

A Whirlwind Life

A conversation with former senior sergeant Margaret Grummitt

By Abby Williams

“I can’t explain it,” Margaret Grummitt says in disbelief. “Up on the news comes: ‘House fire in Coomera: police are still investigating’, nothing more than that.” There was no mention of a name, or even an address; and yet somehow, the senior sergeant sensed that this was no ordinary house fire.

How did she know that the woman she’d met in a fleeting moment two days ago had just died in that house?

How did she know it wasn’t an accident?

Margaret Grummitt has vanished. I stand in the driveway of the Philippine Honorary Consul General’s two-storey waterfront home on a bright autumn morning, phone to my ear, greeted first by her answering machine and then by her husband, Noel Grummitt. Noel has been watering the dense tropical garden on the edge of the lawn, but has turned the hose off to invite me inside and introduce me to his wife. But Margaret Grummitt has vanished.

The following ten minutes are a disoriented blur of screen doors and immaculate hallways and an overprotective guard dog named Rita who has yet to accept that I am not an intruder. I have to walk briskly to keep up with Noel, who assures me that, despite Margaret’s disappearance, she knows I’m coming.

After a series of voice messages and attempts to silence Rita, Margaret appears on the verandah. She is squinting at me through the screen door, phone in hand, visibly perplexed as to how I have come to be standing in her dining room while she has been out on the street trying to find me. To add to the confusion, she’s bumped something on her phone, and now it’s not taking calls. “You’re young, you take a look,” she says to me as she hands me her phone. I disable airplane mode and hand it back.

We make ourselves comfortable at a small table on the verandah, with rocking chairs and home-made banana bread. Margaret is dressed for the heat of the morning, wearing a graphic T-shirt with lemons on it, and her blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. Her tan is likely the result of countless mornings spent kayaking between the small beach at the edge of her lawn and Wave Break Island, just off the coast. Margaret could have retired by now, and with a picturesque home tucked humbly away in the coastal suburb of Biggera Waters, it's a wonder that she hasn't tucked herself away with it.

Sworn in as Honorary Consul General for the Philippines in 2015, Margaret has spent the past five years serving the Philippine community in Queensland and northern New South Wales. The transition to the consulate followed twelve years of service as a Gold Coast councillor, a position she was re-elected for three times. "It was long enough," Margaret says. "Public life is very weary."

At some point during our conversation, Noel passes our table with a large Australian flag thrown over his shoulder. When I ask Margaret where he's taking it, she points to the flagpole protruding from the garden, which stands tall enough that the tip isn't visible from the verandah. She explains that it's a souvenir from where she used to work, and she laughs as she recalls driving away from the Queensland Police Headquarters in the middle of the night with the colossal metal post strapped to the top of her car.

The significance of Margaret's posting at the consulate is unquestionable, as was her position at Gold Coast City Council, however neither of these roles can possibly overshadow the portion of her life which, I'm lead to believe, shaped the woman sitting in front of me.

To begin with, Margaret Grummitt was a policewoman.

Margaret joined the Queensland Police Service in 1975. Her years as a junior constable would be characterised by the turbulence of unprecedented corruption in the police force, because in 1987, the impact of the Fitzgerald Inquiry would send shockwaves through the industry and result in the conviction of then Police Commissioner Terry Lewis. "I hadn't been in the police force for long, and all my bosses were going to jail," Margaret says with a hint of lingering bewilderment. "I was in juvenile aid, and I could not believe that the man who

set up a special unit for children could be corrupt," she says. "But then, I didn't know anything."

Margaret goes on to detail her contribution to the Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC) and her role as Schoolies Coordinator in the mid-1990s: a challenge which involved building safe events from scratch, with no template and no funding, at a time when the week-long celebration was unstructured and relatively dangerous.

At this point, it becomes evident that there is a pattern to this diverse array of postings and accomplishments. Margaret cares about people. It seems that the direction of her life has been dictated by an instinctive gravitation toward serving society, and that the welfare of others is as at the forefront of her mind. So when she was placed in the Southport Domestic Violence Court, where caring is the difference between life and death, she couldn't have known that the latter would thrust her life off course.

