

INTERVIEW WITH MURIEL ARNOTT

This is an interview conducted with Muriel Arnott on 29 August 2013 at her home 143 Richardson St., Middle Park by Anne Miller for the Middle Park History Group.

Muriel and Anne were friends when they were both Girl Guides at the 6th Kew St. Hilary's unit in the 1950s but had lost contact until recently.

Background

Muriel was born on 14 November 1940 in Hawthorn. Her parents were Austrian refugees from 1938, they subsequently had another daughter 4 years younger than Muriel. At this time they moved to Blackburn as her parents were anxious to take the opportunity to raise the girls in a community environment, but initially this had challenges as the Blackburn residents had not met foreigners at this time. Muriel commenced her schooling at the Blackburn State School but when her sister was old enough to begin her schooling the family moved to Kew where the girls attended Preshil, although Muriel was only there for 2 years. She then continued her education at Merton Hall (Melbourne Girls' Grammar School). Muriel had already been a member of the Brownies in Blackburn and subsequently joined the Girl Guides in Kew. Unfortunately her father never recovered from being a refugee, plus the fact he was later diagnosed as a manic depressive so life was not easy for the next few years on many, many levels. Muriel had to leave Merton Hall to go to University High School, which may have been a blessing in disguise. She did obtain her Matriculation Certificate by the skin of her teeth and went to the University of Melbourne from where she studied to become a physiotherapist. Muriel supported herself during this diploma course as there were no scholarships available for diploma courses and her mother was living 'on the smell of an oily rag' although they still lived in a rather large house in Kew. In 1960 Muriel interrupted her course to go to Vienna for a year, where her father was then living there, to try to help him over one of his depressive episodes. She then returned to finish her physiotherapy course and commenced work in 1963 at the Alfred and Caulfield Hospitals. Muriel travelled to England in 1964, met her future husband, worked for 2 years in England and Switzerland, and then returned to Australia in late 1965 where she worked first at the Caulfield Hospital and then in Charleville, Queensland, working part-time for the Royal Flying Doctor Service and part-time in private practice, until she married.

Marriage and family life

Muriel and Ron were married in August 1967 and initially lived in a flat in St. Kilda. Ron's background meant he knew this area. He wanted to paint and felt they couldn't live in a flat where the smell of the paint would inconvenience other occupants of the flats so in 1968 they bought a

house, one of an Edwardian pair, in Middle Park at 112 Wright Street for \$12,400. From the time they married they had saved \$4000. Muriel was Deputy Head Physiotherapist at Caulfield and Ron was Art Director at Briner Ads. They moved in on Cup weekend 1968. Muriel continued to work for 2 more years and they paid the house off by Ron working an extra job at night as a freelance graphic artist at which he was very good. Nickolas was born in September 1970.

Involvement with Meals on Wheels.

Following the birth of Nickolas Muriel was visited by the local Health Centre Nurse and asked immediately if she would drive for Meals on Wheels. This was the beginning of their community work and involvement. There was not another young couple on their block, namely the block bounded by Danks, Page, Wright and Mills Streets. There was a large number of people from Greece in the community, of whom Muriel and Ron did not know a soul, plus a number of rooming houses. Jumping ahead, when Muriel registered Nickolas for school in 1975, ready for the following year, she was told that 70% of the population were Greek and of the remaining 30%, 50% were from single-parent families living in rooming houses. Nickolas commenced school at the beginning of 1976.

