FOR ELEANOR.

12 June 1949 – 8 October 2017.

Eleanor Mary Ramsay was born in Adelaide on 12 June 1949, the last of four children, preceded by Janet, Andrew and Kate. Three years later, in 1952, I was born on the same day. Eleanor’s parents Alex and Amy Jane were teachers of modest means. The fact that the Education Department rules forced Amy to resign her permanent position as a teacher upon marriage (and Eleanor too) like all women at the time, shrunk their means. And then the Department, having forced Amy to resign, required her to repay the costs of her training bond, making things a little tighter again.

Alex was widely known as a man of extraordinary capacity and almost saintly values. After starting his career as a lecturer in economics he rose rapidly to become the Head of the Housing Trust of SA. I regret that I never met Alex. He died in office at 64, having resisted Bob Menzies call for him to come to Canberra and ‘finish the city,’ but I knew of him from the frequent press on his various contributions to an extraordinary range of organizations and good causes, and his extensively reported State funeral.

Eleanor was very much Alex’s daughter, but also Amy’s. Amy returned to teaching, scripture and Latin at Woodlands School in Glenelg, where Eleanor and her sisters were students. Amy was a woman of redoubtable capacity, undiminished to the end of her long days.

Eleanor’s unstinting effort at ferreting out and opposing inequality of opportunity between the sexes I am sure goes back to her experience of the different lives of her parents, and the fact that very little of that difference was to be explained by differences between their capacities as human beings, or their youthful dreams.

That effort is the stuff of legends. Eleanor’s first teaching position was at a high school near Port Adelaide, now gentrified but at that time a solid working class district. As a first year out teacher of English and History she was given matric classes in each, in recognition of her having an honours degree. It was the first time the school had two Year12 classes, all final year students hitherto being taught by the relevant senior masters. Two contradictory messages were immediately given to Eleanor. Parents who hoped a good education would provide their children with a path to a better life complained if they were in this ‘new girl teacher’s class’, and agitated for them to be transferred to the senior master’s. But the principal reminded her that she was in Port Adelaide, and cautioned her against giving her students ‘ideas above their station’. If parents and principal had been conspiring to ensure Eleanor would move heaven and earth to give her students every opportunity to excel, they could not have chosen their words more carefully. Suffice to say her students not only did better than the senior masters’, but gained credits and distinctions far above the state average. And that was only her first year out of university.

Not that she was all about academic excellence and no more. It irked Eleanor enormously that the whole school had to turn out for the inter-school football carnival, while the swimming carnival in which more students and students of both sexes competed was optional. She got her revenge when again the whole school was required to observe the spectacle of the (male) teachers versus the (male) students football match. With a group of women students she had formed an anti-football league of girl guerillas, and together they invaded the field and kidnapped the umpire.

After several years of teaching, supporting her then husband to go back to school when she could have been doing a PhD herself, Eleanor travelled overland to England.

She did not like England very much at all, despite completing an MA in sociology at the University of Kent and training as a teacher of English as a second language. She found the English stiff and boring, still under the spell of the ‘stations in life myth’. She much preferred the vitality of Italy and Barcelona, teaching English in these places for over a year.

Her father’s death brought Eleanor back to South Australia, where she succeeded the wonderful Helen Menzies as the Women’s Officer of the South Australian Institute of Teachers – the teachers’ union. In these years Eleanor worked on raising awareness of sexism in the classroom, and the staff-room, and of systemic discrimination in the rules and regulations of the bureaucracy. She developed Australia’s first union sexual harassment policy, and agitated for reform of promotion systems that made it virtually impossible for any woman who had children to rise through the ranks. She insightfully identified Dale Spender’s pioneering work on gendered language as being a key to understanding why classrooms are – I should say, largely ‘were’ to acknowledge the success of Eleanor’s and other’s work – were different places for boys and girls. She educated teachers on gender issues in schooling through the monthly women’s network newsletter which she, following Helen, produced. In this work, Eleanor’s teaching of her colleagues was extensively research based, and wickedly funny. The cover from one of the newsletters has a typical cartoon which I remember from the time. Two hands are talking, one drawn as female, the other male. The woman says ‘You know studies of conversations show that women usually pick up on subjects men raise, but men ignore most of the subjects women try to raise’. The man says ‘I saw a good movie last night.’

