



Pictured: Nancy and Austin McCallum

Austin & Nancy McCallum: An Incredible Journey

An insight into our founding members' remarkable life



AUSTIN & NANCY McCALLUM: AN INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

Sunday 15 November 2020 marked a significant milestone in the life of a local community services legend, from whose family our organisation is named after. On that day Nancy McCallum turned 100 years of age. Nancy and her late husband Austin McCallum have contributed enormously to our community and what better way to celebrate that contribution than by telling their story?

McCallum's Matt Vallance was fortunate enough to recently sit with Nancy and her son Peter in her Mount Pleasant home to discuss her life and the incredible contribution she and her husband provided to the Ballarat community. It was fascinating to learn firsthand their life journey.

It's apparent from the beginning that Nancy's living room is filled with memories. Sepia and monochrome photographs dating back to the mid-1900s are positioned prominently, along with books, hundreds and hundreds of books in shelving adorning a living room where guests are frequently received.

BORN WORLDS APART – IN BALLARAT

Nancy grew up at the northern end of Barkly Street, whilst her future husband ironically, grew up at the southern end. Despite this, Nancy believes they weren't that well known to one another. Peter swiftly remarked that the story is often told as though "*there was a Berlin Wall divide*" between each end of Barkly Street.

Nancy was educated in primary and secondary schools before going on and beginning an Arts course at the School of Mines in Lydiard Street, Ballarat. She then began work as a milliner, first at Tylers and then, following a takeover, at Morshead's Department Store in the Bridge Mall.





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POST-WAR LIFE

Whilst they knew each other as children, Austin and Nancy's courtship didn't eventuate until 1945 where, on his return to Ballarat, he asked her to an evening at the local movie theatre.

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“I declined because he didn't have a car,” Nancy told me. “But he collaborated with my brother Jack and borrowed his car for the evening, despite not having a licence,” she said with a chuckle.

After marrying, Nancy and Austin built the family house in Mount Pleasant in 1947 and over 10 years welcomed four boys to their family (Ian, Stuart, Keith and Peter).

Nancy recalls Austin's doctor informing him and his fellow POW survivors when they got back to Australia *“don't have any (long term) plans, because you won't live past 56 years of age”*.

No doubt this ominous forecast inspired Austin's enthusiastic commitment to civic life. A commitment, I was told, that was only made possible through Nancy's spirited support at home.

THE COURIER

In the early 1950s Austin gained employment at The Courier as a journalist. Peter recalls his writing style as “quirky” compared to that of other journalists and, as Austin was a lover of prose, had the linguistic ability to develop a simple weather report into a superbly written composition of alliteration, expression and imagination.

VIETNAM WAR MORATORIUM PROTESTS

Even after Austin returned as a POW the threat of war and violence plagued him and Nancy. From 1962 until 1972 the Australian Government sent almost 60,000 men and women to the Vietnam War.

Austin and Nancy were fierce advocates for the discontinuation of the Australian Government's commitment to the Vietnam War, more specifically, conscription of men and women into Australia's Defence Force. Austin, then Chairman of the Ballarat Anti-Vietnam Campaign, with the help of his ex-POW mates, encouraged others to join protests against the Government's conscription policy. Such was Austin's involvement, he believed the home phone had been bugged by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), as well as being called a communist by some members of the community as he passed them in the street.



The first moratorium protests against the Vietnam War took place on Friday 8 May 1970.

Ian, the eldest of the boys, was a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War and refused to participate in conscription. Peter recalls being 13 years of age in the court room where Ian later won his case and said *"it was very touch and go for a while"*.

Stuart, who was 18 months younger than Ian, also registered as a conscientious objector, however he was not called up for military service.

Between 1965 and 1971 1,052 applicants applied for exemption from military service under the National Service Act. 733 were granted total exemption, 142 were exempted from combat duties and 137 had their application rejected.¹

In 1972, with Australian troops already withdrawn from Vietnam, the newly formed Whitlam Labor Government, the first Labor Government in 23 years, abolished National Service.

