

April/May newsletter of U3A Ipswich & West Moreton Tutor Profile – Maria Stevenson OAM

By Ian Muil



At a function in Ipswich on March 5, 2019 the Rotary Club of Ipswich North said of its guest: “Maria Stevenson you have set an example for many by your contributions to your community. Your personal involvement makes our community a better place in which to live.”

In acknowledgement the Rotary Club of Ipswich North made a contribution to the Rotary Foundation in her name and she was recognised by the Foundation as a Paul Harris Fellow, the highest honour in Rotary.

The host then backgrounded guests on Maria’s achievements.

“Maria Stevenson was born in 1940, the youngest of six children to Bruno and Carmen Tapiolas, immigrant parents who lived in North Queensland. Bruno and Carmel were pioneers of the Burdekin River delta who became champions of the cane industry in far North Queensland.

“At 10 years of age Maria was afflicted by polio, causing severe and near complete paralysis for a significant period. After long periods of convalescence, Maria eventually learnt to walk again and was left with a permanent paralysis and life-long mobility impairment requiring orthotics and lower leg callipers.

“Despite the impact of polio on her schooling, her parents recognised her academic potential and ambition, and insisted, against advice, that she sit for a State Scholarship examination with her same-aged peers. They later persevered to enrol her in a Brisbane boarding school despite significant hesitation (indeed refusal) by schools to accept a student with mobility impairment, and ultimately Maria commenced as a boarder at St Margaret’s Anglican Girls School in Brisbane.

“Prior to her illness, she attended the Ayr State School and subsequently St Patrick’s College in Townsville. “Enrolled at the University of Queensland she met her future husband, Charles Stevenson, who was a medical student. “Maria graduated with a Bachelor of Science, chose to pursue her life-long ambition to be a teacher, and commenced her career as a science and biology teacher at Ipswich Girls’ Grammar School. She devoted the next 40 years to IGGS because she believed in the role the school plays in educating young women.

“Maria’s interests over the years have extended to: Zonta, where she served in numerous roles over 35 years; U3A Ipswich & West Moreton, teaching her much-loved course ‘Life, the Universe and Everything’; the World Wide Fund for Nature; Greenpeace; the Australian Conservation Foundation; Amnesty International; Medecins Sans Frontiers; the Red Cross; Ipswich Kindergarten; Colthup Home; and Ipswich Library.

“Through science and education, Maria has made a life-lasting impact on many. Her positive approach to life and the community in which she lives has provided inspiration to countless young women, colleagues and friends and an outstanding role model to all.”

Then in the 2019 Australia Day honours the citation for the award of the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) to Mrs Maria Teresa Stevenson reads:

“For service to education – Ipswich Girls' Grammar School: Board of Trustees member; Old Girls' Association honorary member; teacher from 1963 to 2003; Staff Association inaugural president; pastoral care specialist; member of the State Panel for Biological Science, Board of Senior Secondary School Studies; former Biological Science District Panel chair; U3A Ipswich & Moreton

tutor for 'Life, The Universe and Everything' course; Zonta Club of Ipswich member, former President and director.”

In the course of our interview Maria was asked about her family background. Though Maria had no reservations talking about her family history and her pride in her parents’ achievements it was clear she felt inclusion of their successes in this profile might be seen as ‘boasting’.

But the public record covers what she told me so here are extracts from various North Queensland publications. They highlight the courageous story of penniless, non-English-speaking migrants with basic education making good – that inner courage, intellectual vigour, is perhaps her most valuable inheritance from her parents.

Here is an extract from a North Queensland newspaper: “Looking to start a new life from his economically broken country of Spain, Bruno Tapiolas arrived in Australia in 1911 at the age of 20 looking to start a new life. He quickly found work in the cane farming industry in Ayr, North Queensland and worked tirelessly without pay but the promise of equity in the cane farm he worked. It wasn’t long before he owned the farm and his ingenuity led him to develop more efficient cane irrigation systems that are still in use today.

“Soon after World War II Bruno wanted to build a house for his young family but building materials were in short supply so he embarked on a 400km journey to the Atherton Tablelands to source timber. (Here Maria adds the missing ingredient – Bruno reckoned his attractive young Spanish wife would have more success negotiating with Far North saw-millers. He was right – she got what they needed.)