Interestingly, part of this analysis of language in the classroom, of who gets to talk and who mostly listens, was a discussion of the relative benefits of single-sex, and thus generally private, schooling for girls – all this by resolutely anti-establishment women keen to attack class inequalities as much as gender biases. That illustrates something deep in Eleanor’s approach to changing the world: when all the analysis is laid out, and the politics exhaustively debated, it is the difference made to the lives and opportunities of real people, actual girls, which alone should be measure of whether we are going forward, or slipping back.

After four years in the Teachers’ union Eleanor joined the bosses in the public service in a series of senior executive roles all focused on equal opportunity. Working with outstanding educators like Ken Boston, she was able to develop and implement changes to employment and promotion policies which reduced discrimination against women. A simple measure of this achievement is that had Amy, her mother, begun her teaching career after the policy changes that Eleanor and others achieved, she would not have been required to resign her permanent teaching position, and would have been considered for promotion on equal terms with her male colleagues despite time taken away from teaching for child-bearing. Who knows, then, what professional heights she might have scaled.

From the public service in SA Eleanor was appointed Assistant Director (Equity) in the Queensland Education Department. Wayne Goss was the Premier following the downfall of Bjelke-Petersen. Roger Scott, later VC of the University of Canberra was the Head of Education, Peter Coaldrake, later VC of QUT, was head of the public sector management committee, Glyn Davis, now VC of the University of Melbourne was the Commissioner for Public Service Equity, and Kevin Rudd was head of Premier and Cabinet. In this soup of talent Eleanor thrived. Bob Lingard, now back at UQ after a stint as the Andrew Young Professor of Education at the University of Edinburgh, told me of a discussion about Eleanor with Roger Scott, just a few days ago. Roger said that if he needed something done, Eleanor was the person to do it.

Eleanor never said no. Every invitation to do something was accepted as an opportunity to meet new people, learn about a new problem, shape a new policy, or influence a new group. With that, and being, to be frank, drop dead gorgeous – putting the objectionable sexual politics to one side, it was not for nothing that as a fresher at the University of Adelaide a photo of Eleanor was judged 1967 ‘Bird of the Year’ - she travelled the length and breadth of Queensland spruiking the evils of discrimination wherever the opportunity presented itself. Two examples have entered the mythology.

Eleanor found herself the after dinner speaker at the Australasian Rust Society. They seemed as surprised as she was. She rose after finishing her meal and frankly acknowledged that they might be puzzled as to why the high officers of the public service had nominated her for the gig. But, she explained, she and the members of the society had much in common. They, Eleanor observed, were working to eliminate rust. She was working to eliminate racism and sexism. It appeared they both had a great deal more to do.

It was less surprising that Eleanor, as the Director (Equity) of the Department of Education should be speaking to a group of school principals in rural Queensland. Nonetheless she did not feel entirely welcome – Eleanor was pushing for merit selection of principals to replace the old order of promotion by seniority, which ensured that men got all the positions while the women, if they broke service to have babies, missed out. A man sat himself prominently in the front row, his belly straining at the buttons of his shirt, shorts, socks up to his knees and his legs spread wide and pelvis thrust forward as if that pose was required to accommodate the enormity of his procreative package. As soon as Eleanor finished speaking his hand shot up, and he asked in a gravelly voice what he took to be his trick question. ‘Eleanor’, he barked, ‘what is the difference between sex and gender’. Before prudence could stay her tongue she replied ‘One’s a lot more fun than the other’. And before she completed the long drive back to Head Office the news had arrived that one particular opponent of gender equity had found himself, as it were, shriveling under her mischievous gaze.

