



Eulogy for Noela Whitton, by her son Hugh O'Brien

At Linden, NSW, 15th April 2021

Mum was born in the small Queensland country town of Murgon, Queensland, just three weeks after the greatest stock market crash in history. She was a poster child of the depression and was into recycling and conservation before Al Gore was even born!

It led to her eldest daughter Jane becoming a sculptor using recycled paper pulp, to her middle daughter Claire becoming a whiz at making meals go further and to her youngest daughter Lizzie becoming a United Nations award winning environmentalist.

Mum grew up in the back of her father's electrical goods shop which sold mainly radios - His Master's Voice HMV was their big brand - and then later TVs.

Grandad and grandma encouraged their five kids – Ivy, Noela, Colleen, Kevin and Bryan – to be involved in music and performance. Mum learned the violin and played and sang at dances.

In 1942 with the Japanese forces threatening Brisbane, the students of St Rita's Clayfield were moved to live at the convent in Murgon, further inland and supposedly safer. With a manpower shortage they needed a responsible person to ride each day to the bakers and take a load of bread to the convent for the boarder's lunches. 12-year-old Noela was the only girl entrusted with this job and she did it, rain, hail or shine.

Later when the Australian army set up camp outside Murgon, all the McMahon girls provided musical entertainment at Saturday afternoon dances.

Mum had a love of Shakespeare and became a speech and drama teacher. She met the love of her life Evan Whitton in Murgon in 1945 when she was 15 and he was 17. Evan told me he first fell in love with Noela when he saw her riding her pushbike down Lamb Street.

One day at the Presentation Convent school in Murgon, one silly lad let the air out of Noela's tyres. She hurled him down an embankment and he ended up sprawled in tree branches. Clearly, no one was ever going to let the air out of Noela's tyres – she was unstoppable for over nine decades!

For various reasons, including letters not passed on, the teenage romance of Evan and Noela was derailed.

Mum used to take the 30-mile steam train ride from Murgon to Kingaroy to teach speech and drama. She would stay overnight in the Broadway Hotel and it was here she met a dashing returned serviceman who had been a radio operator on Lancaster bombers in WW2. Our father Des O'Brien stayed on in Belgium until 1946 as part of the war reconstruction team in Europe.

Mum was attracted to our father because he was very well-spoken, very well-read and very well-mannered but best of all, his ambition was to become a racing car driver based out of Paris.

Paris was the hot button word for 20-year-old Noela. She'd been a serious Francophile ever since the late 30s when she listened to Edith Piaf 78s on the HMV model 102, according to my grandfather, the world's finest portable gramophone.

Noela married Hugh Desmond O'Brien in Murgon in May 1951. By June 1956, she had four kids under four and a husband who drank away his undiagnosed PTSD most nights at the Kingaroy RSL.

Mum gave us all a fantastic start with home kindergarten before each of us began school at St Mary's Kingaroy. She encouraged all of us to enter Eisteddfods and she arranged for me to act in a radio play

when I was eight.

She acted and directed plays for the Kingaroy Theatre Company with her biggest role being Pearl in a 1962 production of the famous Australian play *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*.

December 1st 1962 was a pivotal day in our family's history. After the wedding in Brisbane of Mum's brother Bryan to Veronica Murphy, Noela dropped in with us four kids to say hello to Evan's mother and father, who had moved from Murgon to Brisbane some years earlier.

By chance, Evan, who was living in Toowoomba at the time, happened to be there. Mum said a few years ago in the *Sydney Morning Herald* piece *THE TWO OF US* that it was as if she had only seen him yesterday.

Their love was rekindled and plans were made. In 1964 she left our father and she took me to live with Bryan and Veronica in Melbourne. Jane, Claire and Lizzie spent six tough months in the Presentation Convent in Murgon before we were all reunited in January 1965.

We lived in a tiny two-bedroom flat in East Melbourne. Mum literally slept on the couch and worked three jobs at once. She worked weekdays at Dine Out Melbourne, nights at the TAB and weekends selling furniture for a company in Bridge Road Richmond called Myer Teale.



