

Obituary for Gwen Gleeson, long-time Dubbo resident...

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REMEMBERED: A funeral will be held for long-time Dubbo resident Gwen Gleeson on December 10. Photo: CONTRIBUTED

Behind every great man there's a great woman, it is said. At the centre of every brilliant family there is also a brilliant woman.

Such can be said of Gwynneth (Gwen) Gleeson, who died in November this year.

Gwen, who has lived in Dubbo for 58 of her almost 94 years, was the wife of the legendary headmaster of Dubbo High School, Bill Gleeson, and mother to a wonderful brood of children, who included in their ranks a children's author, a teacher, restaurateur, a journalist, a librarian and a businessman. Headmasters had come and gone at Dubbo before the Gleesons arrived in 1960, and there have been a number since. But the Gleesons became indelibly stamped with Dubbo High School, and with Dubbo. Gwen, the matriarch, patron of Dubbo Central Primary and Dubbo High Schools, local historian and community matron, was at the centre of that.

She remained part of Dubbo until the end of her life.

Gwen Gleeson donates four decades of Christmas letters to library Gwen Gleeson was born at Quirindi, northern New South Wales, on December 9, 1924, the sixth of seven children of a farmer, Fred Whitten, and his wife, Josephine (nee Morgan). The Whittens, of Protestant Irish extraction, had been pioneers of the Wallabadah district in the New England tablelands. When she was very young, Gwen moved with her family into Quirindi. The trip from the property, "Woodstock" along primitive roads by horse and sulky had been so hazardous that Josephine, pregnant with Gwen, was thrown off the vehicle and badly injured. In Quirindi, Gwen grew up in a warm and friendly environment, attending the Quirindi District Rural School and winning prizes for swimming and running.

Gwen also encountered an English teacher, Bill Gleeson, aged 23, who became friend of the family, played sport with her brother, Royce, and wrote on her report after her first year that her "conduct could be improved" and that she was "very restless in class". There were, of

course, plenty of things to be restless about, such as ominous international events. Bill left Quirindi in 1939 but kept in contact with Quirindi and the Whitten family and with Gwen. Gwen and friends in Quirindi responded to the onset of war by forming a group called "The Patriotic Younger Set". They organised concerts and other events to raise money and keep up spirits. In July 1942, they had a "Chins Up" revue and a local newspaper described her as singing "very prettily".

Bill and Gwen fell in love and in December, 1943, they married. At their reception, bride and groom at their reception gave a rendition of a popular song of the day, "My Hero", from The Chocolate Soldier. The couple spent a year in Sydney, then moved to Young in southern New South Wales, where Bill had an appointment. They lived in Young for nine years. Children started arriving, led by Jenny (1945), then Jill (1949), Libby (1950) and John (1952). In 1954, the family moved again, to Glen Innes in the state's far north, where Bill had an appointment as English master at Glen Innes High School. There was still a post-war housing shortage so Bill, assisted by Gwen and some friends, built his own house. A fifth child, Margie, was born in 1956, and in the midst of all this activity, Gwen still had time to attend to mothers' club meetings, knit and write letters.

Former Dubbo High students reunite

In 1960, Bill was appointed deputy headmaster of Dubbo High School and went there to find a place to live, leaving his family in Glen Innes for a term. The whole family settled in Dubbo in the second term where Bill found a house to rent in Macquarie Street. Gwen was reluctant to leave Glen Innes.

She is said to have cried all the way to Armidale. But she took to Dubbo, and the high school, with a passion, and was to see not only her children but two of her grandchildren educated at Dubbo's schools. The Gleeson children prospered at Dubbo, not because they were the headmaster's children, but on their own merits and in some ways took a leadership role similar to that of their father. A sixth child, Michael, was born in 1965.

Gwen's daughter, Jill McCann, told the Liberal: "Mum loved history and tradition, and Dubbo High was all 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 all that. She was active in the P&C and the canteen, she helped with the fete and at school dances." Michael Gleeson and went through the Dubbo school system, which automatically took Gwen into the functions and presentation days of each of the schools. Gwen also became patron of the Dubbo Amateur Theatrical Society (DATS), which eventually acquired a theatre of its own. Jill McCann said: "Over the years she knew the successive members of 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 and at our reunions."

