

# Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

---

Volume 3  
Issue 1 *Illawarra Unity*

Article 9

---

January 2003

## Mount Kembla Mine Disaster Centenary Committee

C. Stevenson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/unity>

---

### Recommended Citation

Stevenson, C., Mount Kembla Mine Disaster Centenary Committee, *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 3(1), 2003, 46-48.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol3/iss1/9>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Mount Kembla Mine Disaster Centenary Committee

### Abstract

The creative process for me as a member of the Mount Kembla Mine Disaster Centenary Committee was vastly different to that of those with an artistic or historical knowledge of the event. The objective for the committee was to recreate the mine disaster in today's world—with a degree of sensitivity and respect while endeavouring to present the impact that the largest peacetime disaster in our European history had on our community and the nation. We set out to involve the whole community in the activities, so we tried to plan things of interest to the families of miners and anyone else keen to be involved with us in the centenary commemoration.

# Mount Kembla Mine Disaster Centenary Committee

**Cate Stevenson**

The creative process for me as a member of the Mount Kembla Mine Disaster Centenary Committee was vastly different to that of those with an artistic or historical knowledge of the event.

The objective for the committee was to recreate the mine disaster in today's world—with a degree of sensitivity and respect while endeavouring to present the impact that the largest peacetime disaster in our European history had on our community and the nation.

We set out to involve the whole community in the activities, so we tried to plan things of interest to the families of miners and anyone else keen to be involved with us in the centenary commemoration.

For me the creative work began very early. To be able to “see” the end of a project is the essential ingredient for me to be involved and to be effective.

I needed to be able to walk my mind through the steps necessary to reach a successful and significant conclusion for all concerned. It was really important to get to *really know the team*. The relevant people, and their strengths, needed to be grouped together in a way that would assist in achieving that successful end. It was a very ‘hands on process, motivating others—involving them in your vision. It was vital to ensure the authentic storytellers who reside in and around Mount Kembla were supportive of our plan and understood our respect for that long ago event. This would allow our team to be able to tap their valuable knowledge and apply it to achieve an effective outcome involving the whole community.

The Committee needed to keep an outline of the objectives we hoped to achieve clearly in mind at all times and to be entirely positive in our approach to the task at hand, especially when dealing with the people who would make it possible—even when they started to be daunted by the enormity of that task. We had to be able to do the task setting and costing for the necessary infrastructure. We

needed to make the events possible and then put together a program of events to re-live the 'Walk in 1902'.

It was essential to recognise who the real players (at every level) would be in allowing us to reach our objective, including government, private enterprise, educational bodies, the unions, public facilities, media and the people of the region.

We needed to be able to clearly set time markers for specific tasks to be completed and had to identify and gather in sponsors who would make a significant contribution. We were operating on a shoestring budget and needed substantial funds to succeed. We had to manage the whole event very carefully with a very small budget. I was aware that if local government staged this event it would possibly have taken a budget of approximately \$150,000 plus. We had the publication of the book *Kembla; The Book of Voices* which we knew was extremely important to the success of both the week of the Centenary and for afterwards. This alone would cost \$12,000 plus. Not only did we have a major book to get published, but we had several smaller books to print or reprint along with the production, printing and laminating of massive amounts of historical data and display material. We were supporting a ten-week exhibition, a book launch at the Wollongong City Gallery as well as a local launch. The budget was locked into my brain and kept in check as it moved up and down throughout the lead in and the entire events of the centenary. We had to cover our expenses.

The hard yards were—going out into the community and chasing the support of sponsors—I did on a very personal level. I was dealing mostly with people I knew very well and had done business with in a previous life. They became aware of my passion for this cause in a very short time. Seeking sponsorship was an ongoing job and it was really important to never miss an opportunity. This was part of the creative process for me and it worked. I received very little rejection or 'no response' for this wonderful cause. People wanted to be involved because they could see it's significance to the region. The business community and Wollongong City Council came on board to assist us wholeheartedly.

We also had to capture the attention of the media and gain their support for the whole concept—to convince them all to be part of the week was not too difficult—but in order to seek advertising and coverage we needed to have a viable plan in place. On initial approach they seemed singularly uninterested so it was important to reach the right people with information. We put together our plan on the run and presented it the same

way—they listened and came on board each day. This was a major hurdle overcome. Little was I to know how much interest our events were to generate in the national media. Somehow the message eventually got through at all levels.

I made it my business each morning very early, to thank the media for the previous day's coverage and give them the coming day's activities. They managed to speak with local people and families of the victims of the disaster on talk back radio. The ABC did a week of dramatisation of the book *Kembla The Book of Voices*. The media did a wonderful job supporting us in every way.

As the week of events drew nearer we had the teams in place to carry out the tasks to ensure everyone had the ability to join us in the commemoration of the disaster. The “pulse” was at our home and we had long since put in an additional phone line to help field all the enquiries which had started very early in 2002. This stage was very hard work, every attention to detail was so very important. We knew without strong discipline here things could get off the rails easily. We walked ourselves through the events so many times using our program as a guide and each sub-committee knew what was expected of them—our level of communication was exceptional as was the level of pure commitment and emotion on the part of the participants. This was a good committee with strong sub-committees support. Good operators on the ground everywhere.

Our events throughout the days of the commemoration spoke for themselves. A read of the visitor's books is written evidence of the significance to many families and visitors alike.

We were able to plan, support and produce a wonderful event to the memory of those who perished in the disaster and to their families and loved ones. Those who were left unaided to survive this tragic time stuck together at the time to survive. It was evident our efforts had managed to bring the families of those same people closer again. I feel sure we did those disaster victims proud—100 years on.

So much emotion spilled over at every single event—the whole committee shared so many experiences with people who were overwhelmed by the whole thing.

Our events managed to touch people with raw emotion over the whole time of the commemoration. We had managed to achieve our objective—we involved everyone. To be able to reach people at that level was the greatest reward for all of us.

It is clear to me we were successful as we involved so many people in this event.

It is the old story “**tell me** I will listen but **involve me** I will understand”.