety regulations and policies after the sexual abuse cases, however, the major challenges is navigating the negative media barrage that is bombarding our sector. We support the reforms to make children's safety priority in our services and will continue to provide collective feedback to make our sector stronger in all aspects of child safety. Working with other stakeholders in our sector and DET will strengthen this. Another significant impact for our sector is the current investigations into ECEC funding reforms. I am determined to stay in the loop and advocate for our members. There is still a perception by some families and government ministers that our sector is a baby-sitting service – "wipe bottoms and clean noses." I have been advocating our sector in my centres through our educational program, project work, professional development, partnerships with communities and mentoring. I believe over the past 10 years we have made some strides with the foundation of the Early Years Framework. I would like to advocate on a larger scale through ACAV's initiatives in lobbying and advocacy work. I would like to see funding across the board for all families – no matter what their activity or their income – so that all children are given a chance at an early education. This would need a great deal of on the ground one on one lobbying with State and Federal Ministers and associates such as "Everyone Benefits." Oversupply is another factor that I am worried about, and I am sure many other members are too. We need to have discussions with government, councils and Department of Education to show them the impact it is having on families and services. There is also a perception that sessional kindergarten is better than long-day care kindergarten and the current over supply of qualified ECE teachers. We are working to improve this image, and I am sure other Centres are too. I hope this gap grows smaller and smaller as LDC are becoming more in tune with providing excellence in education and care. There is opportunity for all members to share and celebrate their achievements in early childhood education through networking and highlighting their centres so that we can learn from each other.

Workforce is also a huge area we need to concentrate our attention on as an organisation that wants better outcomes for our youngest citizens. Training organisations need to provide improved programs, case studies, assessment, and placement work so that educators come out ready. At the moment, services are overburdened with having to coach, mentor and assess students and under experienced educators. Supporting Centres with their workforce challenges is another issue we are facing. I would like to be part of encouraging and engaging more people to our sector as a worthwhile and progressive professional sector. Inclusion funding, supports, and resources need huge reforms as the current system is too antiquated, complicated, dysfunctional, and overwhelmingly underfunded. The system is placing a great deal of burden on our educators, management, and systems. There are reviews taking place and we hope that this continues so that improvements can occur. This is something I wish to be a part of, to find alternative solutions that can help our members better navigate this storm with support from the government. Also, but not lastly, I am a huge supporter of our First Nations people and diversity in all its forms. I hope that we can continue to learn, unlearn and relearn to be able to successfully make our sector culturally safe for all and to honour our First Nations people in our educational programs.

Indicate how you might use your time on the ACA Victoria's Board to address these challenges and opportunities.

I will involve myself in working, reference and advisory groups or forums that address these challenges and connect with departmental and government personnel.

I would also like to cross-pollinate with other services so that we can change these perceptions in a positive way and advocate for our sector and thus for our young children. I would like to network with local community groups and advocate with Ministers of Parliament.

What are your ideas to enhance ACA Victoria's engagement with its members?

I appreciate the efforts that the team at ACAV do. Their dedication and expertise are sustaining and growing our association. I am excited to see what happens next. The team at ACAV are great in providing advice and organising work that the association does. Collective feedback is necessary to address varying issues and concerns in our sector and bringing members together to voice their opinions is a major part of ACAV work. We need to collect data via surveys, focus groups and open forums and these must be organised through our association. Being present and making genuine connections with members is one of the best ways to do this. This can be time consuming but would engage members more. I would keep co-hosting the provider's network and the members meeting because that platform really engages them and allows them to vent, share, celebrate in a safe space.

Professional development opportunities should be more about what interests the members rather than selling a supplier/product, however, I understand there is budget and sponsorship issues. Some of the things that interests members may be more about leadership, employment concerns, QIPs, Assessment & Rating, budgeting, and management, control, and succession planning. Recommendations for helpful textbooks, picture books, journals, or website links would be a useful resource to share with the members too.