

EULOGY – Gwynneth Joyce Gleeson

9 December 1924 – 23 November 2018

Mum was the sixth of seven children born on 9 December 1924 to Fred and Josephine Whitten in Quirindi, NSW. Her parents lived at the time on their property, Woodstock which was in the area around Wallabadah that had been settled by Fred's pioneer parents, Anthony and Charlotte Whitten., both of Protestant Irish descent – possibly Huguenot.

During her pregnancy with Mum, Josephine had been tossed out of a sulky as she was going to town – my grandfather apparently used to buy ex-trotters as his sulky horses and they liked to go fast. Josie dislocated her hip in the fall and – this was 1924, she was pregnant, it was in the bush – it was never successfully treated. She walked with a limp for the rest of her life.

The other fallout from the accident was that my grandfather realised that commuting from Woodstock to town was hazardous. They had to cross an often flooded Jacob and Joseph Creek seven times – so he bought a house in town where the family lived, and he visited at weekends.

The Whittens were devout Methodists – once the excitement of their father's arrival on Saturdays was over, the family Sundays were dominated by Church and Sunday school. Charlotte and Anthony didn't dance or play cards – the devil's pictures – but Josie, our grandmother had been brought up differently – in the city – and loved to sing and dance, so she tempered any tendency to dour Methodism. There were also lots of other Whittens around so there were long family lunches on Sundays, big afternoon teas and singing around the piano.

Mum loved her childhood. She had big brothers and sisters and cousins who were lively and involved in everything going on in Quirindi, she had a little sister, Joan, born 4 years after Mum, and a small friendly community. At Primary School and then at what was then Quirindi District Rural School (an Intermediate High School) she was a good student, and good at sport – she won prizes for swimming and running. She also had piano lessons, which lasted long enough for her to be able to play almost anything by ear – a talent which stood her in good stead all her life.

When she was in first year at High School, she had a new English teacher who was to change her life. A young man called Bill Gleeson, who became a friend of the family and played sport with her brother, Royce, He wrote on her school report that year that her "conduct could be improved" and she was "very restless in class", but by the time she was 16 and he had left to teach in Sydney, he was really just waiting for her to grow up so he could marry her.

By this time there was a war on. Mum and her friends formed a group called "The Patriotic Younger Set" and organised concerts and events to raise money and keep up spirits. We have a program from the "Chins Up" revue of July 1942, and a newspaper clipping which describes her singing "very prettily".

Mum and Dad sang together at their wedding in December 1943. The song was "My Hero" from a popular musical of the time, "The Chocolate Soldier". They reprised it for all the guests at their 40th wedding anniversary, and Mum remembered all the words and sang along when we found it on You Tube just after her stroke.

They moved to Sydney for a year, then to the small south – western NSW town of Young, where they were to spend the next 9 years, and where the first four of their children were born. They were happy years, with lifelong friendships formed. One of those friendships, with a student of Dad's – Albert Stevens – was rekindled after they moved to Dubbo.

In 1954, the whole family packed up and moved hundreds of miles north, (by train!) to Glen Innes, where Dad became English master at Glen Innes High School. Here the post-war shortage of housing created such an issue for them that they decided to build a house – Dad and his friends did the labouring, Mum held bits of wood and equipment, cooked and did all the housework, and together they found time to add Margie to the family, in 1956.

Despite all this busyness, Mum was an active member of the Mothers' Clubs of our schools, she knitted and sewed our clothes and she wrote letters – to her mother in Quirindi and to other friends and family. Anyone who has ever received one of Mum's letters knows that they were long and full of news

and anecdotes – in the days before cheap phone calls handwritten correspondence was the only way to stay in touch.

In 1960, Dad was promoted to the position of Deputy Headmaster of Dubbo High School. None of us really wanted to leave Glen Innes which had been home for 6 years but Dad's career came first. Once again, housing was an issue – Dad went off to Dubbo at the start of Term 1 to look for a place to live and left Mum with 5 kids and no car or phone. I don't know how many times he managed to come home – probably only at Easter – but we had great neighbours and Dad's former colleagues helped. I think the last straw was when Margie, who was 4, looked up from playing on the floor one day and asked, "when did Daddy die?"

