

Jack Harrison
Eulogy by Anne Harrison
St Michael's Catholic Church, Lane Cove
29 September 2021

Eulogy for Dad

Jackie

Dad was Jack or Jackie, John Thomas if in trouble, to his family of 10 siblings and to his Mum Molly, a pianist for the Sydney cinemas, and his Dad Tom, a plasterer. He was born in December of 1933 at Leichardt, into a Sydney of the 1930s still recovering from war and economic Depression and facing further uncertain times. But none of that was of much concern to the Harrison kids of four boys followed by six girls and their childhood escapades through the Inner West. We heard stories of Ronnie being caught catching frogs and of tram rides all the way to Maroubra with little Marie tagging along too, of wonderful matinee movies, of Stanley Street and the gangs of kids, of eating ham hocks and going to the Easter Show, and selling papers on the trams before school.

Louise and my favourite story among many that Dad told was of when his big brother, and best mate, Jimmy was out on a night-time skylark, and their Dad Tom snuck into the spot left spare in the bed the four boys shared. The three brothers lay sweating with trepidation, desperately pretending to be asleep, knowing the trap was set! When Jimmy jumped through the window, Tom grabbed him and yelled 'You little rat!', and Dad described he got it too! for loyally trying to yell out to warn Jim.

By all accounts the Harrison kids and their gang ruled Stanley Street from the get go, not least because of the larger than life presence of Mum Molly, who did everything it seemed for the local Catholic Church and the Harrison's Primary School St Fiacre's. I enjoyed a very old nun at the school's centenary celebration in the 1990s, admonishing the then very important Mr Harrison, Director of Personnel, Department of Education, for calling it St Firecrackers mid speech – 'That cheeky Jackimino! Still at it!'

By Dad's account, growing up a Harrison was a fun, loud, endlessly entertaining experience for which he was openly grateful for his whole life. Jackie was widely known for his love and affection for his big family, whom he really enjoyed spending time with, and was always happiest laughing at the middle of large rowdy party of his brothers and sisters, burning all the sausages to perfection.

Jack Harrison

A bursary for him and his brother Jimmy to Christian Brothers Lewisham set Dad on a path of academic and sporting achievement that ultimately won him a long and rewarding life.

Dad was Dux in his final year at Christian Brothers, and Head Prefect, and President of the School's St Vincent de Paul Society, winning numerous awards in Maths, English, Latin, Religious Studies, Debating, Boxing and Diving along the way, and

really enjoying all school offered. And he found great success on the footy field, quickly become such a sure winner for the competitive Christian Brothers in the fierce GPS School comp that Jack could be found playing in a couple of extra school teams across Sydney on any given Saturday!

Dad took to winning on the footy field to such an extent he was recruited to Balmain Tigers, to be part of their 1952 President's Cup winning team, and to play firsts for Balmain between 1952 and 1953.

Dad's Mum carefully collated every press clipping, report card, footy photo and glowing sports reportage of Dad's early academic and nascent football career in a wonderful scrap book we now have, and that Dad was often embarrassed into talking about with me and Louise. Clearly he was the apple of Molly's eye and what a good Mum too, as one Sports Reporter breathlessly scooped in the Herald, 'Jack Harrison's mother has confirmed he will not be playing any further games in 1sts, and be returning to focus on his studies!' No quote from Jack or confirmation with the club, because I believe everyone in Sydney knew Molly had the final word on Jack!

It sounds like turning 17 in 1950s Sydney was pretty fun, and I enjoyed hearing about Jack and Les Ingram taking Maureen out for their favourite Elvis movies, and from Helen, Jimmy's wife, how much Dad used to love racing over on the weekend to head out to dance with his girlfriend of the time. Dad's handsome looks, crooning singing voice and snappy dressing made him a very popular beau, and Dad would often recall the fun of going dancing at the town halls on Friday and Saturday nights around Sydney.

And his Mum was right. He *was* focused on his studies at Teachers College at Sydney University, where he put his is oft repeated motto '*one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration*' into action and won first class honours in English, Maths and Latin, earning his BA (Teaching) and being sent a letter of offer from the NSW Department of Education with his first teaching job.