The Health Centre Sister, Lorna Blair, visited new mothers within a few days of their discharge from hospital. When she visited the Arnotts' house and saw paintings, books and Persians (rugs) she asked Muriel if she would drive for Meals on Wheels. Muriel's reply was, yes, she would help, but she did not know anyone to look after Nickolas. Muriel's mother was living in East Melbourne, too far to ask for her help, so Lorna introduced Muriel to Ruth Stirling. Ruth and Muriel started Meals on Wheels. They also included a woman, Isobel Hurburgh who lived opposite Ruth and together they formed the Middle Park Mums (MPMs). This was to drive one meals round, eventually expanding to driving a round 5 days a week, in South Melbourne, on a rotating roster. They commenced with 2 people driving and one person looking after the children – this was the introduction of a play group. Every time anyone walked through the door at the Middle Park Health Centre Lorna Blair would ask them to help with Meals on Wheels! Gradually they had a growing team which subsequently stayed together for 30 years!

Muriel then became pregnant with her second child Christopher which prompted her to start an antenatal class for herself, on the floor of her sitting room, this became another avenue of the community coming together. Simultaneously with this Muriel started a postnatal exercise class in the Community Centre in the Health Centre premises (at the corner of Richardson and Nimmo Streets). On the day the Health Centre was not operating she was able to hold the classes.

At about this time a baby-sitting co-op started with the Stirlings and approximately 11 families. Ron and John Stirling made the baby-sitting tokens that were exchanged instead of money. These

tokens were kept on spikes and everyone had the same height of spike. People were not allowed to accumulate any more tokens than the spike would hold or they would be a 'token capitalist!' People got to know each other in these groups doing Meals on Wheels and baby-sitting for each other.

Freeway extension.

In approximately late 1971 or early 1972, which Muriel dated from the big meeting in the Town Hall of the United Melbourne Freeway Action Group in November 1972, to which Muriel was unable to attend as she was breastfeeding Christopher who was born at the end of October, the residents heard of the freeway plan.

Marilyn White, as she was then, who lived in Herbert Street between Mills and Wright Streets in Peter Couchman's former house, rang Muriel telling her that the freeway was planned to go through St. Vincent's Place. It was planned to commence at the West Gate Bridge, which was about to open, through St. Vincent's Place, down into Herbert St, crossing Canterbury Road and to meet at St. Kilda Junction. The plan was to be discussed at the South Melbourne Council meeting that night and they wanted as many as possible to attend, so they rang everyone on the Meals on Wheels and babysitting lists asking them to attend. The group packed the Council Chamber and later amalgamated with a pre-existing group, 'The Emerald Hill Association', forming the 'South Melbourne Freeway Action Group' which became very active. Later, to achieve a better balanced Council they became actively involved in getting rid of the existing Council which had become disproportionate in the number of voters in the electoral wards. There were 5 wards, 3 were business wards with very few voters, and 2 were residential wards with quite a significant number of voters in each, which meant that the interest of the council was mainly geared towards business. But to achieve a total spill of the Council a 15% population petition was required. This meant going around door-knocking everybody to obtain a petition with the 15%, which resulted in a complete spill of the Council in 1975, so there was a complete rejigging of the wards making them much more balanced. They were all involved and working very hard in this Campaign, including Ron who did a lot of art work. As Muriel recalls, 3 of the 5 wards now had a *Campaign for a Better Council* Councillor. There were 3 Councillors for each ward, one a 1 year term, one 2 years and one 3 years for the 3-year term. This meant they now had a majority in council so they were riding high in terms of South Melbourne becoming a fantastic area in which to live. They had a streetscape project, the idea of which was to prevent the traffic coming off the West Gate Bridge going through the residential streets, by widening the footpaths at the intersections and installing roundabouts in order to keep the through traffic to the boundaries. Jim Holdsworth and John Stirling had a little shop in Armstrong Street to show people the plans of how they planned to rejig the streets to lessen the flow of through traffic.

Social welfare services were increased – South Melbourne had the first Family Planning Clinic, including Dental Health - and the Housing Commission flats were much better looked after at this time.

Petrol Crisis.

At about this time, in the early 70s, there was a huge petrol crisis when people became more interested in living in the inner suburbs because living in the outer suburbs was threatened without a reliable petrol supply.

