

Rena Merryl Wood

*Eulogy delivered by Alison Chamberlain at the Service of Thanksgiving, Blackburn North Uniting Church, 107 Koonung Road, Blackburn, Victoria 3130
Wednesday, June 13, 2007*



Good afternoon.

I am Alison, Rena's youngest child. And I am speaking on behalf of Ian, Jeff and Ruth. Thank you all for coming to help celebrate the life of our mother, Rena Wood

I think the Rena Wood is just the most fabulous name for the woman we know and love! Her name reflects the nature of the woman. Rena just "would" do things: she was a woman who would accept a challenge and try new things regardless of her age!

Born Rena Merryl Cox in Chatham in Melbourne on August 28, 1911, she and her twin sister Eelin were the first born of nine children to Arthur and Ethel Cox. Mum and Eelin's siblings were: Lorna (deceased), Phyllis (deceased), Alex (deceased), Bess (very much alive today), John (deceased), Margery (now living in Adelaide) and Ian, Mum's big little brother who died a few months ago.

To cover a lifetime of almost 96 years in a few minutes is a big ask. I could just use Mum's favorite saying "I've had a good life you know" and sit down.

However, it would not do her justice, and I would like to talk a little about the woman we knew and loved...

As a child and young woman, Rena grew up in Hawthorn, and also lived in Spotswood, Williamstown, Camberwell, Wonthaggi, St Arnaud, Charlton, Rosebud, Blackburn, Mingarra Hostel in Croydon and finally she came back Camberwell where she spent the last 18 months or so, at

Bethany Nursing home; which was in fact just around the corner from 86 Bowen Street where the family had lived for some years.

Prior to her marriage, Rena had worked as a book keeper, until she turned 21 and was made redundant; and then as a house keeper to a doctor and his family.

Rena had four children and two step children 11 grandchildren and a growing crowd of great grandchildren. She outlived two strong husbands and kept her interest in people and contact with friends strong until the last year or so. She just loved the “little ones”, her little great grandchildren;

Rena was an interesting and interested woman. She had a great curiosity, great capacity for meeting, befriending, understanding and accepting people from different cultures. As Elaine Hewson said after church last Sunday: “Rena was a great collector of people.”

She had a phenomenal memory for faces, connections, children’s and sibling’s misdemeanors and a phenomenal ability to forget everyone’s food likes and dislikes, but the door was always open, the kettle on and the welcome mat was out!

She was a very generous teacher of all her skills: cooking, sewing, gardening, entertaining, meeting people, participating in community life and fitting more into the day than is normally possible. She was always ready to allow us to do things that others thought we may be too young to do. Ruth and I were taught to cook at an early age, and encouraged to join Mum in entering things in the Charlton [Agricultural] Show. Mum won prizes for beautiful clothes, bottled preserves, baking etc. Ruth and I would do decorated saucers and scones and cakes and Jeffrey, not to be left out, won first prize for a plain sponge. In the photos at the back of the room you will see Ruth and I completely dressed in Mum’s work, dresses, jumpers, coats and hats.

Ian and Jeff were allowed to build all sorts of contraptions in our various back yards – underground houses and tunnels, cubby houses in the middle of the huge Cyprus hedge in Peel street, great holes in the garden to trap the unwary visitor to unexpected parts of the garden, and the Peel Street White Elephant – Ian’s remarkable fish pond.

Mum was a bit of perfectionist at times, which could explain why a lot of stuff was left unfinished and why she spent an inordinate amount of time “hunting high and low” for things. When she and Bill moved from Charlton to Rosebud, decades of craft work went with her, some dating back 50 years.

Mum was prolific in whatever endeavor she and the CWA ladies dreamt up. Jam jars and bottles covered in plaster of Paris and gold paint, place mats, tea towels, oven cloths, embroidered aprons and tablecloths appeared in each person’s Christmas parcel. Mum should have been a factory manager: she knew the basics of the effectiveness of producing large numbers of units of whatever was that year’s craft fad.

Will we ever forget the decade of the mosaic tiled table? If you missed out on a tiled table, there were still pot stands, dishes, and ash trays to come all covered in mosaic tiles...

And the landscapes, done in oils... Her real artistic talents lay in watercolors or portraiture, but she would never attempt that no matter how much she was encouraged.

3

It could safely be said that Mum suffered from a certain degree of stubbornness, and there would be little dispute that she could also be pigheaded. Her attitude to advice was to treat it as a challenge. "I'll prove them wrong."