Noela Whitton with Hugh, Claire, Lizzie and Jane, June 1965, East Melbourne.

When Evan came to live with us in 1966, Mum did not ease up but if anything worked even harder. She sold advertising for *Fashion News* - her boss described her as their greatest ever salesperson, she sold creative services for Central Art Studios and United Graphics and insurance for AMP.

Her vibrant personality, her courage and her incredible work ethic meant our circumstances slowly improved. We moved to Sydney in 1971 and as Evan rose up the ranks of journalism the financial pressure eased a little but Mum continued to work hard.

She was a typesetter at the University of Sydney and became so good at it she later taught the subject

at Sydney College of the Arts. She could typeset in 16 languages but so she could be faster, she actually studied Arabic, not an easy language to master when you are entering your fifties.

Mum's love of performing never went away. In 1979 she became a proud member of Actors and Announcers Equity and in 1982 she appeared as a featured extra in the Noni Hazlehurst film *Monkey Grip*.

As I mentioned earlier Mum's hot button word was Paris. She always wanted to live there so she convinced Evan - who thought crossing over the Sydney Harbour Bridge to go to the North Shore was a journey too far - to actually move to Europe as the *Sydney Morning Herald's* foreign correspondent. They lived in Notting Hill in London but most importantly, for three glorious months in Paris. It was in Paris in September 1984 that Noela finally married Evan. Their best man was former Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam.



Noela Whitton married Evan in Paris in September 1984 with former Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam as best man.

In France, mum met a fascinating elderly lady named Lily Carre who had been a member of the French resistance fighting the Nazis. Mum wrote Lily's story as a film treatment and my sister Claire, who was by that time was working as a post-production supervisor in Hollywood, put the film treatment in the hands of Roman Polanski.

Around this time, Mum had one of her travel articles published in the *New York Times*, something Evan was very proud of. She wrote extensively for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and at one stage had a regular column on media matters.



From about 1987, when Evan and Noela lived in Brisbane so Evan could cover the Fitzgerald Inquiry into police and political corruption in Queensland, Noela took on possibly the hardest job of her life. She totally supported and championed Evan's goal of changing the legal system from an adversarial approach to a fairer inquisitorial system. She became adept at book publishing and dealing with TV and film producers.

That amazing girl on the bread bike in Murgon sure went places and I was privileged to be along for some of the ride. Thank you Mum for your love.

Eulogy for my mother Noela Mary Whitton 19/12/1929 – 9/4/2021, by Elizabeth O'Brien



Our mother was the best mother in the universe. From the moment we each came into the world, we have been nurtured and supported by mumsy to develop into being the best possible versions of ourselves. She considered us the greatest achievements of her life – her artworks: Jane a fabulous artist and cook who has created this beautiful home and our lunch, Hugh an award-winning playwright and script-writer to premiers, Claire an artist and a post-production supervisor in Hollywood, and me, a scientist who advocates for a safer and healthier world.

Noela believed that to raise children was to MAKE friends with your children: show them the warmth, compassion, interest, loyalty, good will, kindness and generosity that you'd show a friend. In Noela's written words from her book "How to Stay Friends with Your Children" [free to read or download at <http://netk.net.au/Whitton/NoelaWhitton.pdf>]:

- "Why can't a parent be more like a friend?"
- "Plan your masterpiece [your child]"
- "To air and water, add poetry and laughter"

Noela discovered the teachings of Maria Montessori years after she had developed her own home-preschool – which started punctually at 9:22am (yes, that's where Hughy gets it from!) replete with special materials used only for this purpose. The materials were "unpacked before starting and put away when we finished" and "during every waking moment of the children's lives, supplying, where appropriate, an explanation of everything they touched, smelt, tasted, heard or saw."

My earliest memories of my mother are of this wonderful preschool she created in our home in Kingaroy, where I developed my love of patterns and my love of teaching. I remember she taught us and a friend's children to read, write, add and subtract before we started school, but more than that, she taught us to love music, art, literature. When I was four and my siblings were at school, Noela