

Eulogy for Donna Staunton by Hon. Michael Wooldridge

St Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, Paddington. 10th Jan 2018

Donna was born at Invercargill, in the South Island of New Zealand. Exactly when is a bit of a mystery. You can't get much further south than Invercargill. She grew up in a blue-collar family as one of 12 children to Snowy and Joyce. Snowy worked for the local Power Board.

At 2 years of age the family moved to Dunedin where Donna grew up and went to school. Childhood was chaotic and complex: a constant struggle for money, but with richness in many other ways. Donna had her first job at 14 in order to save for what would be her second pair of shoes and some stockings. Already the elements of the Donna we all know were there: toughness, loyalty, love of family and style.

Donna went from school into nursing. As she would tell me,

'if you were a catholic, working-class girl from Dunedin your only choices were nursing or teaching. I wouldn't have been a good teacher'.

So, at 17 she left home and moved into the hospital's nurses' quarters. Dunedin was never going to hold Donna and at 21, she headed to London with 4 girlfriends. They made it as far as Sydney.

In Sydney, she fell head over heels for the lead singer of the rock band Mother Goose. Mother Goose comprised 6 musicians, all boys from Dunedin who had just released what was to be Mushroom Record's fastest ever selling album, 'Stuffed'. Sydney's bohemian rock scene of the late 1970's suited Donna.

At the same time, she would work as a nurse at Northside Clinic, the country's first private psychiatric hospital and the first hospital in what would become the Ramsay Empire. There she met her future husband, Keith. She describes Keith as a suave, elegant, intelligent Englishman, who worked as a Psychiatrist at Northside. While her and Keith's marriage did not last, she remained immensely fond of him. As she said once, *'He did a good job on me. Taking a rough Southland, Kiwi and turning her into a confident young lawyer'*. For that she was forever grateful.

Of course, the path to law was not linear, it involved a false start in Psychology; University drama; sociology and a period as a radical feminist Marxist complete with short spiked hair. But the style was still there. Without doubt the only Marxist in Australia who drove a Morgan. In the end, it was law that prevailed.

Donna's career again followed a non-linear path: it now took off exponentially. Clayton Utz; CEO of the Tobacco institute in her early 30's; head of Corporate Affairs for Phillip Morris, AMP and finally CSIRO. She was the first woman to sit on the Business Council of Australia and sat on the boards of Work Cover NSW and the National Breast Cancer Centre. She is one of very few people to have been appointed to substantial Boards by both Labour and Liberal Governments.

During this time, she met and married Martin who gave her two beautiful children that were the love of her life. She said to me so many times: *'I can never thank Martin enough'*.

It was during this time that I first met Donna. It was at a large function in Canberra; she was a tobacco executive and I was about to become Australia's Health Minister. Her opening line to me was *'You've been avoiding me'*, to which I replied, *'Yes and until now quite successfully'*. The rest, as they say, is history.

In trying to think what I would say about Donna, I started with a blank sheet of paper and tried to describe her in as many one or two words characteristics as I could. A few minutes later I stopped at over 20. Let me pick just four that I think most sum up my friend and the person that was Donna Staunton. They are style, fun, achievement and nurturing.

STYLE

This was Donna's secret. She had style.

At Phillip Morris' Asia Pacific Headquarters at Southbank, Melbourne 25 years ago, it wasn't the CEO who had the largest office with the best view, it was Donna. Her entertainment was legendary. Donna had what was perhaps the largest budget for entertainment in corporate Australia at the time and she used every cent of it. Football, tennis Grand Prix or the birdcage at the Melbourne Cup, Donna was everywhere entertaining to the full.

The birdcage at Flemington for the Melbourne Cup was what Donna was most famous for. There, Cabinet Ministers and Shadow Ministers would rub shoulders with Donna's mates, family, staff and the odd Bishop. All were equal.

At CSIRO, with a staff of nearly 6,000 people, the entire organisation was allocated just 2 passes to the airline VIP lounges. Naturally, one was allocated to the CEO and of course, the other to Donna.

If there was a common theme, it was that everyone seemed to remember the first time that they met Donna. She did first impressions like no one else. Always fabulously dressed; perfect hair; perfect smile and if you were talking to Donna, you were the only person in the room.

FUN

A few days ago, I was with the family when they met Fr. Paul for the first time to discuss the funeral. Everyone was obviously upset and Father was chatting to put people at ease.

He turned to Maddy and asked 'Maddy, how would you describe your mother?' Maddy lifted her head up, rolled her eyes back slightly and replied in a single word...'Wild'.

That sums her up well. She was wild; she was fun; she was passionate and she would try just about anything once. This doesn't mean that she wasn't serious, she would be very serious when she needed to be but always without taking herself too seriously. She was great fun to be around and she had boundless energy. Indeed, the unforgivable sin in Donna's mind was to have low energy or to be boring. She could put up with most things but she couldn't put up with that.

ACHIEVEMENT

Donna was the most effective lobbyist I have ever witnessed. She knew how to put a case and she would work tirelessly to have the networks so that she could put that case when and where she needed it.