“It did not take long for word to spread that he had found a good supply of timber so he began to sell the timber he brought back and in 1947 in Ayr the timber sales and joinery business Parkside was established. He then expanded into home building and Tropical Homes is today one of Queensland’s largest project home builders with over 15,000 homes built.

“In 1962 Parkside bought a sawmill at Eungella and gradually expanded by acquiring more sawmills including in Western Australia and Victoria. Parkside is now Australia’s largest hardwood miller and timber manufacturer exporting to Europe, Asia and the Americas.

“With Bruno’s son Joe driving the business it expanded into residential land and commercial and retail developments with estates created in Ayr and Townsville. The company's divisions include construction, retirement villages and finance. The third-generation, Peter, Robert and Wilfred Jr. now on the board.”

Now here is Maria’s story in her own words:

“I have had a rewarding life albeit one with a few challenges which no one can escape. One of my privileges has been to have a diverse cultural background – a big help for someone who wanted to be a teacher. My parents migrated from Barcelona and my five older siblings and I grew up in Ayr, a community enriched by people not only from Spain but also from the UK, several European countries, Pacific Island nations, and China but, sadly, few Indigenous families – a mix that reflected the glories and the conflicts of the history of North Queensland.

“I had a happy, carefree childhood with parents who valued education highly. Mine turned out to be an eclectic one as I started out at a rural state primary school, followed by two years Distance Education as a patient in the polio ward of Townsville Hospital, then three years in a convent and topped that off with two years at an Anglican boarding school in Brisbane – a well-rounded education!

“My parents aspired to have all their children go to university but WW II intervened for my brothers and sisters and in the end I was the only one able to do so.

“From when I was very young, I had two things I wanted when I grew up: to study science, which I did at the University of Queensland, and to become a teacher. One big distraction from my study

(and his) was to meet Charles Stevenson, a Malaysian student studying medicine. As a result, the world of Asian cultures was opened to me. This was the time when the White Australia Policy had not yet been dismantled and so Australians in general had very limited knowledge and understanding of the different ideas and values of so many of our neighbouring countries. It is so different now.

“Sixty years on, celebrating 55 years of marriage, we value being part of the Ipswich community. Our pride and joy and the focus of our lives is our loving family who, thankfully, are all now in Australia after many adventures overseas. Carmen lived and taught in Japan for more than five years which is where she met her husband who is a fifth generation Japanese American from Los Angeles and they have three beautiful children and live near us; Tanya is the Head of an Anglican primary school in NSW and Anthony (a medico like his dad) and his partner who grew up on a farm on the Darling Downs, have charming twin girls and live nearby in NSW.

“In 1957 the Russians began the Space age by successfully launching Sputnik 1 which shocked the world. Suddenly Science teachers were in great demand. A few years later, I was excited to be employed at Ipswich Girls’ Grammar School to teach Maths and Science to the new Grade 8 that used to be the old Scholarship year.

“That began my close association with IGGS including IJGS as teacher, Senior Co-ordinator, Member of the Board of Trustees, Honorary Old Girl, parent and continues as grandparent. The School and teaching was important to me then as they still are now.

“As both a student and a teacher, I owe much to U3A for the friendship, the pleasure and the encouragement I get by being a part of it. In particular, I am indebted to a thoughtful, generous member who nominated me for an Order of Australia award. I was honoured to receive the OAM in 2018 for services to education for which I thank her and all who supported me. It has been a humbling experience.

“I was asked: ‘What makes your U3A science class so popular?’

“Well, humans have a deeply curious nature and that curiosity is a strong motivator for learning. Young children drive parents mad with their incessant why? how? where? Then, sadly, as they grow they encounter too many adults who tell them: ‘stop asking stupid questions’. By their teen years they have to cope with a demanding curriculum and assessments with limited time to explore ideas and uncertainties. They stop asking.

Then life follows. It is not till we are retired that many of us once again have the time and the confidence to ask questions about the complexities and wonders of nature. We love to know the answers, even if there's no obvious benefit.

It gives me great pleasure to join with the ever-fascinating and fun members of my classes as we seek answers through science to the conundrums of ‘Life, the Universe and Everything’.

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