Freeways were threatening all the inner suburbs at the same time, the petrol crisis made the inner suburbs attractive to people who did not need a quarter acre block. The inner suburbs - Carlton, Fitzroy, South Melbourne - came together, calling themselves the 'United Melbourne Freeway Action Group' (UMFAG) for which Ron did the art work. They had a huge meeting in the Melbourne Town Hall, mentioned earlier, demonstrating against Hamer who was going back to the elections in April 1974. At the last minute Premier Hamer pulled the plug on all the freeways in order to get himself back into power. Most of those freeways have subsequently been built, except for the F9 which was to come off the West Gate Bridge through St. Vincent's Place, this never eventuated.

These events resulted in a very active period for the area and very cohesive as well. Muriel felt that a big factor contributing to saving the area was its community spirit and its parameters - namely the beach, the lake, Pickles Street (in those days with many factories in that area) and Fitzroy Street. Their Meals on Wheels group was like a playgroup, after the meal delivery they would sit down and talk for the rest of the afternoon while the children played. Many issues were solved – marriages broke up but one day sitting around Muriel's table someone was offered a job driving a delivery truck for another mother's business. Muriel offered to baby-sit her children so that their mother could go back to work.

Albert Park Tennis Club

Some of these people belonged to the Albert Park Tennis Club located in St. Vincent's Gardens. The tennis club in Middle Park behind the station was the 'Carmelite Tennis Club' which included some long time Middle Park residents who had grown up in this area. [From later in the interview] This was not solely a social outlet for Muriel and Ron. Ron was on the committee and worked towards the rebuilding and repainting of the clubrooms. Many of the other members were also involved in the community. When the Arnotts joined, the club had notices at the South Melbourne market and in St. Vincent's Place encouraging new members because there were only 20 members. The local Council told them 'to get their act in order'. At that time the Arnotts had been playing and paying at private courts in Canterbury Road. Ron and his brother

were good players, having played at the Christ Church St. Kilda, courts as they grew up.

Somewhere around 1970 the Arnotts discovered the courts at St. Vincent's Gardens. Later they were joined by a younger group of Colin & Joy Bandy, Scott & Jill Fowler, and the Mackays all of whom did not have children at that stage. Everyone became very involved and gradually it reached the stage where now there is a considerable waiting list for membership, it is a lovely setting. This became the Arnotts second home where they had picnics every Sunday and their children played in the Gardens.

Muriel recalls that Ron and Colin Bandy were part of the introduction of a program where children from the Housing Commission flats came to have tennis lessons. Two of these children are still playing today.

The Tennis Club had a fund-raising BBQ for Southport Nursing Home when it was being built.

Heritage Issues.

Muriel feels there was much more respect for the heritage component of the buildings formerly, than now, despite the heritage overlay today. Muriel did not know of anyone who altered the profile of their home. The ambition and money for significant change came much later. Many people like the Arnotts, the Stirlings, the McGains all put a room within the roof which was not visible from the street using the high pitch on the roof of Edwardian and Victorian houses.

In 1980 the Arnotts moved across the road to 109 Wright St. Their neighbour at 114 had died, the house was sold and new purchasers built down at the back which impinged on the Arnotts privacy to Ron's mind, so they sold no. 112.

The outcome of the MPMs.

The Kennett government contributed to the demise of the MPMs by amalgamation and the threat of commercial competitive tendering. In 2001 they finally disbanded the group. Kennett came in in approximately 1993/4 and amalgamated the 3 local councils (Port Melbourne, South Melbourne and St. Kilda) and installed Commissioners. When they became the City of Port Phillip the base for collecting the meals moved to St. Kilda. For many years previously they had picked the meals up from the South Melbourne Elderly Citizens Club in Ferrars Place. The meals had been cooked at the Caulfield Hospital kitchen, a driver would bring the meals to South Melbourne where they were served to the individual plates. The deliverers would pick up the 25 meals and the list from Dulcie. By this time the MPMs were providing a team 5 days per week. The members rotated, some wanted to always be on a certain day while others would rotate. There were always 3 people, 2 driving and 1 baby sitting. But some people preferred to always baby sit, others wanted never to baby sit. Muriel supervised the rosters for all this for 30 years. Every year they had a renowned Christmas party for which Ron did a funny invitation. The members came, without their husbands,

