

Eulogy for Helena Carr

Tabled, by leave,

Ms Sharpe
.....
Clerk of the Parliaments
22 / 11 / 23

Opening

“Why do you love me?”, Helena asked in a cheery mood.

“Because you’ve got a beautiful face and because you are always happy.”

Happiness

Happiness is the theme of this celebration of the life of Anne Helena Carr.

Happiness was **her very essence**.

Happiness **her middle name**.

“H, you’ve got the most infectious laugh!,” said Graham Richardson on a campaign bus in 1982.

And Paul Keating, walking down George St with me, looked over his shoulder at Anita and Helena, in Anita’s first months in the country.

“Look at them”, he said, “how they like a little fun.”

One of the nuns at Our Lady of Mercy College, Parramatta, nicknamed her Smiley.

Her sparkling eyes and infectious smile studded our days with joy, mischief and wisdom.

Helena taught me happiness.

Jnwise

Some are surprised at me doing this.

What happened on October 26 is still very raw. But in a city where I have raised my voice in so many causes, over so many years, I could not say no to this one. Even if there is some risk.

Taiping

Happiness...

Where did it come from?

What about a magical corner of the federated Malay states – a city based on silver mining and rubber plantations, the capital of Parak Province... Taiping, Mandarin for Peace.

The forest covered Maxwell Hills, holiday resort for the Sultan's family...
A city famous for its beautiful lake garden.

Terraces of Chinese and Indian merchants – tailors, jewellers, money lenders. Trishaws and rickshaws.

It was a Chinese-Indian culture and the family of Lourdes John, Helena's father – a Jaffna Tamil raised by Catholic brothers - and his wife Regina, Helena's Chinese mother were at the heart of it...

A Catholic community ... huge numbers of friends from all the different cultural groups...her father a hospital administrator, her mother a nurse and midwife, teaching health and hygiene to women in the surrounding villages.

The Convent school was run by a French order, the Order of the Infant Jesus, but staffed by Irish nuns. It began the great warmth Helena always had for the nuns through her school days at Our Lady of Mercy College, Parramatta and life at Sancta Sophia College.

Going to school age five, Helena's says she shrieked with fury when she saw herself in a dress for the first time.

She had been playing as a boy in shorts and t-shirt with her brothers, Ivan and Vincent, and their friends. What a playground – paradise – Taiping was - the food markets, tropical forests, taken to school in a rickshaw, eager to have the fastest runner, late night feasts of satay, the parents' elegant parties, the weddings of her sisters, the hill, the lake garden.

Refugee family

Mr John took in a refugee family from China and set them up in the back of their house. He found them jobs running the hospital canteen.

Nine year old Helena joined in. She took their five year old daughter to the convent school and told the Nun she had to be enrolled. No, said the Sister....

Grandmother

The special relationship was with her Grandmother.

Helena still remembered her Grandmother's palm pressed to her forehead when she was battling to survive typhoid fever, covered in wet banana leaves.

The photo we saw on the reel of the family with glum faces seeing Helena off to Australia at Ipoh Airport doesn't show the Grandmother – she would have been back in the bungalow weeping her heart out at losing her favourite - and fearing she would never see her little girl again.

The version of Fujian that Helena spoke was from her Grandmother's home town Putian.

Arrival at Our Lady of Mercy College, Parramatta

Tahiti

During a stopover in Tahiti...I was swimming laps in the pool and at the far end, there is Helena, I might say, a resolute non-swimmer, sitting on the edge with her feet demurely in the water. And I was able to ask her what's the book?

The latest John Kenneth Galbraith book, The New Industrial State.

It was the first conversation and we discovered we were both friends of Vicki Rubenshon's.

The first time I took her out was to dinner at the Little Dutch Inn at Kings Cross, followed by Hamlet on Ice starring Kate Fitzpatrick at the Nimrod Theatre.

The second time was to a Labor Party fundraiser in Lane Cove.

I even recruited her to come to one of the monthly meetings of Young Labor which I chaired in Sydney Trades Hall.

When she decided to punt on me she knew precisely what she was getting in for.