¹National Archives of Australia, www.naa.gov.au, 2021

A LOVE OF THE ARTS

Austin and Nancy's story to this point could be quite a fulfilled life: a story of adventure, horror, family and love, but it's really only the beginning.

On a previous phone call, Peter had told me that his father loved prose and was an inspired devotee of Shakespeare. Such was his love of Shakespeare that he would put on plays at the Hainan prison camp for his prison mates.

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Austin had been quoted saying *"it was my kit bag of novels which kept me and my fellow prisoners sane during the awful experience of our incarceration"*.

Austin also kept detailed diaries and journals during his time as a POW, one such journal was loaned to the Ballarat Gold Museum which, as Austin wrote in another journal – was a Biographical Exhibition.



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Having a passion for maintaining accurate historical records, Austin would later go on to be a focal member, along with Jack Chisolm, credited with establishing the Central Highlands Regional Library, the Historical Society of Ballarat, as well as the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery.

Peter informed me that although initially Austin was unqualified as a librarian, he held the position of Chief Librarian at the Central Highlands Regional Library in a caretaker capacity. Such was Austin's work in the caretaker role, he turned the library into a thriving information hub and was subsequently given the role on a permanent basis.

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“Austin was known as a ‘book man’ and turned out to be a good choice for librarian, attracting many donations of historical material to the library, much of which was referenced by Weston Bate in his award winning literature ‘Lucky City’ and ‘Life After Gold’, two books that provided great insight into regional and goldfields community history,”
Ian McCallum.

Austin also wrote a play called *“When Grief Hath Mates”* about life as a prisoner of the Japanese. The play was performed by the Little Theatre.



(Extract from the Ballarat “Courier,” 1st November, 1950)

Prize Winning Play At Little Theatre

Playing to an almost capacity house at the Little Theatre, Camp street, last night, the Ballarat Branch of the National Theatre Movement presented local author, Austin McCallum's, play, “When Grief Hath Mates,” supported by “One Afternoon.”

“When Grief Hath Mates” gained first award in a competition conducted by the NTM, and judged by Alan Aldous. “One Afternoon” was third prize winner.

“When Grief Hath Mates” proved realistic, down to earth—simple in composition, sincere in motive, it held the audience from the opening words until the final curtain.

The setting was a Japanese prison camp on April 25, 1945. Even to those who did not serve it presented a message.

The vocabulary was richly and “snaky dr” Australian, with no punches pulled. There was nothing blasphemous or silly about the dialogue. The plot centred around the plight of prisoners, who were dying for the want of life-saving drugs.

Kelly, portrayed by Col Rowe, as a tough, reckless, typical “Digger,” undertakes a mission to “scrounge” the drugs from the Japanese. He is successful, but gives his life in the attempt. Throwing the bundle of drugs over the wire, while mortally wounded, he sums up the Meigs spirit in the line, “Cop this, y’ bladders.”

The thieving and scrounging for life necessities is brought in throughout the play, petty jealousies are rampant, and the nostalgic thoughts of home enter every mind.

Oce Moss, as Blue, the scrounging “babbler,” portrayed his role very well, showing contempt for those who just sat and dreamed instead of doing something material for their own comfort and welfare.

The character who smoothed everything over and was the mediator of the party, “Scotty,” played by Reg Hara, was an all-important role which was handled with finesse.

Bill Nesbett, as Dinny, forever casting doubts and cooking up dream recipes, handled the majority of the dialogue, and brought the main theme into focus from the start.

All other characters gave able and efficient support, and lighting and stage and sound effects were in keeping with the nature of the play.

To sum up: One of the finest one-act plays ever seen in Ballarat. Author showed brilliance, actors been interpretation.

THIRD PRIZE WINNER. “One Afternoon,” third prize winner in the competition, was in direct contrast to the prize winner. Set in a decayed but once magnificent mansion, “Banning House,” it portrayed the ideals and nature of the last of a once illustrious English line, the Bannings.