to the Arnotts sitting room, everyone bringing a plate. Coming without their husbands was much more unusual at this time. There was no expense, and they all had a lot of fun until late. But the amalgamation made it all too hard to continue. They picked up the board with names from a spike, they never spoke to anybody, whereas in the past they spoke with Dulcie Dale who was the Council employee for dishing up the meals. Dulcie was included in the Christmas party. When they arrived in the morning to collect the meals Dulcie would mention if any of the food recipients had not appeared well on the previous day or if any were being difficult. Or conversely, the deliverers would return and report any concerns to Dulcie if someone had not appeared well or had not answered the door. Deliverers knew Joan Crawford who was employed by the Social Work Department of the South Melbourne Council, would follow up and visit this person that same day. All of this was lost following the amalgamation and moving to the City of Port Phillip, taking away the connection, the pleasure and the satisfaction - the feedback that volunteers need to continue their task. Joan had been very supportive of Muriel in her job of organising the rosters for this, never making her feel guilty on the rare occasion when she could not provide anyone. By this time they were working alongside people who were paid to do the job of delivering meals.

The MPMs would deliver the meals at Easter when the men would do the deliveries. One volunteer, a devout Catholic, said that on Good Friday it was better than going to church! For many years he did the Easter round with Ron. 30 of the most needy regular meal recipients were selected by Joan of the 150 that were delivered daily in South Melbourne, for the 5 days of Easter. Muriel went to Caulfield Hospital to collect the pre-plated meals. Bill and Ron would then deliver the meals to the most severe living conditions including to a rooming house in Howe Crescent with shacks and a toilet in the back yard and a gully trap and running water out the back.

The MPMs always delivered meals to the same route, seeing the same people which was part of the pleasure. Sometimes they took their children. As with Easter and at Christmas they would deliver to the most needy. On Christmas Day they would go to Sally Browne's to cook the meal and dish it up, the children were heavily involved, and Joan would provide them with the list of those people who had nobody on Christmas Day. After dishing up the meals they would go to Beryl Mill's house to join with 5 or 6 families Muriel had organised. They would divvy up the meals 3 or 4 to each family, share a Christmas drink, before going off to deliver the special Christmas meals to the selected recipients. Their children would have to put their toys down, their hands behind their backs and smile and give the meal to the recipient. This cannot be done now because of the health regulations required these days. Muriel would organize someone to cook a Christmas cake which they would divide up between the recipients, presents were also part of the delivery package.

As mentioned previously Muriel always had a hugely successful Meals on Wheels party, but when

this started to fade they began a lunch at Bell's Hotel (corner Moray and Coventry Streets, South Melbourne) because Kay and Bill Bell, the owners of the hotel, also had their children at the Middle Park Kindergarten. This luncheon has become an annual fund-raiser for Napier Street Aged Care Services.

Aged care in South Melbourne

In approximately 1989 Joan Crawford and the Social Work Departments of Port and South Melbourne were very worried about the situation for people once they could not be at home but were not requiring nursing home care. Muriel and her friends had been involved in raising money for Southport Nursing Home but there was no Hostel as that level of care was then called. At that time there was Federal Government capital works funding available once a facility opened. As a result South and Port Melbourne Councils worked together and were finally allocated the Napier Street site which had previously been set aside for a morgue. A number of influential people lobbied against the morgue proposal, one of whom was the late Father Michael Daly who had been a parish priest at Sts. Peter and Paul, until he married Tricia Tracey. The Labor government purchased the former orphanage site from the McKillop Foundation (the Catholic Church) which included the whole block from Clarendon to Church and from Napier to Raglan Streets. The Child Care Centre went into the former parish school, while sale for private housing in Raglan St provided cross-funding. In the corner were Housing Commission houses, the Ministry of Housing were on Church Street and Aged Care was allocated to the former Orphanage. The history of Aged Care in Napier Street is currently being written.