In fact, she shyly admitted once when, at Sancta Sophia college talking about husbands with other girls, she had said she'd rather like to be married to a politician.

Marriage

We celebrated our wedding reception at Sancta Sophia College in February, 1973.

She directed there would be no beer served at the wedding, only wine.

She had recruited Father Ed Campion to perform the ceremony at The Swifts, Darling Point.

She found us the flat at 46 French Street, Maroubra for \$24,000.

It fulfilled the key test: it was within the borders of the Maroubra Branch of the ALP.

As you know, in our marriage, she was CEO, CFO, the chief planner and strategist.

I was just entertainment director...down the corridor.

But...I've got to say the entertainment - set to roll on for 40 years in politics - was pretty terrific.

She was no reluctant spouse forced at bayonet point into politics.

She loved the play, and the humour, the personality of the game.

She got to know my colleagues in the machine's inner core – Paul Keating, and Laurie Brereton and Trish, the late John Ducker, Barrie Unsworth and Pauline, Graham Richardson, John McBean, Kath Anderson, the late Johnno Johnson and Pauline.

And our contemporaries on the Left...Rod Cavalier and Peter Crawford who became signed up Helena fans.

And, of course, our good friends, John and Christine McCarthy, who she knew from university.

Even Malcolm Turnbull who brought Lucy to our Maroubra home in Cooper Street for dinner on their first date.

We introduced Malcolm to Paul Keating and watched them circle one another, curious. Later, Malcolm said:

“They said Lang was greater than Lenin. What will they say about your mate, Paul?
“Keating is greater than Kerensky?”

To which I can say today, well yes he was greater than the Prime Minister of Russia after the February Revolution...by a very big margin.

All this - part of the human comedy - fed her smiles.

She took to them breezily as decades later she was to cheerfully mix with ASEAN foreign ministers and their wives with whom she maintained rich friendships over the last 10 years. The Shanmugams from Singapore; the Natalegawas from Indonesia and Anifah and his wife, Rubiah from Malaysia. She warmed to Prime Minister Letta from Italy and his wife, Gianna.

Early years

In our early years we had a disagreement...young people learning to live with one another. I totally forgot what it was about. We both wanted a way out. I got up and put on a 45 record that seemed perfect, the McCartney/Lennon song “We can work it out”.

“Try to see it my way

“Do I need to keep on talking ‘til I can’t go on?

“While you see it your way

“Run the risk of knowing that our love may soon be gone.”

She said how much she liked my gesture...and the words.

Of course, the words made sense to Helena's spirit – her common sense – her instinct for joy over conflict.

The McCartney/Lennon lyrics said it all:

“Life is very short and there's no time
“For fussing and fighting, my friend
“We can work it out...We can work it out
“We can work it out.”

Business

Helena suspected that her mother, Regina – the nurse and mid-wife in Taiping – had rather hoped that her youngest daughter would make an independent career. That would be a profession. And with the benefit of her economic studies, fuelled by the brilliant Sister Germaine at OLMC, she did just that.

She joined Leigh-Mardon in 1976. She was critical of the way its publishing business in Melbourne had run at a loss. They said, "...if you are so smart, fix it...."
Within six months she did.

She won a five year contract from Telstra to produce the electronic Yellow Pages, arranged Newsweek's simultaneous publishing by satellite. In 1984 she was appointed to the Board of Leigh-Mardon and took under her wing, the security printing division producing postage stamps for Australia Post, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Uganda.

The factories she was responsible for produced cheque books for Australian banks plus travellers cheques, bonds, passports and airline tickets.

This was security printing. It was specialised, competitive, tough.

She drove operations employing more than 1,100 people with a turnover in 1990 of \$160 million.

She was appointed to the Board in 1984. Here was a young Chinese-Indian woman appointed to the Board of a serious Australian company in a highly competitive sector. But at the same time, her husband was getting elected to the Wran Cabinet to become Minister for Planning and Environment.

Here's the story though: she waited till the day I was sworn in as Minister for Planning and Environment, to shyly tell me about this stunning elevation to the Board of a public company.