The most brilliant and ruthlessly effective piece of lobbying I ever witnessed involved Donna and occurred in 1997. The issue was an excise tax on cigarettes, whether it be levied on a per stick or a per weight basis. This meant a lot to Philip Morris, who had smaller pack sizes containing heavier cigarettes. They discovered quite late that they were being out manoeuvred on this issue by their rival, British American Tobacco and they needed to pull out all stops. Within 48 hours of finding out that they had a major problem, Donna had arranged for their CEO to meet 13 out of 16 Cabinet Ministers and within 7 days, their CEO had had meetings with 13 out of 16 of the Federal Cabinet. The three they didn't see were the Prime Minister (and they saw his Chief of Staff instead) and two Cabinet Ministers whom it was deemed that they didn't need to see in order to have their case favourably considered. There were few, if any other companies in Australia that had that access.

When it came time for Cabinet to make a decision on excise, Philip Morris which had had the better access and put the stronger case, won a very significant victory. She could have done exactly the same with the ALP.

Part of Donna's success and achievement was due to her own standards: they were exacting. She hated mistakes, she saw them as being discourteous to the client. Of course, these standards also applied to those around her. If you were close to Donna, it meant that you would receive regular and blunt performance updates concerning whatever you were undertaking, whether work related or not. Similarly, you would receive a daily appraisal on your dress sense and appearance. She had high standards and she expected them of others: at least those who were close to her.

I used to joke with her, '*You need a big ego to hang out with Donna Staunton*'. She hated me saying it, but there was a fair bit of truth in the statement. Not that she was ever unkind: just a very private person and it was often hard to really know what she was thinking at any point.

This would be borne out by Donna's 'trick' questions: asked innocently, almost in passing, you would realise after the event when there was only ever one of two responses to your reply. If you scored a pass you would receive a response of 'EX-ACTLY'. You had dodged a bullet. On the other hand, if your reply wasn't up to the mark, you would be met with (in order) silence; head moved slightly forward, pupils dilated and the words, said slowly, '*Have you lost your mind?*'

NURTURING

The final word that most describes Donna to me is nurturing. Just after Donna's passing, I received an email from Melanie Carew, the Director of Communications at the Mental Health Co-operative Research Centre in Melbourne. Donna was on the Board of that Research Institute and offered to give a talk to the PhD Students about Politics and Lobbying. This is what Melanie wrote,

"Donna presented to our PhD Students four years ago. It is worth noting that as a group, our students are notoriously difficult to impress by the very nature of their training they tend towards critical thinking and subjecting people and ideas to scrutiny.

Donna impressed them within a minute of speaking. One student, now a Post-Doctoral Fellow in Neuroscience at Harvard, told me afterwards that she just didn't want to work with Donna, she wanted to be Donna. Another student this year was

discussing with me how she needed to make connections at an International conference and referred to how she decided to 'Donna' the situation. In her mind this meant presenting herself confidently; making sure she had met every person in the room and left them with a good impression. From this one meeting this student received invitations to visit 4 International Universities, so it clearly worked.

The impact of a single, hour long presentation to our student group has reverberated with Donna providing for many of them a role model for how to be a successful, impressive woman in a high-level position".

So, what was the secret to 'Donna-ing' the room? She had a very genuine interest in everybody. It was sincere, there was no faking it. She was thoughtful; she was kind; she was generous. There are many, many people that benefitted from Donna's kindness and generosity; from her support and her mentoring. She was a wholly, nurturing individual and was passionate about seeing young women succeed.

So that sums up the Donna I know. The only thing that I would add to all that is that she was tough. Perhaps the toughest person I have known. She hated me saying that and would reply disdainfully *'That is ridiculous, I am a pussy cat'*. That became my nick name for her: 'Puss'.

I witnessed her toughness in how she responded to her illness over the past 2 ½ years. There was not a single moment of self-pity. Early on, her oncologist referred her to a Psychiatrist as she was not behaving in a manner that was usual for someone with a terminal illness. Most don't continue working 80 hours a week, with a gruelling schedule of domestic and international travel. She went once and then stopped. As she put it to me

'This is pointless. If falling to bits would help, I would probably do it, but I just cannot see how it will help'.

Donna didn't battle her cancer; it battled her. In spite of substantial and at times heroic treatments, she refused to let it change her life. Of course, the other side of this toughness was inspiring bravery, on show until the very end.

The one contradiction in Donna was her work in tobacco, for which she was mercilessly criticised and quite unfairly pursued for a long time. I always thought

the reason behind it was that she was so good at what she did. The public servant in my Department with whom she dealt most frequently (now one of the most senior officials in Canberra) once confided in me that he wished that the anti-tobacco lobby was as easy and professional to deal with as Donna.

She was unapologetic about this period and would frequently state that Phillip Morris was the best company she ever worked for. However, when she moved on, she moved on totally and in her subsequent work and actions, I believe atoned for it many times over.

We farewell you today Donna, a nurturing and proud mother; an inspiring role model and a passionate and loyal friend to me, as to many others. I will miss your style; your warmth; your friendship and your fun. We all will. You were the most complete individual I have ever known and you leave us having done something that not many do: You leave the world a better place.