

8.1. MM01: Vale Gerry Nolan

Gerald (Gerry) Wallace Nolan was born in Whyalla, South Australia in 1940. The family moved to Koppio near Port Lincoln when Gerry was seven, and again to the small town of Cleve.

Gerry lived with his parents and four brothers on a rural property outside of Cleve where they were almost self-sufficient. Fresh rainwater from the tank was rationed, *so we all used to bathe once a week, and all in the same water* (Gerry Nolan, Oral History archive).

Gerry was forced to leave school at 14 because, in his own words, *there was nowhere else to go ... there was no Leaving Certificate, and being a big family, I couldn't go to boarding school.* Faced with the choice of a first job in either the Bank of Adelaide or the State Bank of South Australia he chose the latter *because I was very keen on the Manager's daughter... oh yeah, and the son was my best mate at the time.*

He left the bank to work at the Post Office where he was Junior Post Office and Telegram Boy during the day, and 'night boy' on the telephone exchange overnight. Gerry followed that by training as a Technician for the Post Master-General (PMG, which became Telecom then Telstra). He topped the State in the Public Service Examination in 1958.

Gerry soon joined the Navy to work in the Fleet Air Arm because of a very keen interest in flying. He was transferred to Sydney and joined the company of the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* in 1960. In 1962, he left the Navy and transferred to RAAF where he finally learned to fly.

Soon after, he got a job with Qantas as a flight simulator technician for the Boeing 707. In 1964 Gerry married Susan Lloyd and they later had two daughters, Sarah and Emma.

In 1966 he left Qantas to start his own business, a theory-based pilot training school in Mount Street, North Sydney. The business closed in 1968 because of industry downturns and a new cadet scheme at Qantas. Gerry tried various jobs including hydrography near Mount Tom Price.

He began writing fiction and poetry in 1968 and continued this throughout his life.

In 1972 Gerry attended a meeting at North Sydney Council Chambers about the problem of "latchkey children". He told Council's oral history project: *I was the only bloke there.*

That led Gerry to becoming the driving force in establishing the North Sydney Creative Leisure Centre. The Centre hosted before and after-school care for "latchkey kids" ... but for those of us who experienced it back then, including Gerry's own daughters, it was a magical, raffish, and slightly wild place for kids. And Gerry Nolan was at the heart of the fun and magic. Almost every child who played there will remember the joy of the "flying fox" that Gerry built, strung between the old fig trees, and the sense of freedom and controlled chaos and creativity – there was recycled paper, boxes, fabrics and clothes, paint, chalk, and every child was encouraged to be creative in their own way.

However, like every North Sydney story, this magical place was threatened by overdevelopment. Developer, Sabemo, planned for high rise buildings and a plaza on the site of the Creative Leisure Centre and the land that is now Ted Mack Civic Park. The building occupied by Centre – an old Senior Citizens’ hall (now the site of the North Sydney Community Centre) – was to be demolished to give way to towers and plazas.

Gerry wrote an article opposing the centre called the North Sydney Civic Heart Action report which he circulated to Progress Associations and media outlets. The report included the following:

The basic requirements of a Civic Heart ... are the grouping of Community Services such as Family Planning, Marriage Guidance, Baby Health, Child Care and Pre School Facilities, Library, Creative Leisure, Senior Citizens and Problem Centre together with ... Theatres, Halls and civic meeting places ... coffee shops, wine bars, sandwich shops ... all arranged in such a way , close to existing Church and Sporting facilities, that visitors to the Civic Heart will be encouraged to relax and to become involved.

The term “Give North Sydney a Heart” became a slogan for the campaign opposing the development. The campaign was successful when Council voted against the development in 1973. Indeed, we owe the continued existence of the civic precinct – Ted Mack Civic Park, North Sydney Community Centre, Ros Crichton Pavilion – to those passionate and persistent residents who campaigned to keep the land in community hands and prevent the development.

Gerry left North Sydney local politics for a time to pursue a wide range of interests including managing projects and adventures with Dick Smith, sailing on Gretel II, and starting a children’s newspaper in Crows Nest, ‘The Frontier Times’. After his divorce from Susan, he became father to his youngest daughter, Kay, in 1976.

He began a graphic design business in Neutral Bay in 1985 which led to re-engagement with local issues by producing the newsletter for the group that would be known as Friends of North Sydney Independents or FONSI.

In 1991, after the defeat of local member Robyn Read in the State election and concerns that the Liberal Party was aiming to take over North Sydney Council, Ted Mack encouraged Gerry to run for Mayor.

Gerry was directly elected Mayor of North Sydney in 1991 and held the office until 1995. Remarkably he had not been a councillor before that time. He continued Ted Mack’s campaign to calm traffic in local streets. 50 km/h zones were introduced – the first in the State. Yet he hated speed humps!

His interest in transport led to the creation of the Bus Interchange at Neutral Bay as Gerry said: *that came out of having lunch with the boss of State Transit Authority every 6 weeks or so ... I think that was probably a hallmark of my, what do you call it? Not reign? My time as Mayor!*

Gerry worked hard to counter the expansion of local schools into residential areas. The result was the formulation of agreed development envelopes and plans *which gave everyone a lot of comfort*.

Gerry wrote a weekly column for the *Mosman Daily* during his Mayoral term, expressing his views and explaining the decisions of Council. He relayed Council successes and sometimes questioned its processes. Not all the topics were parochial. In June 1993 he made the case for flexible working arrangements – arguments that resonate today. In June 1995 he urged local residents to support the international movement to ban landmines.

Gerry was a supporter of innovative thinking and even raised the possibility of introducing electric cars to North Sydney Council in 1991.

He supported the idea of open government but ended an interview given with Council's Historian, Margaret Park, in February 2000 with the following: *you can create all the right environment, all the right procedures the protocols you like, for open government, but at the end of the day people are going to have to get off their bums themselves and do something*.

He finally got to university in his early 60s and was awarded a BA Hons in Philosophy at UNSW in 2006, at the age of 65.

Shortly before he passed, Gerry's daughter, Emma, asked him what he felt were his best accomplishments during his time as Mayor. He said the bus lane on the Harbour Bridge and the big hub bus stop at Watson Street, Neutral Bay, and how they helped alleviate traffic congestion to keep people moving. He was also proud of being a very active founding member (and North Region Director and Deputy Chair) of the Local Government Recycling Cooperative, having recycled drink bottles himself all those decades earlier, in rural South Australia.

I acknowledge the assistance of Emma Nolan, Dr Ian Hoskins and Stanton Library's oral history archive in preparing this vale to Gerry Nolan.

I therefore recommend:

- 1. THAT** Council acknowledge Gerry Nolan's contribution to North Sydney, particularly, his legacy of championing public spaces and places for children and the community.
- 2. THAT** Council write to Mr Nolan's family expressing sincere condolences and gratitude for his service to our community.
- 3. THAT** Council commemorate Mr Nolan's contribution by planting a tree with a commemorative plaque in a suitable location to be decided in consultation with Mr Nolan's family.
- 4. THAT** Council liaise with the North Sydney Community Centre and seek to name the Children's playground the 'Gerald Nolan Adventure Playground' in recognition of his role in creating that space.

**COUNCILLOR ZOË BAKER
MAYOR**