

A young Margaret Whitlam who swam in the 1938 Empire Games.



At 88, Margaret Whitlam still embraces a busy social schedule, works hard at staying healthy and enjoys a happy marriage

WORDS **JULIE McCROSSIN**  
MAIN PHOTOGRAPH **RUSTY WHITE**

# A Woman of substance

Just before Christmas last year, I ran into Margaret Whitlam at two events: a women's lunch for the Bell Shakespeare Company and a party for SCEGGS Darlinghurst, the Anglican girls' school we both attended 30 years apart. On each occasion, I was struck by the 88-year-old's palpable verve, vitality and enthusiasm for life.

The Bell Shakespeare lunch was held in the Westpac building in central Sydney. I happened to arrive just as Margaret Whitlam emerged alone from a taxi at the front of the tower block. Dressed in bright red, with a broad smile on her face, she walked with the aid of two walking sticks and was greeted like royalty by a young security guard who recognised her instantly.

There was something about the way she walked that day that caught my eye. It was clearly not easy for her, but she was determined and brisk. You could sense an act of will was involved. I was reminded of something the Hollywood star Bette Davis once said: "Old age is no place for sissies."

During the lunch, Whitlam chatted warmly with everyone, young and old, including two actors who performed and sang. She was full of fun and had people laughing

wherever she was in the room. She attended the SCEGGS event with her husband of 65 years, Gough Whitlam, 91, Prime Minister of Australia from 1972 to 1975. Margaret's first priority on arrival was to make sure Gough, who sometimes uses a wheelchair, was comfortably seated with a drink and someone to talk to. Then she was off to catch up with old friends and meet the parents of current students.

Again, I was struck by her physical vitality in the face of difficulties, and her eagerness to meet new people. It was also great to witness the loving intimacy between the couple. A happy marriage after such a long time together and with all the pressures and controversies of public life is an enviable achievement.

As I thought about these two encounters, I realised that Margaret Whitlam is living the kind of active life many of us hope to be living if we make it to 88. I decided I wanted to search her life story for practical hints about how to be active and happy when you're old. In particular, how has she managed to stay so curious and engaged with the world?

We met to talk in the small apartment she shares with Gough in Sydney's Darling Point.





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The walls are covered with books, paintings and photographs of family members, including a framed photo of a grinning great-grandchild in a Kevin07 T-shirt. You can see boats bobbing on Sydney Harbour through big windows in the sitting room and a sandstone cliff and gum trees through the kitchen window.

It is a lovely, comfortable living room, but the apartment is strikingly small. The short hall that leads to the bedrooms would be too narrow for Gough and Margaret to pass side by side. And the living room would be very crowded if all the family members visited at the same time.

Gough and Margaret are both over six feet and so are all their four children: Anthony, 64, a retired Justice of the Federal Court; Nicholas, 62, an investment banker and company director; Stephen, 58, a former diplomat; and Catherine, 54, a former public servant, who now spends a lot of time supporting her parents.

But space is no problem as we sit alone and talk about her life over the cup of tea Catherine has made before leaving us to chat. When I first arrived at the door of the Whitlams' apartment building, I got a shock when I saw Catherine with wet hair, fresh from a swim. For a brief moment it was like seeing the ghost of the young Margaret, who represented Australia in breaststroke in the 1938 Empire Games.

I start our conversation by asking Margaret what matters most in her life these days. The answer comes very quickly: "Good health. Nothing else works unless I am healthy, and I've got a fixation on that."

The first lesson I learn about successful ageing is how hard Margaret Whitlam works to stay active. "I've got a physio coming twice a week and I get hydrotherapy once a week," she explains. "I've got osteoporosis really acutely. In fact, I'm like a violet crumble bar. You could call me Violet!"

For the first of many times during our conversation, she laughs at her own expense. The truth is Margaret has had several significant broken bones and the ability to keep walking is a hard-won battle. As always, she is blunt about the facts, but the last thing she wants to do is to dwell on her difficulties.

During the Sydney Festival in January, the press reported her attendance, "sans





Gough”, at the opening-night performance of the Spanish contemporary dance group, Compania Nacional de Danza. (Gough was there but the couple had arrived separately.) She was spotted again, with Gough, at the National Theatre of Scotland’s production of *Black Watch*, an exploration of the experiences of soldiers in Iraq.

Her interest in contemporary dance and theatre reflects a lifetime passion for the arts. The origin of this passion lies (along with her love of reading, education and social justice) in her happy childhood and the influence of her parents, Mary and Wilfred Dovey.

Both Whitlam’s parents were very bright. Perhaps this is why she never seems to have been intimidated by Gough’s erudite and articulate ways. Her father grew up in Kelso, near Bathurst in NSW, attending local public schools. He won a scholarship to the selective private school, Sydney Grammar, and a bursary to Sydney University, ultimately becoming a judge in the divorce courts. Whitlam says he was “a readaholic” who “fed me a constant stream of literature”.

Her mother attended Sydney Girls High, another selective school, and she also won a bursary to Sydney University. The early death of both her parents meant Mary never completed university, but she taught in several schools and introduced her daughter

to the world of ballet, music and theatre.

“She was quite brilliant as a mathematician and musical as well,” Whitlam says of her mother. “She gave me an inquiring mind and made sure I read decent things.” Whitlam has built on these early influences and developed her lifelong pattern of support for the arts. The arts community has brought her many friends and endless delight.

