A Tribute to Keith Warne

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We Miss This Giant of a Man

Keith Warne was an integral part of the RMIT Southern Grampian partnership from the time it started in 1993, providing welcome encouragement, generous hospitality and, most of all, an erudite, well-informed and practical framework for a university’s engagement with a farming region. His capacity to respect and listen to others—regardless of background, cultural and epistemological differences or the places we might come from—was infectious. It enabled us as a group of rural and university community members to interact with each other and to create new responses to the challenges of the contemporary world. Keith continued to play a significant role in this partnership until he passed away at the end of 2005. He continued to be an active member of the Handbury Community Fellowship Program, and acted informally as a caring, loving and wise mentor for those of us who shared his dream for building a better world; from the local to the global. The following tribute is based on a eulogy prepared by Yaso Nadarajah with the Warne family.

I first met Keith Warne in 1994. Somehow my students and I had gained Judy Warne’s admiration for our belief in our own ability to put on community concerts without being chased off the stage and out of town. Judy noticed that we had developed a talent for being able to continue our performance—despite the distraction of raucous laughter coming from our audiences, much of it emanating from Judy herself! I think Judy knew that her husband would also respond heartily to our cavalier displays because that was his inclination.

I still remember the evening when I first met Keith. Dusk was setting in at Woodhouse West. A white ‘ute’ came to a grinding halt, almost at an angle, and out he stepped, a big grin on his face, his silvery mop of curls glistening in the setting sun. He held out his hands and said ‘Who is this person with
such brown hands?’ I looked at him and said, ‘You can talk, look at your hands!’ He had the hands of a farmer who had spent many hours working in his paddocks. He threw back his head and laughed, and I swear I saw a kangaroo hop away in surprise.

That was the beginning of more than a decade of travelling with this man with large brown hands. Through him I learnt to love the land and the people who lived on it, and I got to know his family and wide circle of people who had become his friends in the Mallee, where he began, Woodhouse, where I met him, and Dunkeld, where he ended up.

Keith was the last survivor of a family of five boys who grew up on a farm near the Mallee town of Culgoa. Stories from those times paint a happy picture, of an already assured, even precocious, young man growing up during the 1930s and ‘40s. Mulberry fights, towing the four brothers on the one bike behind his horse for three miles to school in Culgoa; all typical Mallee stuff. However, it wasn’t all fun. There were the tragic deaths of three of Keith’s brothers—all aged between sixteen and twenty-two—in separate incidents. What stood out for me was the way in which Keith and the rest of his family dealt with those tragedies. After the funeral of his third brother in ten years, the day was spent with his father and surviving brother, Hal, sewing bags of seed wheat in readiness for the following season. That positive attitude remained with Keith, and it was the same attitude he had when he was diagnosed with cancer three years before he died.

As a result of the family tragedies, Keith gave up his career as a budding mechanic and the associated aspiration of becoming a racing car driver to concentrate on the family farm with Hal, and their partnership lasted forty years. By the early 1950s, when Keith was in his early twenties, a 2.5 litre Riley was his car of choice. In 1953, he represented the youth of Australia at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. One didn’t know Keith was such a royalist but he was certainly a keen traveller, and on that trip he learnt something about other cultures. Reportedly, at dinner on the boat going to England a fruit platter was handed around by one of the Queen’s Ladies in Waiting. Unlike other guests who had selected a sliver of fruit from the delicate arrangement Keith plucked a whole orange and spent the rest of the dinner wondering what to do with it.

Shortly after returning from the UK, Keith developed an interest in the settlement of Kaneira West, which is a lot closer to Culgoa than the United Kingdom. He developed a particular interest in one of Kaneira West’s residents, Judy Arnold. At one of their earliest meetings, Judy was about to leave when Keith exclaimed, ‘Don’t go yet, I was just starting to like you!’ This approach didn’t quite work, because Judy refused to see him for several months afterwards. However, in February 1956 they were married and stayed together for the next fifty years. After they were married, they moved north to Korarlee, just outside Berriwillock, about eight miles north of Culgoa. In 1957, their first child Liz was born, followed by Marg and, finally,
David. As the children grew up, Keith and Hal continued their farming partnership, purchasing more land around Culgoa as well as Korarlee.