Ned Banning, played by Carl Ervan, ably carried out the role allotted him. He lived in a world apart from the commercialism of the present day, according to his standards, in genteel poverty, surrounded by old-time splendor, only in memory.

He was supported by Mary Ludbrook as Nellie Grogan, his house-keeper and mistress. Nellie's performance was good as that of a scheming and avaricious Mrs. Macd Hollway, as Ned's sister, Rose Warren, carried out her role well. She was of the conventional world, in Ned's opinion, marrying a grocer, and only looking on the material side of life.

The famous “Banning emeralds” were the object of each of the feminine heads.

The timing of the players was not nearly as good as in the other play, and the dialogue seemed forced at times. The play was a little inactive, but except for a lag in the middle section and a little too much playing up of incidentals, it also was a play worth seeing.



THE BALLARAT HISTORICAL PARK

Generally speaking, the Ballarat Historical Park is not a name many Ballarat residents would remember or even know how to find on a map. However, if you were say the name “Sovereign Hill” to most people in Australia they would automatically know it was located in Ballarat.

So, what does this have to do with Austin McCallum?

He and Jack Chisholm, Mayor of Ballarat Shire at the time, visited the Swan Hill Folk Museum on a fact-finding mission, after which they said, *“We can do better than this in Ballarat”* and went on to become the founding members of the Ballarat Historical Park.

Jack Chisholm had also visited an authentically constructed historical park in Virginia, USA, and both he and Austin agreed that that was the way it should be done in Ballarat – using original construction tools, methods and materials – to make it as authentic as possible. Sovereign Hill, as it is known today, has since become a tourism mecca attracting approximately 450,000 visitors per year (pre-covid19 pandemic).

And, one more very important thing Austin was also involved in was the restoration of the Eureka Flag. An historical artefact that signifies the birth of democracy in Australia.

INSPIRED TO DO MORE

Austin and Nancy were inspired by a gentleman named Dr Eric Cunningham Dax AO, who was a pioneer in psychiatric art therapies. Dr Dax was educated in England and studied medicine and psychiatry, before arriving in Australia in 1952 gaining employment as the Chairman of the Mental Hygiene Authority of Victoria.

Dr Dax's work was mainly focused upon people in Melbourne but inspired Austin and Nancy to begin providing support to families in Ballarat with children with disabilities.

“*He was very well known in Melbourne for starting this type of thing,*” Nancy said.

Whilst not having any family members or connection to people with disability within their community, they volunteered to provide support to a family of a 13 year old with an intellectual disability.

“*Mrs Hathaway, who was the right person, in the right place, I considered. I felt sorry for Mrs Hathaway (who had a disabled child),*” Nancy said.



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LISA LODGE GIRLS HOSTEL

In 1970 Nancy was working as an Honorary Probation Officer (HBO), an officer of the court that would provide supervision for a specified period to juveniles, under the jurisdiction of the Children's Court of Victoria. With four sons growing up and leaving home, the work with young girls added a new dimension to Nancy's life as a caring, loving person.

It was then that Nancy and seven other female HBOs identified the need to provide local accommodation and support for young women, many of whom were pregnant outside of wedlock, appearing before the courts and being sent to institutions away from Ballarat. The women established the Lisa Lodge Girls Hostel for females aged 15 to 19.

"We (Nancy and her friends) wanted to do something to help somebody," she said.

The premise of the hostel was to provide support to prevent early offending or ongoing contact with the court judicial system. The hostel enabled girls from troubled home situations to remain in Ballarat, attend their schooling or employment and have safe lodging and a support network around them.

From 1970 until 1976 the hostel accommodated more than 150 girls and had transformed from a volunteer committee to a company.

In 1976 Lisa Lodge established a transition facility named Hayeslee House which provided accommodation for seven adolescent girls with intellectual disability following the closure of the Sisters of Nazareth House Children's Home in Mill Street, Lake Wendouree.

Lisa Lodge continued to grow over the years, and in the early 2000s Lisa Lodge began management of the Glendinning House program, providing crisis accommodation and housing advocacy for women over 21 years of age.