She hadn't wanted to take the gloss off my own initial climb up the greasy pole of politics.

Radio on overnight?

Turned out she had gotten up early and gone down to rehearse a speech my staff had required her to give to a women's group in 1990. Never done public speaking – was very nervous.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,

“It was with great pleasure that I accept your invitation....”, it began.

In the lead up to 2003 election, Eric Rozendaal said he wanted to have Helena put our case for a third four year term... polling showed people liked her and it would freshen up our messaging. I said, “good luck Eric... public speaking, let alone TV ads, are not in her repertoire.”

I remember looking from my office through a narrow glass panel into the conference room and seeing...

I remember her intent eyes. She in profile with that beautiful nose that had started out Aryan Indian before being highjacked and flatten by the Chinese genes. She was intent and nodding as the General Secretary explained what was required. And bravely she did it.

The advertisements rated their socks off. They held helped hold frontline marginal seats. They gave us the fourth election night with happy news.

Modesty

She sparkled with amusement watching the entertainment of the Maroubra branch.

She loved our neighbours at French Street, Maroubra. At Maroubra Junction, she bargained with the Ukrainian delicatessen, enchanted the big staff of the fishmarkets and pursued the best cuts at Peter's Meats. It seemed she could command a network of tradesmen, gardeners, builders who all called her Helena.

I called it the Helena Club.

I told her it was all based on her upbringing in Taiping going to the markets with her mother and dealing with the tailors and providores.

I was intrigued by the rapport she seemed to have with older ladies. There was magic between her and Annita Keating's 90 year old mother.

I said to her, isn't it interesting, all the old Greek ladies warm to you. It's your brown eyes.

But it was the love in her relationship with her ancient grandmother that had a serene, spiritual force.

People who make us happy, said a writer, are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.

1971

The movie, The Boy Friend, directed by Ken Russell included the song “You Are My Lucky Star”.

“I saw you from afar
“Two lovely eyes at me – they were gleaming; beaming
“I was star struck.”

As we walked across Railway Square, Helena looked up and said, “You are my lucky star.” To this day, that is the most beautiful compliment I have ever received.

And it meant she had made a commitment, to take a bet on me - the gauche, gawky kid from Matraville with preposterous ambitions.

That she made that choice was a stellar burst of luck for me.

You are a very astute mob. I know what each of you is thinking: it’s the other way around. Helena was my lucky star.

As the song said:

“You’re all my lucky charms I am lucky in your arms.
“You’ve opened heaven’s portal here on earth for this poor mortal.
“You are my lucky star”.

Shakespeare on Romeo

Shakespeare gave his Juliet words to say about the death of Romeo.
Let me just tweak the gender so they apply to Helena:

“If **she** should die, take her and cut her out in little stars
“And she shall make the face of heaven so fine that all the world will be in love with
night and pay no worship to the garish sun.”
“Cut her out in little stars....”

If tonight... NASA telescopes... identify a constellation of new stars in the outer reaches of the Milky Way...

They will note each star sparkles away...

Lively...

Spirited...

They might even note a hint of mischief in their gleam.

If one of the astronomers cracked the code, they might find a message; ...that life **is** very short...there is no time for fussing and fighting...a smile goes a long way.

We farewell a Chinese-Indian girl from this idyllic tropical town... educated by Irish nuns...drawn to Australia...recruited improbably to Australian public life ... while she ran a business creating jobs in Australian manufacturing... Her very spirit lives today - the eyes, the smile we recall so easily urges us to joyfulness, in a happy cosmos.

A final message to my little friend.

H, we gifted one another that lovely last day in Vienna on October 26 - at peace in a 50 year partnership. Accepting time would not be ours for ever, happy just to see the other one happy. That was where our long journey had taken us, to this calmness and wisdom.

And where it ended so suddenly, cut off so cruelly.

“We are such stuff

“As dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.”

Leaving me to say, my friend,

As your co-conspirator in this half century collaboration:

I thank you...

...thank you, my lucky star...

...Farewell, my little friend...

“And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!”