

watchthisface

Words Sarah Sheridan
Photography Sahlan Hayes

Human rights are close to the heart of this young visionary who is determined to make the world a better place.

Prashanth Shanmugan embodies the new Australian identity. He's a Hindu who grew up in Lidcombe and can hold his own in a game of trivia at the pub – except when it comes to *Neighbours*. As Sydneysiders celebrate the landing of the First Fleet and more recent arrivals take vows of citizenship across the country on January 26, Shanmugan will be in Cooma as one of 150 Australia Day ambassadors across NSW, speaking about patriotism and what it means to be an Australian today.

It's a topic close to his heart. Born in Sri Lanka, Shanmugan migrated to Sydney with his family in 1986, partly to escape political upheaval and partly because his parents sought a better life for their children. When he became a citizen, Shanmugan didn't feel he was giving up a part of himself. "Being Australian is not a race, but an attitude," he says. "I still speak Tamil at home. I still have my heritage and culture."

At the age of 24, Shanmugan is one of the country's most recognised and active speakers on human rights and cultural diversity. He refrains from using the term "multicultural" because "it breaks people into race and doesn't celebrate unity". A nationalist with a cosmopolitan outlook, he says that for Australians to find their place in the world, they must have a united sense of identity that acknowledges and embraces cultural differences. "We can't have this us and them mentality," he says. "Migrants must be willing to be Australians while established Australians must be willing to accept them as Australians."

Since high school the fire-bellied visionary has put his ideals into action. When he arrived at the University of NSW, he founded a United Nations Society that now counts the Indian, German and French consuls among its members. In 2003 Shanmugan was awarded the Centenary Medal by the Commonwealth of Australia for promoting international peace and co-operation and he has been selected by the United Nations as an ambassador for human rights. Shanmugan's business card doesn't begin to hint at his varied interests. "It's not diplomacy, foreign affairs, humanitarianism, empowerment, engagement or advocating the Australian identity, but all of these," he says. "It's the sum of all of them. I ought to have 10 different business cards to hand out to people."

On a grey, drizzly afternoon last November, this young man of many hats slipped into a more universal persona – triumphant graduate. His thesis for his honours degree in international humanitarian law at the University of NSW explored the changing nature of warfare. Shanmugan did consider attending law school and one day prosecuting war criminals, but feels he has spent more than enough time in the classroom recently. "I want to do something that puts me in touch with people," he says.

Last year Shanmugan spent two weeks travelling 2500 kilometres across NSW speaking to high school students and community groups about youth empowerment, international humanitarian law and the role of the Red Cross in the world's conflict zones. Even in remote settlements such as Bogan Gate (population 200), near Parkes, he sought to inspire people to get involved by highlighting the broad impact of volunteering on a local level. "A lot of them did not know that the Red Cross has won the Nobel Peace Prize four times. That's not an award for an organisation, but for every person who volunteers. They're spreading the message of the power of humanity."

Above all, Shanmugan says he wants people to be aware of global issues and take an active interest in international relations. He loves to engage on both sides of a good debate. "There's nothing I like better than disagreeing with someone I agree with – just to explore other perspectives," he says. "Too often in politics we don't have an opposition. The idea is to keep improving. Liberty is forgiving of many failings, but not of apathy or neglect."

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