As Dad would retell, he opened the letter and thought 'Strike me Pink!' Broken Hill! What have I done to deserve this!' And at that, Jack Harrison, Sydney boy through and through, headed to the bush to become a teacher.

Mr Jack Harrison, 'Sir'

Louise and I loved swapping notes on the latest 'OLD' man to come up to Dad when we were out and about, and shyly ask 'Mr Harrison, Sir! Do you remember me, you taught me at so-and so school!' which Dad always responded with such personable delight, you could tell he really did love his time in the classroom, and it was wonderful seeing these grown men in suits return to shy school boys pleased as punch with praise from Mr Harrison.

After his character forming introduction to teaching via Broken Hill, he was quickly returned to Sydney Boys for the final year Maths Class, and on to Randwick Boys following, both schools of which he spoke with great admiration, and then on to Teachers College to train up the next cohort of incoming teachers. On the train up to Armidale Teachers' College, Dad loved telling us of seeing a stunningly beautiful

woman, that as soon as he saw her, that was it! He was smitten. To which proclamations, our Mother Shirley would protest, 'Oh what nonsense!' and blush with delight.

A slow romance blossomed between these two while working together at Teachers' College, and what a pair! Honestly, it's hard not to be taken with both Shirley and Jack's good looks, style and swagger, but the intellectual meeting of minds was the real love affair. Jack had more than met his match, and he fell in love with Shirley Buffett for ever more. When he sang Frank Sinatra's, 'I will love you, always' to his 'Shirl' on their wedding day in May of 1963, he truly meant it.

Jack and Shirl set up home together with a gusto, and grew around them a loving network of friends and family that filled their lives and homes in Wellington, Lindfield, Pymble and Longueville. Jack was offered a role as a School Inspector with the NSW Department of Education, and worked hard at that role which often sent him on long trips through country NSW.

Inspectors impending school visits were prepped by Principals with grave concern, with teachers extolling the wrath of the Inspector on all kids who misbehaved. He told us of one time, he'd Inspected a school in Mullumbimby, north NSW but then had become lost driving to his hotel that night about 9pm, so stopped where he saw a light on in a country house. He walked up to the door and knocked hoping for friendly directions, and a small boy opened the door and screamed terrified at the top of his lungs, 'It's the INSPECTOR!' and in a pleading voice to Dad – Sir! I've done all my Homework! Promise!

The friendships and professional camaraderie amongst the School Inspectors lasted Dad a lifetime. He cherished he and his wife's close friendship with Margaret and Jim Docking, the Napthalis, his colleague and friend David Maher and many others he kept in contact with through the ex-inspector social network, and their (I hear) still wild Christmas luncheons that Dad thoroughly enjoyed organizing for many years.

Dad

While Dad and Shirl's careers excelled, both completing their Masters, they were saddened to learn they could not conceive and decided to register for adoption. They were ecstatic to hear that they were to adopt Louise Mary Harrison, born 26 August 1972, and finally start their much longed for next chapter as a family. Never was a baby so welcomed. I arrived as a bonus surprise for 17 November 1975 and wow! Louise and I often count our blessings to be grown up by such wonderful parents, and such a kind, generous, gentle, serious and funny Dad as Jack.

We loved waiting for him to arrive home at the door with his briefcase and umbrella to sing Hello Dad! and regale him with our feats of the day. He always had more time for another story, and was a champ at carrying you from the car to bed without waking you. Every unexpected Friday night trinket bought for Shirl and us 'fell off the back of a truck', and all chocolates were from Darrel Lea.

Dad's greatest compliment when Louise unveiled a wonderful new outfit was 'Wacky Doo Mate!', he always greeted everyone with a genuine 'How you going mate?', and

expressing his greatest frustration and impatience with you was a mild, '*Choof off, boof head*'. I think we were the only girls in Longueville taught how to box, and tackle at the knees and throw a great dummy pass.

Jack won a role as Director of Special Programs in the Department of Education in 1981, and set out to launch the first Aboriginal Education Policy in NSW, and in fact Australia, with a wonderful team advised by the NSW Aboriginal Education Committee. One of Dad's first employees in Special Programs was the now Hon. Linda Burney MP, and through his career in education he thoroughly enjoyed the friendship and collegiate support of his many friends and peers that have so kindly expressed their admiration for Dad as their 'boss' to Louise and I. Dad finished his 38 years with the NSW Department of Education as Director of Personnel in 1992 and 'retired' to lead programs in the Catholic Education Commission.