Mum announced that we were going to Dubbo at the start of Term 2 even if we had to sleep on floors, but by this time Dad had found a house to rent in Macquarie St. It wasn't in very good condition but it had enough bedrooms and a garden and so we duly said goodbye and drove off.

Mum cried all the way to Armidale.

This was the beginning of Mum's 58 years in Dubbo, and of one of her abiding passions – Dubbo High School. She was interested because it was Dad's place of work, and one by one, her children's school, and then later her grandchildren's schoolbut it was more than that. Mum loved history and tradition, and Dubbo High had that. She loved sport and competition, and Dubbo High had the Astley Cup. She loved old country values and country people, and Dubbo High had that. She was active in the P&C and the Canteen;

she helped at the Fete and at school dances. Over the years she knew the successive members of the staff from the cleaning ladies to the Head teachers.

She knew all the kids in our class and remembered them when she ran into them in the street or when she saw them years later at our reunions. When the Bindi Club was formed in 1985 she and Dad both joined and attended the annual lunches. In 2012 they made her an Honorary Life Member, and she was thrilled.

It was in Dubbo that Michael, the last of the family was born, and the cycle of involvement in schools continued through his Dubbo Primary School and DHS years. At some point during these years, she became a Patron at both schools and she loved attending their functions and Presentation Days. She was also a Patron of DATS, and regarded the building of the theatre as a great leap forward for the community, particularly when her granddaughter Jessica appeared there with the Bell Shakespeare Co.

Dad's retirement in 1973 gave them the opportunity to travel – they packed Michael up and went off to see Europe for the first time. It was an exhilarating few months – they were both so knowledgeable about history and geography that so much of it was familiar to them. They visited the Whitten's home in Roscrea which was still occupied by members of the family; they saw Paris and Venice and Rome and Athens and came home with stories for the rest of their lives.

In 1984, Paul and I, with Patrick and Brendan, came to live in Dubbo. It was typical of Mum's huge generosity of spirit that they had been absorbed into the family immediately as grandchildren, part of her loving flock of pet lambs.

She was thrilled that they were at Dubbo Public, and then Dubbo High School, she followed their cricket and tennis exploits and she was always happy to sit over a cuppa with them.

For our part, it was important that we could help her through the difficult years of Dad's decline into dementia, and the early years of her widowhood.

Some of it was a struggle for her – Dad had been the person who paid bills and called tradesmen and dealt with practicalities and now she had to take on those roles, but it was typical of her positive attitude to life that she was able to shoulder these new responsibilities. She even had two flights to America to see Michael - something else she would never have imagined doing without Dad.

And she developed other new interests. She became a guide at Dundullimal, where she loved to talk to visitors about its history, and she did several bus trips with the National Trust. She drove – very carefully – to Canberra and Albury and Sydney to see the family. She had always had to fight for a bit of the paper – and for time to read it – but now she read the Sydney Morning Herald every day and did

the crossword and phoned at least one of us to bemoan or rejoice in the political news. She continued to write letters, but now she also had time to telephone – her sister Joan in Taree, and all of her far-flung children and, as they got older, the grandchildren. She loved nothing more than lunch or coffee and a chat with visitors to Bultje St – or at one of her favourite watering holes – the Magnolia Café or the Outlook at the old school where she would look out on No 2 Oval and reminisce about Astley Cup hockey games. And there was always family around – especially at Christmas when she would play the piano and everyone would sing. Her grandchildren are probably the only kids of their generation who can sing “The Whiffenpoof Song” Mum had a stroke sitting in our living room on 2 July. Despite the earliest possible intervention and the best of care, the damage was great – she could no longer walk, or read, or watch television, or feed herself. But, importantly, she could still talk and her memory was still strong. She endeared herself to her carers and nurses at Feros Care in Bangalow as she told them stories of her life, and she was able to remember and communicate with all of her visitors over most of the 4 months she was there. All the great love she had demonstrated to her family and friends came back to her – there was always someone to sit by her bedside and hold her hand.

Mum wasn't much of a churchgoer – too many years with our atheist father.

But she was a true believer in the power of love - her love for her family, her friends, her community, for humanity really, was her guiding principle.

Copy of the Eulogy supplied by Jill