In July 2012, Lisa Lodge merged with another iconic Ballarat organisation in Berry Street, a not-for-profit organisation providing family support services throughout Victoria.

THE BEGINNING OF McCALLUM AS WE KNOW IT

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"Austin was often working, and working very hard, with the typewriter going crazy and Camel Plain smoke coming from the den next door," Nancy said.



In 1953 Austin was the President of the Y's Men's Club, a sub-branch of the YMCA and was encouraged to establish a facility in Ballarat to provide education, welfare and therapy for children with disabilities.

From there things began to grow quickly.

"Jack Sheehan (the former Principal of Ballarat High School – the recently renovated red brick building on Sturt Street is named "The Sheehan Wing") was very much involved in helping form what became McCallum House at the Kohinoor Community Centre in Sebastopol Street," Nancy said.

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"People wouldn't know what to do with their kids (with disability)," she explained.

"People from Melbourne would come and have dinner with us and say "That's wonderful of you, but where's your retarded child?" Nancy recalled.



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In 1955, with the assistance from the Victorian State Government and generous volunteer support from the Master Builders, Master Plumbers and Master Painters Associations, McCallum's first facility was opened by the Honourable Henry Bolte MP.

I later discovered from Ian McCallum that the friendship between Bolte and Austin would fracture when Bolte refused Austin's pleas to commute Ronald Ryan's death sentence in 1967. Ronald Ryan was the last person legally hanged in Australia on 3 February 1967 at HM Pentridge Prison.

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And, it wasn't all smooth sailing in the early days. Nancy recalled clearly as Cr Pittard of the City of Ballarat saying "it would never work" but Nancy proudly stated "look at what McCallum is doing today, it's amazing".

Unbeknown to Austin, who missed a Committee Meeting due to a scheduling conflict (he was a very busy man, remember?), his friend and founding member Jack Sheehan put it to a vote that the organisation be renamed "McCallum House" in honour of the work Austin had completed.

THE LOSS OF AN ICON

In January 1982 Austin was wheeling his bike home from the local shop when he fainted on Tress Street, Mount Pleasant.

He subsequently fell and hit his head and was taken to Ballarat Base Hospital for treatment. His condition was such that he was rushed to Royal Melbourne Hospital where he later died of a cerebral aneurism on 12 January 1982 - one day before his 63rd birthday.

At the age of just 62 Robert Austin McCallum passed away – almost 7 years longer than his army doctor had predicted back in 1947, but contributing more for his local community than anyone could ever have imagined.

TRAVEL AND MARGOT SENGER

Following Austin's death and the children moving out of home Nancy maintained the busy lifestyle that she was accustomed to. She was a member of the walking group called 'the Numbats' and often joined in their walks and longer excursions to Mount Cole and Mount Buffalo.

"On one trip to Queensland, she struck up a friendship with a generously forthright Fraulein in Margot Senger," Stuart revealed.

"Margot helped open up a new world for Nancy and the pair toured the world together by plane, train and automobile and even boat and bicycle. After Nancy became too frail to travel, Margot would come out every summer (winter in Germany) to care for Nancy and enjoy Nancy's friends and golf," he said.



As my interview drew to a close Nancy asked me if I enjoyed working for McCallum, to which I responded “I love it”. Her response, “well that’s music to my ears.”

In our final exchange in our brief but most interesting meeting Nancy summed things up nicely.

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“One little thing can change not only the life of a person, but the life of a town”.

**Happy 101st Birthday on Monday
15 November 2021, Nancy.**

LIFE MEMBERSHIP

At the 2021 Annual General Meeting the McCallum Board of Directors will induct Nancy McCallum as a Life Member – a small gesture to show our appreciation of her forward thinking and community spirit which has borne an organisation that will soon be one of the largest in regional Victoria, supporting over 600 people with disability and employing a further 400 people.

Thank you Nancy and her four sons Ian, Stuart, Keith and Peter for the information they so willingly provided, as well as fact checking and ensuring the integrity of this story.





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