At school and university, she loved to perform and is good-natured about the fact that she always got small parts, such as “handmaidens or voices-off”. It seems the one advantage of being so tall was that her long legs looked good in doublet and hose.

It was at a cocktail party for the Sydney University Dramatic Society in 1939 that she met Gough. “It was instant recognition of a mutual pleasure,” she told Susan Mitchell at the Sydney Institute. Remarkably, Margaret Whitlam’s parents also met for the first time at the Glee Club at Sydney University.

She has sat on the boards of several arts organisations, including chairing the Opera Conference back in the 1970s and 80s, helping opera companies nationally. She is still a subscribing patron of Opera Australia, attending many performances and dress rehearsals each year. When it comes to the arts, Whitlam is a player and a stayer.

But how does she keep up the pace at 88? Does she consciously get up and go out despite her physical challenges? “Oh yes,” she answers quickly and in the most serious tone of voice that she uses in our entire conversation. “Once you stop, you might as well put your cue in the rack. If you stop, you have put your cue in the rack, haven’t you?”

So it’s not surprising she has current

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Hydrotherapy is part of Margaret Whitlam’s fitness regime.

Below left: Her parents, Mary and Wilfred Dovey, at the Melbourne Cup. Below right: With Gough on election day 2007, also their granddaughter Helen’s wedding day.



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subscriptions to the Sydney Theatre Company, Musica Viva and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. And one of her greatest pleasures is going to the Dendy with her old friend, Meg Renshaw, the widow of Jack Renshaw, a former premier of NSW.

Whitlam acknowledges that one of the great challenges of reaching her age is that many of her friends have died or they no longer feel fully mentally or physically competent and so they don’t keep going out. But she says she got her commitment to cheerfulness from her parents.

“I don’t fear the worst. I look for the best all the time,” she explains. “That’s the way my mum and dad went and so do I.” This optimistic temperament has enabled her to provide support to Gough and the children on numerous occasions in a family and political life that has often been turbulent.

The name Whitlam has always stirred deep and contrasting emotions. These emotions have included ecstatic admiration, especially when the Whitlam Labor Government was elected in 1972 after the Coalition had governed federally since 1949.

However, there have also been times of brutal criticism, most obviously in the aftermath of the controversial dismissal of the Whitlam Government in 1975 and the subsequent loss of the election by Labor.

Perhaps the most impressive achievement



in Whitlam's life is that she has maintained an independent identity and working life while being married to the most famous and controversial politician of his generation.

The publication of her biography by Susan Mitchell in 2006, launched with characteristic irreverence by Kath and Kim, was a rare moment in which she was the focus of attention. Generally, the spotlight has been on Gough or on a controversy involving one of her high-profile children.

We now accept that Therese Rein, the wife of the current prime minister, Kevin Rudd, has a right to an independent career. It is hard to remember how rare and controversial it was for the wife of a leading politician in Margaret Whitlam's era to assert her right to a working life and to views of her own.

Whitlam worked as a social worker, graduating from Sydney University in 1943. She loved the "practicality" of helping wives when their husbands were at war and later supporting the families of hospital patients.

When Gough was prime minister, she took occasional time away to work as a journalist and television broadcaster.

Despite some tough criticism in the press at the time, she wrote a column about her life in *The Lodge* for *Woman's Day* magazine. Eleanor Roosevelt had written a syndicated column about social and political issues when her husband Franklin was president

of the US. But this precedent didn't stop Margaret getting a caning for her column.

In 1973, she presented an interview program on television called *With Margaret Whitlam*. The conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein was a guest on her first show. It took guts to take such high-profile work in the highly charged political atmosphere of those times.

In 1990, Whitlam began leading international study tours. She also served on many advisory councils and boards, especially in the areas of women's rights, social welfare, education and the arts.

Her career is all the more remarkable when you consider she raised the children largely alone. Gough was away at the war from 1942 to 1945, serving as a navigator in the RAAF in northern Australia and the islands, and then he was busy building up a legal practice in the city and the country.

Then, in 1952, Gough was elected to federal parliament. During these child-rearing years, Margaret made a home for their children in Cronulla in southern Sydney and in Cabramatta in Gough's electorate of Werriwa in western Sydney.

Last year, the Whitlams were awarded the first-ever life memberships of the Australian Labor Party at the national level. As Gough got up out of his wheelchair and walked into a packed auditorium, he was, as *The Sun-Herald* reported, "the star of the show".

The soon-to-be elected prime minister, Kevin Rudd, paid tribute to the advice he'd received as a 15-year-old from Gough about how to become a diplomat (go to university and study a language). Even at 91, Gough had connections to the current leadership.

But Gough took the opportunity at the start of his speech to recognise and thank the woman he described as "the partner of my life and work for 65 years this week". He said, "If our generation had enjoyed the full benefits of equality for women initiated by my government 34 years ago, no limits need be set on the positions and honours which might have come her way, as certainly she receives this honour in her own right."

It was a great tribute from a loving husband and recognition of Margaret's vital role in his life and marriage. It echoed another tribute from her son, Tony Whitlam, aired on ABC TV's *Lateline* when Margaret's biography was published: "They spend an awful lot of time in each other's company and I think my mother could probably survive without my father, but my father couldn't survive without her." ♦