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Steve Quinn: A Life

Abstract

It's difficult to know what areas of Steve's life to talk about today. From my perspective, he was a devoted and loving husband, father, grandfather and friend. A seriously passionate man; passionate about family, working people, social justice, music, politics. Because others here today will speak of his work and political life I'll concentrate on Steve the family man. He met my mother when he was only 18 – they married four years later and began a journey from a fairly austere traditional and religious upbringing to a life of a radicalism focussed on social justice and workers equity.

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Jane Quinn

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He met my mother when he was only 18 – they married four years later and began a journey from a fairly austere traditional and religious upbringing to a life of a radicalism focussed on social justice and workers equity.

His family today is an extended family. In the immediate circle; his wife Barbara – companion, political ally and best friend of 58 years; three children – myself, my brother Tony and my sister Fiona; a very loved daughter-in-law Joanne; four grandchildren – Michael, Thomas, Ashleigh and Ainslie; a sister-in-law Janet, whom he has known since she was the eight year old pesky younger sister of my mother; her daughter and all time very favourite niece Kate; and nephew-in-law, if there is such a term, Shane.

My father was determined to provide for his family all that he did not have in his early life. He was a child of a separated family raised during the Depression, by his often absent father, from the age of nine. And while in the 1930s depression times this in itself would have been an horrific circumstance, it was exacerbated by his family's involvement with the Church and the morality associated with it.

However, many aspects of his childhood where idyllic. Raised on 30 acres in Bosley Park in the west of Sydney he often told us stories of country life. He had a goat and built a buggy so that the goat could pull him around – an image just too fantastic to contemplate fortunately we have it captured on film.

He stole a bag of oats as a Christmas present for the goat – his generosity on display early. His frustration with the goat when it wouldn't eat the whole bag was palpable -ungrateful thing. He had a Jack Russell that would bounce up onto his bike or buggy to enjoy the rural existence with him.

As he grew up he and his brother Harold got up to all the skulduggery children without supervision do. When he was 10 he nearly severed his foot chopping wood for the morning fire. They used to go out rabbiting finding food for the table. There was no adult there so a neighbour some distance away took him to hospital.

He was telling me just the other day about a time when as young lads of 11 or so he and Harold were out rabbiting in Orphans Creek when they heard the sound of hoof beats. This was during the war when the light horse brigade was in training very near where they lived. Thinking this was just a runaway horse and as country folk do, they set about turning the horses back. As the horses came over the ridge they could see that this was in fact about 400 horses from the light horse brigade and it was a stampede down Cowpastures Road not a mere runaway. In their naivety they thought they could wave their arms about a bit and stop the horses, help a mate who had come off their horse. Needless to say at the sight of 400 they scurried away under a barbed wire fence. Apparently there were many horses killed that day.

His love of rural life continued and we enjoyed many country excursions. His brother still runs a property and he enjoyed the time he spent there doing odd jobs. The holidays we spent on Magnetic Island were simple and very rustic – he wasn't all that comfortable in 5 star luxury.

Another facet of his life that perhaps is not widely known is his lifelong passion for classical music. At St Josephs in Fairfield and later at the Marist Brothers in Parramatta he was an accomplished young violinist who had several weeks of encore presentations at the Parramatta Town Hall. The concerts had been scheduled to run for two weeks but due to public demand ran for a month. He told me of an experience during one of these concerts when a string broke on his violin and to avoid disrupting the presentation he collapsed all the strings and just kept in step with the others – incredibly quick thinking

and always working for the good of the team.

This passion for music continued and he and my mother (when they were “courting”) subscribed to the Sydney Civic Orchestra. The visit of the Italian Opera Company sometime in the early 50s was a high point in his music journey and his passion for most things Italian was always with him. I think his current collection of classical and operatic CDs would rival the best around. His particular favourite will be played here today. He also appreciated a good ballad, a protest song whatever the genre and particularly anything Irish -the only part of his heritage he clung to.

My father loved to work. He was definitely an early riser who had to have a job to do. The opening question at breakfast was always “What’s on the agenda for today?” We had to have a plan and we had to have something to do. Drilled into us was “To rest is not to conquer.” This applied equally to planting the garden, doing our homework or resolving a great political crisis.

