

LOVE, MARRIAGE, BABIES, THE WHOLE DARN THING.... EXPECTATIONS, AND REALITY!

INTRODUCTION:

This project evolved for a variety of reasons. Firstly over the last five years I have visited many Aged Care Facilities in the ACT. After liaising with the Activity Officers I have taken parts of my extensive antique clothing collection to present reminiscing sessions to the residents. These visits were supported for two years by ACT Seniors Grants. During these visits I noticed that many of the residents were women and often, after viewing my collection, they were keen to share their life experiences.

Secondly after researching my collection and putting the items into a social history context, I realised that many of the stories followed a pattern. Most of the elderly ladies I spoke to had hoped for a life partner and most had found one. They had married and they had children. But they had also lived through a time of great social change, particularly at least one world war and the economic Depression of the 1930s. Many had had to cope with difficult challenges including sickness, epidemics, emigration, the loss of children, loneliness and for many, the loss of their partners. They were now living out the last years of their lives in residential care. Some had formed friendships, others had not. But many were happy to speak to me of their past.

Thirdly this project was also stimulated by a chance discussion with a woman in residential care who had remained single. Having broken her back she was aware that she needed care but she was also keen to discuss the larger issues of her life experience, especially her career, as she had been a high profile scientist. She also had an extensive collection of antiques which she had to keep in a friend's garage. She enjoyed my visits but was aware space restrictions in aged care facilities meant that possessions and personal items had to be kept to a minimum. She enjoyed sharing my collection as she spoke enthusiastically about her own.

So many people told me their stories on these visits and later, when others heard of my talks and I visited Day Care Centres, more elderly people were keen to share their stories. It was at this point that I decided to try and record some of the stories to incorporate in another range of talks, so I applied successfully for an ACT Women's Grant.

Through contacting the Association of Activity Officers in ACT Aged Care facilities I was able to source some older women who were willing to share their stories. Others were accessed through previous talks and contacts within the ACT community.

Who would benefit from these talks and would the women's stories be accessible to others if they were recorded? The talks would certainly be available in the ACT residential care system. I have never advertised my services but this talk based on the life experiences of these five women would join the other seven reminiscing talks I already give. This one though would hopefully encourage some ACT seniors to share

their stories with their descendents so they can be recorded before it is too late. Sadly three of my subjects are suffering from memory loss, four are extremely frail and one has failing eyesight.

Who else would benefit from these talks? As a person from the next generation after these women I was truly inspired by their stories, particularly by their resilience and their belief that they had been extremely lucky. All had married and had children. They had brought them up in an era before television, antibiotics, modern home appliances, and before the onset of modern rampant consumerism. All had found a life partner but sadly, for them all, they were widows in their later years.

I sometimes work as a relief teacher and spend some time in high schools. I am able to observe young people, particularly young women. I am hopeful that this project will be able to be used in ACT high schools as I believe the stories are incredibly inspirational. Perhaps some young women may be inspired to ask about, and possibly record, the stories of their own older relatives.

The women's stories are only a quick sketch of their lives. Their descendents will have a copy of the stories and I hope, will find out more and add more detail, before it is too late.