Family life at that time in Berriwillock was a very social affair. There was a wide circle of friends and most Saturday afternoons through summer were spent playing tennis and talking into the long evenings. Sundays meant church and more talking after church, then, usually, lunch and more socializing. As well as family and work, Keith was heavily involved in the community. It was not uncommon for him to be at meetings four or five nights a week—a level of commitment that continued throughout his adult life. He worked his way through countless organizations and eventually became an elected Councilor on the Mount Rouse Shire Council.

In the late 1970s, the Warne farming empire expanded to Woodhouse, and in the early 1980s, Keith and Judy sold their Mallee land to settle permanently at Woodhouse West. Keith and Judy enjoyed being in the Western District and were soon active in the local community, probably working harder than at any other time in their lives. With the exception of any shed that he entered, Keith loved to leave things better than he found them. The improvements he made to the property at Woodhouse over ten years showed that he could work as well as he could talk.

As a farmer, Keith enjoyed the long boom in wool, but when market prices started to tumble he was approaching retirement age and so looked to Dunkeld. However, when Keith and Judy built their new home at Griffins Hill, overlooking Mt Sturgeon and Mt Abrupt, it was anything but a quiet retirement that they’d entered. Possessing natural skills for the hospitality industry, they set up a Bed and Breakfast operation in one wing of the house. Keith began to divide his time between being cheeky to guests, establishing an elaborate garden surrounding the house, making more mess in his shed, and attending countless meetings aimed at making Dunkeld an even better place.

I will never forget an infamous ‘blue party’ (when we all dressed in blue); a rather dubious Indian breakfast fiesta at Griffin’s Hill; a trip to India where Keith mourned the loss of his brother Hal while sitting on the banks of the River Ganges; celebrating the birth of his grandchildren and the obvious delight he had in watching them grow; and seeing him stride into a Hindu temple in Melbourne, a turban on his head, to take on the role of father at my wedding. And, near the end, the wonderful celebration of Dunkeld’s 150th anniversary that Keith co-ordinated. The memories are endless.

At the heart of it all has been the generosity that Keith and Judy gave to RMIT University as an extension of their involvement in the partnership we began in 1993. They were always gracious to the many visitors I brought to their home, and they had a knack for listening to people and pulling them together for some rather zany party or a shared meal. And Keith was always generous towards those who worked ‘behind the scenes’ with him on his
many community projects. He was also always keen to know about the work I was doing in other countries.

I last spoke to Keith on 29 December 2005, from a tiny little phone box, sitting on a sack of potatoes (because the phone box seemed to be doubling up as a storeroom) in a tiny hamlet in India. As always, he was bursting with curiosity about what was happening in that part in India. When we travelled to India together, he was particularly keen to look at the similarities and differences in the ways in which the farmers in both countries faced their challenges. And again, in our last conversation, he wanted to know how the Indian farmers were dealing with drought conditions. As our conversation drew to a close, I told him I would be coming back soon and asked him to be there when I got back. ‘I’ll be here, Yaso. You bet I’ll be here. You just get home safe.’ When I got the phone call two days later to tell me he had passed away I was shocked. All the way back home from India for the funeral I kept thinking, ‘Why did he say he would be there when I got back? Was that a promise he couldn’t keep?’ But as soon as the car I was travelling in turned the corner and came into Dunkeld, I suddenly knew what he meant. Of course he was there with us, and always will be.
Every time people gather and pull together in a common effort to improve their lives and their land, Keith is here.

Whenever local government, organizations, community members and leaders negotiate a collective shared purpose for their towns and community, Keith is here.

Whenever there is an endearing rudeness that breaks down barriers, bureaucracies and brings people and cultures from all walks of life to laugh and joke together, Keith is here.

When there is truth and fair play and accountable behaviour, Keith is here.

And where there is joy, family and friends, and above all a love for all that is fair and compassionate, Keith is here.

Great Mother of This Earth
Rise and Gather Into Your Arms This Giant of a Man
May the Wind Carry His Spirit
The Mountains Bear His Name
The River Bathe His Heart And
The Flowers Whisper His Name Forever