Jack and Shirl enjoyed travelling all over Australia by car or bus, and especially with their very own family holiday mini bus - supplied by Brother Vin's school. Scrolled down the side of our holiday bus in massive letters was 'St Edmund's School for the Deaf, Blind and Handicapped'. Pulling up to a country town motel and 20 Harrison's piling out of that van always resulted in some hilarious first conversations with the locals!

Jack would carefully set the itinerary for all, and checking the odometer to the projected kms at each stop to run the annual 'Guess to the closest km the trip length' competition – the prize being the remaining petty cash. The trips to South Australia, and Queensland kept to budget by overnight stays in any closed up convent, catholic school floor or old boarding school the nuns and brothers could rustle up for us. All were left with either a bottle of whiskey (brothers) or Scotch (nuns) to say thanks.

Jack lived simply and a sleep on the beach next to Shirl was the best holiday, a sausage roll and coffee out the best treat, and a Friday night short soup at the local Chinese a sumptuous meal out.

Jack's Shirl passed 22 years ago, and in widowhood Dad's friends and family helped keep him grounded. His mates Chas and Mary Holland included him in their gang to the Merimbula Jazz Festival yearly, and the Berry Island Jazz days, Kassim for wonderful meals out and for Saturday golf at Massey Park, Dad loved his Saturday Symphony with his sisters and neighbours, the Hodgetts. He enjoyed cracking a cryptic crossword and really enjoyed showing you how he did it! Most of all he never hid his deep joy at coming over to Newtown to hold his grandkids, Jasper and Rosie, singing and crooning to them for hours on end!

Dad found enormous pleasure in his charity work with St Vincent de Paul, Lane Cove, as their Treasurer for many years, and as an outreach worker going into homes to assess what families in crisis needed. When I freaked out about Dad going into dangerous situations as a 72 years old in Woolloomooloo and The Rocks, he just laughed and noted that he and (75 years) Mike Scott would just give 'em the old one two if there was trouble. Honestly, I believe he would too.

When I had to call to cancel the many charities Dad donated to, the list ran to 257! That gives some indication of the sum of this great man.

This church, St Michael's Lane Cove, was his other great support, and this Catholic Church, Dad's other great passion. He rang the church bells here, loved a beer with the church lawn mowing club, and ran the Catholic Weekly stalls, assisted Caritas, and delivered sacraments to the local nursing homes and the Royal North Hospital for fourteen years. Louise and I thank the St Michael's community for their love and support of Dad.

Dementia is no easy task, but somehow Dad, as was his way, approached this last test with courage, strength, humility and enormous grace. It was Dad's return to his core gentle loving laughing nature that made caring for him at home such a privilege for me and I am pleased he got his wish to be cared for at his beloved Longueville house for as long as could possibly be managed. Louise and I would like to particularly thank Rosie and Jasper for their help over these last ten years in their patient care of their Grandpa, and Louise and I express our heartfelt gratitude to Dr Peter Ward, Stephanie at Daughterly Care, and Andrew, Ellie, Mark and Anna from Centralis Care who made Dad's life wonderful to the end with their excellent services. Dad would not have been able to live at home without the care and community shown to him by his great neighbours Carmela, Frances, Jules, Julia, Di and families – thank you for everything.

Jack was a humble, deeply honest man of great integrity and charity. He lived his Catholic values from birth to death, and his faith was central to his life. Everyone I met who knew Dad spoke of him as a great friend, a true husband, Louise and I knew him as a dedicated and loving Dad, and many knew him as a conscientious colleague, a fun competitor and fair and inspiring boss.

It takes great courage to live with such compassion and Jack lived more bravely than most of us.

I know I and many around him admired him deeply.

Dad, knowing you're reunited with your Shirl is a great thing, and we know she'll have a great party organized for you, we will be cheering you Dad, someone will find the last lost Easter Egg in Longueville, a VB and bowl of Pringles will be set out, and you'll settle in to telling a long joke. See you soon, mate.

Don't work too hard.