Eleanor confounded people’s – well, only men’s actually – expectation that a feminist could not be funny, nor indeed feminine. Her view was that if men think that the aim of feminism is to enable women to become like them, the men that oppose change, then they really really don’t get it. Feminism, for Eleanor was all about liberation, not a new set of constraints. She would say to hell with the heavenly stations: if all we know about a child is their gender and the circumstances of their birth, we know nothing about their inherent abilities, nor what contribution they might make to our community if given the fair chance of an excellent education.

In 1993 Eleanor was poached from the Queensland Department of Education by Denise Bradley, then DVC (Academic) at the new University of South Australia to become Australia’s first Pro Vice Chancellor (Equity) at UniSA.

Eleanor and I worked together for nine years, usually of one mind, on a major restructuring of UniSA and on projects opening the university up to students who traditionally had not benefited from higher education, and ensuring that as UniSA developed its research base, women academics got a fair share of the action and were not left as just undergraduate teachers while the men become post-graduate supervisors and researchers also.

And of these nine years we worked together, eight passed before it occurred to me that in addition to being of one mind we could also be of one body. When we fell in love we fell fast and deep, and married on April Fool’s day less than a year later, in 2001. The date meant something, but not that we were the fools.

We married just before Eleanor turned 52, and me 49, with the aim of having a youth together after I could retire from the University. Prior to my retirement, and as an Adjunct Professor in the Hawke Research Institute, Eleanor undertook a seminal – she would say ‘ovular’ – ARC funded project on part-time study and the success of senior secondary students in SA, as well as a number of program and institutional reviews in various Australian states and overseas.

Eleanor continued to ply her trade after we sailed away, particularly valuing her participation in the NZ Universities senior Women in Leadership program, where despite presenting twice a year for 10 years, always in the same suit – storage is an issue on a boat - she remained the most highly regarded expert contributor.

You will have seen a clear see a theme developing here. Eleanor thought that the world needed changing, and in many respects, women needed to be the lead agents of that change.

That is why she was committed to girls’ education in general, and to St Michael’s Collegiate school in Hobart in particular. She believed that girls should be nurtured and educated to become young women set for life. Not just because it is their right, but more deeply, because our world needs them all.

But she was not just an intellectual and an activist. Eleanor was someone who loved making and doing, and collecting things from her wide travels. She was a particularly talented seamstress, as was Amy’s mother. Eleanor claimed she did her elder sisters’ sewing homework before she herself started school. As a young woman she made many of her own clothes, and in our years together cleverly designed all manner of storage bags and so on for our yacht, as well as mending her clothes and mine. Eleanor could not see why I should give up on a shirt if the collar needed turning, or the back replacing. Eleanor never gave up on anything.

Or anyone. Her friendship was attentive, sensitive and enduring, as evidenced by the flood of messages of sympathy and remembrance from all over the world that have sustained me in the weeks since her death. I read you just a few words from one excellent man and four wonderful women.

In his adjournment speech to the lower house of the Tasmanian parliament, the Hon Jeremy Rockliff, Deputy Premier and Minister for Education, among many other roles, having noted that Eleanor ‘set sail to Tasmanian with a cat, a dog and a man, and found it impossible to leave’, said of Eleanor that

Her research and considered commentary about education in Tasmania has helped shape the Government's policy and will continue to touch the lives of many generations in the future. You could not get a more passionate and dedicated person than Eleanor when it comes to education, someone who really and truly, in her heart, understood what education could bring to people, particularly people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Mary O’Kane said ‘Eleanor was one of those stunning, life enhancing people that make the world a happier place.’

Di McCarthy, who as the CEO of the Royal Society of NZ started the NZ WiL program (with the EO Commissioner, Judy McGregor) explained to me why Eleanor was the most valued presenter at every program, saying that

‘while everyone is good, not everyone is a star, but Eleanor is a star’ – and now a ‘tragic loss’.