A steering committee was set up between the City of Port Melbourne and the City of South Melbourne (1989/90) which included the Town Clerk of each city, the Mayor of South Melbourne was the Chair, the architect and engineer from South Melbourne, and the Social Workers from both cities. In order to obtain the Commonwealth capital works funding it was necessary to include a number of community-involved committee members. This explains how people like Muriel, Gael Wilson, Beth Joyner and Thelma McKinnon were approached to join the committee. These people were seen to have an interest in the community also with knowledge of aged care. Muriel was an Aged care Consultant Physio, Gael was a nurse working in Aged Care, Thelma was a volunteer and Beth Joyner was the CEO of Southport. This steering committee worked to plan an Aged Care Hostel in Napier Street. The committee visited other aged care facilities in a little bus and finally decided which they thought the best. This was the work of architect Paul Archibald who did a fantastic job. The former orphanage was reconfigured and opened on 31 May 1993. Capital works funding was only available once the doors were opened and the government had inspected it, which is why it was necessary to have organisations like Port and South Melbourne Councils to advance the money and professional help. Once opened a regular Committee had to be elected.

This initial committee comprised Muriel as Chairman, Gael Wilson, Frank O'Connor, Thelma McKinnon, Annette Madden and Dr. Richard Whiting. The Manager and CEO, Margaret Kerr, was appointed. This was a facility for 42 residents when opened, which since then has not failed as a community-run, not-for-profit organisation, with 50% of the residents being financially disadvantaged people. The remaining 50% of residents pay an asset-related in-going bond, from which only the interest from this bond can be used to enable the Hostel to extend and improve.

Claremont Aged Care facility has recently amalgamated with South Port Nursing Home to form CaSPA – Claremont and South Port Aged Care. They have now acquired the land behind Napier Street, formerly the St. Vincent's Boys Home, and after very lengthy negotiations work has commenced on a 100+ bed facility. Muriel was the Chairperson of Napier St for 10 years and remained on the committee for a further 10 until 2010 when she was 70. She still chairs the *Friends of Napier Street*.

Grand Prix.

In 1993 Kennett unannounced imposed the Grand Prix on the local community. The first meeting of people concerned about this included John Dietrich, Peter Cronin, Carolyn Hutchens and Harry Ward. In 1993 this became *Save Albert Park*, which the Arnotts joined soon afterwards. They fought the Grand Prix decision tooth and nail for 10 years or more, including a vigil in Albert Road that Muriel took part in every Saturday for 10 years. One of Muriel's sons attended Melbourne High School and befriended a boy called Matt whose mother purchased a house in Danks Street opposite Muriel and Ron. Muriel and Matt's mother, Eva Colin, were involved in *Save Albert Park* and the vigil together for over 10 years.

Muriel's return to work

In 1975 Muriel became the breadwinner, she went back to work when Ron commenced painting full time and looking after the children. Muriel worked at the Alfred Hospital as the Senior Reliever as well as conducting antenatal classes 2 nights-per-week at the Mercy Hospital. Muriel also did locums for other physios at Christmas time which was additional. Ron worked for the Council of Adult Education twice each week. Every 18 months or so he would have an exhibition which 'put the cream on the cake'. These exhibitions were most successful with huge opening nights, thanks to the Arnotts being so involved in the local community. Ron designed his own invitations and the Arnotts organised things themselves. The private art galleries were not interested in Ron's work as he had not attended an art school which was a most important pre-requisite at this time, they also required a considerable commission.

Middle Park Primary School (MPPS).