"I'm in the domestic violence unit at the court house, and it was frantically busy...and on a Tuesday this woman tugged on my shirt," Margaret recalls of a momentary interaction with a figure who would soon become embedded in her memory. "They don't pull on my shirt, which is why I remember her." The woman had just obtained a domestic violence order to prevent her de facto partner from coming to her home in Coomera. She was asking for help.

On Thursday, in spite of the order, the partner returned to house with fuel in the boot of his car. "His story was he was going to mow the lawn, but apparently he went inside, they had an argument, and he had a knife in his hand...and she died in the kitchen." Margaret's story unfolds into a horrific recount of a murder, a getaway, and an inferno. "They found the fuel scattered throughout the kitchen," she says. "He picked her up, put her in the passenger seat of the car, and torched the house."

The blaze appeared on the news that night. It captured Margaret's attention and triggered a surreal sensation which indicated that this was not a regular house fire. "It had never happened to me before," she says. "I'm just looking at the TV, getting dinner ready, and I said, 'That's one of my ladies'." Her tone is so chilling that it induces goose bumps in

the midday heat. “So how did I know that? I didn’t know. There was nothing; there was no address and no name, and I didn’t even make eye contact with the woman.”

When Margaret visited the Criminal Investigation Branch in Coomera on Monday with questions regarding the whereabouts of the inferno, she received more than answers. “You’d better sit down,” they said to her. “We want to interview you.”

They told her everything. Having used his supply of fuel to set the house alight, the alleged murderer drove to the local service station to put petrol in the car, with the woman’s body in the passenger seat. When he sped away without paying, the cameras at the station zeroed in on the number plates, which police soon identified on the highway, heading south into NSW. When the driver noticed the police vehicle on his tail, he panicked, swerved, and crashed. The police who had been following the car pulled the driver from the burning wreckage. “They got him out, but they couldn’t get her out,” Margaret says. “He’s heard on tape saying, ‘Don’t worry mate, she’s already dead’.”

By the time the story had taken shape, confirming Margaret’s fears, the accused had been arrested and extradited to Queensland, and locked up in the watch house below her. “He’s downstairs charged with murder, and I said to the magistrate, ‘I’ve got to get out of here. This is not working’.”

The next day, Margaret walked away from the police force and her life as a senior sergeant. That was sixteen years ago. Now, as the nation aches following the murder of Brisbane mother Hannah Clarke and her three children, the Camp Hill tragedy is a heart-wrenching testament to the harrowing presence of domestic violence in our society.

For Margaret, who spent years fighting against tragedies such as these, every life lost to domestic violence weighs heavily on her. “It made me angry that [Hannah] paid for it with her life,” Margaret says with a weary frustration in her eyes. “But then, she’s one of many.”

It is this indignation that drives Margaret to speak out against domestic violence at protests, including a rally held after the Camp Hill tragedy. “We’ve been coming to these things for thirty years...what does that tell you? The legislation is not working.” The urgency

in Margaret's voice reflects her dissatisfaction with the lack of reformation regarding the issue, but there's another reason why these stories hit so close to home.

For Margaret, every life claimed by domestic violence sparks a memory of the woman who tugged on her shirt and asked for help, sixteen years ago. "I just feel like I failed [that woman]," she says. "We gave this girl a bit of paper: a court order. Doesn't stop knives and bullets, does it?"

The early afternoon sun is casting its glare onto the water, and Rita, who has long since given up trying to protect her owners from me, is dozing on the verandah. Margaret illustrates the moments of her life so vibrantly and so vividly that I somehow feel tangibly exhausted, as though I've physically travelled through her memories with her. It's probably just the heat, but I tell myself it's the memories.

I ask Margaret whether she transitions seamlessly between the segments of her life as a way of distracting herself from where she'd last come from, or if it's simply because she's constantly on the move. Before Margaret has the chance to answer, Noel pipes up from somewhere within the house:

"That's a very good question."

Domestic Violence Support Services

1800 Respect national helpline 1800 737 732

Women's Crisis Line 1800 811 811

Men's Referral Service 1300 766 491

Lifeline (24 hour crisis line) 131 114

Relationships Australia 1300 364 27