Margaret Gardener, VC of Monash University who worked together with Eleanor over many years ‘with the purpose of advancing women in Universities’ said

‘[Eleanor] loved life and gave of herself and her skills and intellect to make sure that life was better for others. She had a profound impact across education over many sectors and decades. She was a constant advocate against discrimination generally and to provide opportunity for disadvantaged people. Simply she tried her utmost to do good and that is all we should ask of anyone and something that she did better than most.

Finally Quentin Bryce said, confirming Di McCarthy’s assessment, that

‘Eleanor was a shining star whom I admired with respect and affection. She had a great capacity for friendship and I was fortunate to be the beneficiary of that.’

Eleanor did indeed have a great capacity for friendship, and for celebrating with friends. She was a good cook and a great host of frequent and very generous dinner parties. She would gasp at the price of the wine I would buy for these dinners, then go and spend twice as much on the cheese! All of which would be enjoyed long into the night as conversation flowed around our table.

Which is not to say Eleanor was extravagant. She just unerringly sought the good, in clothes, food, wine and company, as well as social policy and especially education and gender policy.

That explains Eleanor’s willingness to give generously of her time and deep expertise to Collegiate as a member of the Board. She thought Collegiate was a good school, a very good school, and well on the way to being a great school. It pained her that **all** Tasmanian students, boys as well as girls, were not able to study at a school as good as Collegiate – and that is why she worked hard to show the community the magnitude of the problem we have with senior secondary education in Tasmania, knowing that the first step in solving a problem is admitting that you have it. Since not all of you will have followed Eleanor’s and my work on education in Tasmania, let me simply say that if you are a student in Year10 in a public school in Tasmania, your chances of completing your Year12 certificate is less than 50%. This our big problem. You will find more information at <https://educationambassadors.org.au>.

But it also pained her that while we are solving that big whole of Tasmania problem we continue to waste the talent of individual girls, girls with the talent of Amy, her mother, girls who might one day become another Tasmanian Nobel Prize winner or Governor, or Chief Justice of the High Court, or Vice Chancellor of one of our leading universities, or indeed Governor–General. Girls who could not be set on that path because their families lack the means – and thus are likely condemned to inherit their parents’ ‘station in life’. That is why, together with the other members of Eleanor’s family, I am establishing the Eleanor Mary Ramsay Scholarship – to give all girls in Tasmania, regardless of where they have come from, just the chance of an education that can take them further than they ever imagined.

Finally, I come to the mystery of Eleanor’s death. On the advice of Eleanor’s and my GP that, despite my being a non-believer, I would find a lesson there, I turned to the Bible. I read from 2 Kings, verses 18-20

When the child was grown, the day came that he went out with his father to the reapers. He said to his father, ‘My head, my head.’ And he said to the servant, ‘Carry him to his mother.’ When he had taken him and brought him to his mother, he sat on her lap until noon, and then died”.

Medical authorities believe that this is a description of what happened to Eleanor. In fact it is almost exactly what happened to Eleanor. On Sunday 8 October just after mid-day, Eleanor was working in her garden when she complained of a sudden headache. By the time the ambulance arrived Eleanor was cradled in my arms, warm and heavy like a deeply drowsy child. Eleanor had suffered a subarachnoid hemorrhage, an event that strikes from the blue with a thunderclap of a headache, and carries most away in the squall. Those that we attempt to save by medical intervention are not infrequently condemned to a fate worse than death.

It is not hard to find a lesson in all of this. Life is a lottery, and all we can do, as Eleanor did, is hold each other dear, and near, and get on with life while he have it. And do good wherever and however we can – not only because we should, but also because, in the end, it **is** more fun.

Let us toast. To Eleanor – may she not be forgotten, but let her influence grow, and her work continue.

Michael Rowan 18 October 2017