His first job was at a dairy as a general hand. By the time he left he could turn his hand to just about anything in the dairy. His second job was at Summers and Grahams, a soft drink factory in Smithfield. Again he was a generalist doing all sorts of jobs in the factory. In 1946 he left this job to become an apprentice boilermaker. His boss at Summers and Grahams said that he was sorry to see him go, but that he should train for something. He had the intelligence and drive he just needed the training – and thus began my father’s commitment to education. At that time he could choose which trade to go into and made his choice based on the variety of tasks a boilermaker could undertake. It was a five year apprenticeship. It was also his political awakening. He met and enjoyed the company of union delegates at Clyde Engineering and soon became active in union activities. His radicalism I think is demonstrated in his involvement in a strike in 1949.

As you may be aware apprentices did not go on strike. The FED&FA were on strike and the apprentices were asked to work. Determined not to undermine the workers, Steve looked to the rules associated with apprenticeships and found that they could not work without tradesmen supervision. So the apprentices at Clyde Engineering played cards for 6 months and only went back to work when Marshall Law was declared to

break the miners' strike – a radical in the making.

At his 80th birthday celebration last year he spoke of how lucky he was to have been born when he was. He grew up in a time of depression that saw working people come together, lived through a war that he was too young to be involved with but which created circumstances where manufacturing requirements meant work was available.

He was a strategic thinker and able to operationalise strategy – make things happen. He had an optimistic view of the future knowing that the next generation and the one after that have work to do but they have the intelligence, motivation and desire to do it.

To know Steve was to know determination. At 54 following his heart attack he revived his interest in sport. All my life I had understood him to be a passionate supporter but I didn't appreciate his talent as an athlete until he took to exercise 25 years ago. As a young man he was quite a tennis player. At the Peace and Friendship carnival he was a finalist in the men's tennis losing to a lad from Darwin. He still claims foul because he was injured by a ball to the eye. Not quite the temperament of a Marat Safin but neither the temperament of a Roger Federer but nonetheless very competitive. I won't go into the machinations of the social tennis he and my mother played with Jack and Mary Lamb. Suffice to say one competitive partner and one hit and giggle partner did not make for universal happiness for either couple. Having taught himself to cook he could make the best sponge cake around which was usually the aim of the match anyway. The sponge cake at the end was good.

After the heart attack he took to walking and loved it – solving a lot of the world's problems on the 13 kms he used to walk each morning. When arthritis stopped him walking around the neighbourhood he adopted the treadmill and the exercise bike and loved it just as much. A headset, the news and an energetic bike ride set him up for the day. His sporting genes may have passed on to his grandchildren – skipping a generation.

Our political education began at an early age. I remember as a child having Party branch meetings at the house – the fiery discourse of politics followed by smooching noises about how cute the children were. I also remember being taken to a May

Day march and directed to the Women's Lib banner. I remember him fighting off a copper at a Moratorium march when I was about 10. I also remember knowing all the Ministers in the NSW cabinet in 1969 – a sort of party trick for my school friends. A conscious decision not to have a television in the house meant that we always had time to talk about whatever came to mind. Rhetoric and debate took the place of Disneyland and cartoons.

To the last he was concerned about what action should be taken on Pacific Brands – those workers must know that they had his support – he shouted it loudly enough for them to hear.

Family also meant holidays and usually by the seaside. Each year we had a holiday. Sometimes particularly in the early years with the extended family – his very much loved and admired mother-in-law Beatrice and sister-in-law Janet – but sometimes just us. When we got financial and bought a tent we went camping in Queensland for the August school holidays. We also used to go north at Christmas – but a little closer to home -we went to Bulli, about 10 kilometres up the road.

Steve's guiding hand in his children's upbringing is seen today in his children and their children. He was immensely proud of us and let us know in both tangible and emotional ways. He was equally proud of his four fabulous grandchildren Michael, Thomas, Ashleigh and Ainslie. With these children he saw the embodiment of the important things in being human: intelligence and creativity, leadership, compassion, a healthy dose of competitiveness sprinkled with some sporting prowess. Add a pinch of political acumen and you have Steve Quinn. We, all his family, are a product of his love, nurturing, support and encouragement.

In terms of the tangible, we always got a gold for a good report. Each one of us got the coin for anything from a good mark in an exam to a university degree. His granddaughters gave him a gold coin the day he was presented with life membership of the South Coast Labour Council – just reward from both the labour council and the granddaughters.

The calls we have had from old comrades tell me not only was socialism the way he lived his life with us, but also how he lived his life outside the family – an authentic existence. If you define a life by the impact you have on the lives of others

my father lived a very fine life indeed. He has few peers as a husband, father, comrade or ally.

Vale Steve, we will miss you every day.