When she got her replacement knees she was given firm advice on how to exercise gently, not to walk too far and not to bend her knees to garden. Did she take the advice? No. She just said "Is that right?" and went on her merry way... Her stubbornness was also demonstrated in her approach to most other things in life – particularly machinery or equipment. "I WILL NOT BE BEATEN BY THIS!" As son Ian wrote in an article for the BBC, Mum's determination and doggedness, would be the life or death of her. It proved to be the life of her.

After Rena married Bill Wood, a farmer, councillor and local identity, she continued to run the business for another year. She and Bill had a wonderful life together travelling around the world, Victoria and Tasmania for Grand Lodge, Rotary and Bill's other local government commitments.

Mum blossomed in this environment as she was a very social person. She loved people to drop in and she loved to entertain. Dinners for large numbers at the house in Swan Hill Road were a delight to her. She and Aunt Phyllis used to swap ideas of how to cater for formal dinner parties without stressing too much.

Although she declared herself to be a shy and nervous person, she was very good at working a room. I think she would be taken aback at that description of her, but a little bit pleased, but meeting people and putting them at ease was a real skill of hers. Within minutes Mum would strike up a conversation and find a contact with a mutual acquaintance, colleague, family member or someone who came from this or that town.

Although fiercely independent, and convinced women could do anything men could, Mum still believed in supporting her husbands in their business and community life.

As we were growing up, Mum supported Dad when he ran the Tribune in Charlton and in her own right was involved in church committees, CWA, Infant Welfare and pre-school committees. She continued this work after Dad died in 1954 as well as running the paper and the shop, still making our clothes, gardening, and insisting that we went home from school in the middle of the day for a cooked lunch!

In addition to all of this she ended up owning four newspapers in total. The "Charlton Tribune," "Quambatook Times", "Wycheproof News" and the "Manangatang Courier". Phenomenal really! even given that she had Ian and Jeff to help her in the business, and June Wood, Ruth and me helping in the house.

Mum, of course, was fiercely competitive, a trait she hotly denied. Anyone who has played a game of "Scrabble" with Rena will know what I mean. She was definitely a "take no prisoners" player. Her excellent vocabulary, good memory and firm grasp on her own edition of the dictionary and the score pad usually saw her win every game.

Mum was in later life a pretty impressionistic driver – aim at a spot and hope for the best – where possible only make left hand turns. We were astonished when in her eighties she was able to renew her driver's license! Surely, we said, if someone had gone outside and looked at her car, they would have seen that it was less than crisp around the edges!

Rena solved the vexed question of how much longer she should drive, by managing to have an almost head-on collision with, of all things, a tow truck! On being taken to see the written off car and remove her belongings, Mum declared that she had not done all that damage – it must have been someone else!!

Mum's cooking was legendary. She always cooked for an army and was a clean-plates lady. In later years the state of her health was measured in sausage rolls. I remember Helen Spong reporting the Auntie Rena must be well recovered from an illness because she had just made two dozen sausage rolls.

Mum never came to grips with use by dates: as she didn't feel that she had one herself! Eating at Mum's was "interesting" as her memory of when items were purchased or made was fuzzy at best and non-existent at worst. We still want to know how despite our surreptitious efforts, there were still items in her cupboard that were between five and 10 years past the use by date.

We do have to thank you Mum for teaching us all to be independent, to cook, sew, garden, chop wood, kill chickens, and generally be able to look after ourselves. You also taught us how to be proud of our children, entertain, make friends, meet new people and be flexible. However, we wish you had not been quite so effective at teaching us how to "go the extra mile", get involved in lots of community groups, make sure that everything is just right, do our duty and do the right thing all the time, take on too many projects, say "yes I can do that" and then learn how to do it. It's all very tiring.

Mum always said that she wanted to wear out, not rust out. There was no way she was going into one of those places where people just sat and stared at the walls. She fought the move, and missed all her friends here at the church who had supported her so well. However, being Mum she soon found friends and then loved the village life: lots of people on hand all day to talk to, good care, games, puzzles and painting. It was lovely to see her settle down and gain a sense of peace and contentment. We owe a great debt of thanks to the congregation of this church, the staff of "Mingarra Hostel" in Croydon and latterly the staff at "Bethany", for easing Mum gently through the last days of her life and sending her on her way in peace.

Thank you to everyone who has been a friend and companion to Mum during her long life. Please rest well Mum.