Bill retired in 1973 and the couple visited Europe, their first trip overseas. They went to the family home of the Whittens, in Roscrea in Ireland, and linked up with Gwen's distant relatives. They returned to Dubbo, settling into a home in Bultje Street, not far from Dubbo High, and saw their children prosper. They were thrilled when Jill McCann and husband Paul McCann, with children Patrick and Brendan, came to live in Dubbo. She saw the grandsons go into the Dubbo school system and followed their progress. She even saw granddaughter Jessica Tovey (daughter of Libby and Euan) appear in the Dubbo theatre as part of the Bell Shakespeare Company. A great devourer of media, she was able to follow son Michael's career as a journalist with the ABC and that of Jessica Tovey's sister, Josephine, who was a prolific columnist on the Sydney Morning Herald.

Author Libby Gleeson is festival's artist of the year

When the Bindi Club was formed in 1985, Bill and Gwen joined and attended the annual lunches. Bill, who wrote a column for a time for the Daily Liberal, received several honours, including Life Membership from the NSW Teachers' Federation, which he had strongly supported. One former student said of Bill that in school teaching, particularly at principal level, he had "found his vocation".

Sadly, in his final years, Bill succumbed to dementia and died in 1994, leaving Gwen to face widowhood. She handled that, and even made two trips to the United States to see Michael. She also drove, to wit very carefully, to Canberra to see children Jenny and John, and enjoyed contact with what was then a very large family. Gwen became a tourist guide at the historic homestead of Dundullimal. In 2012, The Bindi Club made Gwen a Life Member, which she found extremely gratifying. And when her own decline came, following a stroke on July 2, all the love and commitment she had given others came back to her when she was accompanied to the end. Gwen died at Bangalow on the NSW north coast on November 23.

Gwen's funeral will be at Dubbo on Monday, December 10 at the Lazy River Estate starting at 10.30am. She is survived by her six children and their partners, 12 grandchildren, four great grandchildren, and many other relatives from a large extended family.

Former Dubbo High students reunite by FAYE WHEELER

Dubbo High School Class of 1965 members Judy Wilson, Janet Rice and Jill McCann catch up at the weekend's reunion.

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The questions in their old exam papers were like "a foreign language" but there were plenty of laughs and catching up when Dubbo students came together 50 years after their final year of school at the weekend.

The Dubbo High School class of 1965 attended a reunion where reminiscing was the order of the day and a couple of surprises were in store.

At a dinner attended by 82 people, of whom 50 were ex-students, minds were cast back to the final year of secondary education.

Former student Wendy Gibbons, nee Budden, had found some old Leaving Certificate exam papers and brought them along, reunion co-organiser Jill McCann reported.

"She read them and they were hilarious because we couldn't answer any of the questions," Mrs McCann said.

"They were like they were in a foreign language."

Then 1965 school captain Dennis Wilson - now a barrister in Sydney - took the microphone.

"He made an impromptu speech and told some scurrilous stories, it was very funny," Mrs McCann said.

In 1965 the school was the only one at Dubbo, Narromine and Gilgandra to offer the Leaving Certificate, the final two years of high school.

"Seeing everyone have such a good time together, some hadn't seen each other for 50 years, it struck me that all those years didn't matter because we spent our formative years together," Mrs McCann said.

"It's given us a shared memory and it made it easy for us to pick up where we left off."

Gwynne Gleeson, Mrs McCann's mother and wife of Bill Gleeson who became school principal in 1965, also attended some of the weekend's activities, which included a visit to Dubbo College Senior Campus, where Dubbo High's honour boards, old photos and newspaper clippings were on display.

"Mum had a wonderful time talking to everyone, she has a fantastic memory," Mrs McCann said.

"It's lovely for her to see them - she was a great supporter of all our adventures at school, especially Astley Cup and Mulvey Cup."

Mrs McCann said the next chance for a big reunion was in April 2017, when festivities to mark the centenary of public secondary education in Dubbo are planned.

Dubbo's Libby Gleeson named 2017 DREAM Festival Artist of the Year

WINNER: Award-winning author Libby Gleeson has been named the 2017 DREAM Festival Artist of the Year.

Dux of Dubbo High School and award-winning author Libby Gleeson has been named the 2017 DREAM Festival Artist of the Year. Ms Gleeson will be presented with her award on October 16 at a dinner at Western Plains Cultural Centre, which includes part of the former school.

Festival chairwoman Anne Field said the dinner venue was "fitting" as Ms Gleeson's father was a principal of the school where she also served as captain in 1968.

Ms Gleeson has written more than 40 popular and highly-acclaimed books for children and teenagers.

She is a Member of the Order of Australia and has won numerous awards including the Lady Cutler Award, NSW Premier's Literary Special Award and the Prime Minister's Literary Award. She was the first Australian to take out the prestigious Bologna Ragazzi Award.

Ms Gleeson has won the Children's Book Council Book of the Year five times, with her books shortlisted 14 times.