

MEET THE MEMBERS

Cathy and Peter Prowse

I was warmly welcomed into the home of Cathy and Peter Prowse to the strains of Sarah Brightman. The warmth and love in the home was apparent and became even more so as we talked. Peter built their present home as a retirement home 14 years ago. Prior to that they lived a few blocks further up in the same street, a house now belonging to their daughter. In all, they have lived in Croydon for over 60 years.

This couple lives for their family and their pride in their 6 grandchildren is evident. They see a lot of the family but it reaches its peak each year at Christmas time. Every Christmas morning, Cathy and Peter host a breakfast for the family, immediate and extended, which is a great time for the family to get together. Their definition of "family" is flexible and includes several local people, mainly widows who are lonely and enjoy the chance to be part of the lively group. Peter starts preparing for the event in October, when he makes the Christmas puddings. I had the strong impression that anyone wishing to interfere with Peter's responsibilities in this area would do so at their own peril. The group usually numbers somewhere around 40 - 45 people. It started off as a crayfish and champagne affair but with the cost of crayfish these days, it has evolved into prawns, chicken and even bacon and eggs, if preferred.

Peter has always been involved in the local community. He has not only played football at the local level but has also coached at various levels. He did have ambitions to play for the AFL at one stage but a session with the big boys left him disillusioned and he returned to Croydon. He was involved in a couple of Premiership games which restored his confidence. Peter has also coached squash to State level and has taught bowls to some of his students.

Peter started his teaching career as a trade teacher. He was a qualified plumber and a friend of his suggested he become a teacher, so he sold his business and went into the education field. He enjoyed this contact with young people so much that he went to Uni, qualified as a Secondary teacher and subsequently became involved in a number of innovative programs. One of these was establishing the Work Experience program in Victoria. This entailed close liaison with employers and unions, as well as schools. The pilot program proved very successful and it went on from there. He was also involved in a group from Holmesglen College, who piloted the VET program in foods. Many students who were less academically inclined benefited from his work. Peter was also instrumental in pioneering sex education programs in the state. In his spare time, he was running debutante classes, which involved choreography and organisation for events mainly at Rembrandts and Karralyka Centre.

Peter described Cathy as the "maternal" one of the unit. Just how maternal became apparent as they discussed their experience in fostering babies and small children for more than 20 years. Cathy had her hands very full with her own children and a succession of fostered children as well. With five healthy children, Cathy and Peter felt they wanted to give something back to the community. They started this work through the Mercy Hospital but later the children came from St Joseph's Babies' home. Cathy would often take the small babies to Peter's sex education classes and invite the students to become involved in changing, bathing and dressing. One oft-repeated question was, "Do you breast feed them, Mrs Prowse?" A bit more education needed there!

Most children were cared for in the Prowse home from between 6 months to a year, depending on individual circumstances. Many of the natural parents were very young and inexperienced and did not really understand what was involved in looking after a child. Most of the babies were adopted out and this could be a source of great joy or pain to the Prowses. Most of the children came from the inner Melbourne suburbs and Peter and Cathy were introduced to "the other side of life." On one occasion they were called to the Mercy in the middle of the night to collect a baby, which they did. Three weeks later they were contacted by a distraught official from the hospital, asking if they had Baby X. The mother had been in such a state that the hospital hadn't informed her of the fostering arrangements and somehow the details of the exchange occurring in the middle of the night didn't reach the appropriate nuns. Fortunately, all was able to be resolved. Peter and Cathy gave up fostering when their last baby died of cot death.

They believe the overall experience has enriched their family life and gave their own children an understanding that "not everyone is born with everything." The Prowses did not go to Queensland as usual when I arranged to interview them. I am glad, as it gave me the opportunity to get to know an inspiring couple.