When Nickolas and Christopher were at the MPPS Muriel was involved with the Mothers' Club

which mainly involved raising money and a sausage sizzle on election days.

There was no tuck shop at MPPS. Muriel was the representative of MPPS on the Victorian Federated Mothers' Clubs Conference which was headed by Joan Kirner, holding the annual conference at the Assembly Hall in Collins Street. Muriel described what Mary Crean had called the tuck shop (on the NW corner of Mills and Richardson Streets) as being a bakery run by an English couple who made the best pies in town. There also used to be a milk bar diagonally opposite the church on the corner of Wright and Richardson Streets and a post office on the corner of Mills and Richardson Streets. The former church on the SE corner of Mills and Richardson, now divided into 3 domestic dwellings, was possibly a Congregational Church. In Muriel's memory it has not been a church for a long time – Peter Gough had his studio there for a long time before the building was taken over and converted into flats.

Muriel's involvement with the school was that she was always available but the Mothers' Club was mainly involved in fund raising. They had the room at the back onto Page Street as their club rooms. Muriel recalled that they did have huge carnivals for which Ron did the art work while they both did the foot work. The Greek families did wonderful huge spit roasts. To Muriel's knowledge the Mothers' Club did not have input into the philosophical or policy outcomes of the school. Carolyn Hutchens was more involved than Muriel and would probably know more. Before Nickolas started school in 1976 the Head Teacher was Mr. Cummins who still used the strap. Muriel can recall standing over at the kindergarten being worried about this. At this time the playground was all concrete from border to border. There was a group who built the famous mound which has since been taken away, they worked hard to improve the grounds. The school took a leap forward when Colin Crawford became the Principal in the early to mid '80s. The demographic was also changing. Some of the Greek parents had been involved with the school, including the Voukelatos family. Voula would sew in the back garage all day to make money and George drove a taxi, he also served on the School Council. Their children went to kindergarten and school with Muriel's.

Muriel's children and the two children of her sister who lives in Vienna did swaps, each spending 3 months at age 10 in the other country.

Changes in the shopping precincts

When the Arnotts lived in Wright Street Muriel did the daily shopping in Mills Street, the shops extended from Danks Street to Little Page Street. There was a grocer, two greengrocers, a butcher, a chemist and a milk bar. The shop on the corner that is currently the milk bar used to be a private house. The second greengrocer was on the other (N) side of Mills Street where the gym is, together with a bike shop. The milk bar was over the road where Ragazzi's Restaurant is now.

There was a very good butcher George Bailey (in Hambleton St). If you could afford the time

required to go to George's as he didn't cut up the meat in advance and there were no price tags. The queue would be long so you needed to have plenty of time and it was necessary not to be on a budget to go to Butcher George Bailey. Muriel only remembers the butcher and a licensed grocer in Hambleton Street.

Armstrong Street had two greengrocers.

The Old Buffers Parade

This was something everyone became involved in, a huge event, for which Ron did the floats for the kindergarten and won prizes for the best float. There was a huge carnival in the Park before this was taken over by Jeff Kennett. The money raised was for Prince Henry's Hospital. Muriel thinks that the demise of this was partly due to the ageing of the Lions' Club members who ran the festival, Moomba and partly due to a flat feeling in the community at this time. Christopher Arnott was a member of the St. John's Ambulance run by Ken McClavity and was on duty at community events. Muriel wonders whether the Nippers are replacing that now. In Muriel's memory the Old Buffers did move to Kerferd Road and to Albert Road. One year they tried bringing the parade down Canterbury Road from Fitzroy Street. There were just not enough community organisations who were prepared to decorate a float or a combination of a whole lot of things.

Muriel's Awards.

Muriel has been honoured by the community with the following awards:

1980 She features on a postal stamp, one of a series illustrating Community Welfare

1988 Citizen of the Year. Awarded by the South Melbourne Council

2001 Muriel represented the City of Port Phillip at the Centenary of Federation celebrations.