



When Passion Ignites Purpose

Sue Lennox (nee Grieves), Class of 1970

Alumni Sue Lennox (nee Grieves, Class of 1970) is one of NSW's most esteemed change agents, an environmental educator, co-founder of OzGreen and named 2020 NSW Senior Australian of the Year.

Accolades in Sue's career are many and distinguished. Recently awarded the 2020 NSW Senior Australian of the Year, Sue also received the 2019 international Veer Bhadra Mishra Environment Award on World Environment Day for her contribution to restoring the health of India's holy Ganges River through the Clean Ganges campaign.

Sue's story proves that the combined force of science and insight are powerful, and that equality and sustainability are vital for a peaceful future. OzGreen's approach incorporates citizen science, sustainability education, community development and participatory leadership – including the award-winning global Youth Leading the World program.

"OzGreen was never a job," begins Sue.

"It was simply my response to a deep concern for the environment, and desire to contribute to a more sustainable, peaceful and equitable world."

How does a Roseville girl go about changing the world? Most certainly not alone! Together with her late husband, Colin – also an Environmental Science teacher – and an army of thousands, Sue says she was well equipped for the task, even from her Roseville days.

"My father passed away when I was just eight years old and I knew it was a really big stretch for Mum to have me at Roseville College," admits Sue, who doesn't take privilege lightly. "I never questioned whether my mother cared or whether my school cared. I just knew they did."

Her six years in Senior School at Roseville College had "a significant influence on who I am," says Sue. She thrived in the progressive community of women and girls, where learning wasn't restricted to the curriculum.

"We were encouraged to learn about what was happening in the wider world," she reflects, adding that the Vietnam War and the Peace Movement were dominant themes.

"I was blessed to have some very good teachers, like Mrs Richardson [Headmistress 1972–1984] who gave me extra weekly research tasks that fuelled my curious mind and made me greedy to learn more."

Sue shares many crisp memories of her time at Roseville College, such as "one of those school days when what was

meant to happen, didn't – like a sport carnival, but it rained. Whatever the reason, we found ourselves in a History lesson and engaged in debate on topics from Hitler to the Vietnam War."

She laughs, "I still clearly remember what our teacher told us, isn't that amazing? She taught us that freedom of speech is priceless; to speak up when things matter; to do what you can, when you can; and to be informed.

"I was empowered in a classroom that day... you see, Roseville College didn't just prepare me for my purpose in life, but for life itself.

"As Seniors, we were treated with respect and trust – and we expected it and all the privileges that came with it. Remarkably, there was never a discussion about 'earning the trust' or 'earning respect'; it was simply our right to receive it and responsibility to give it to others. We all met that expectation, of course, and that prepared me for being a trustworthy and respectful adult.

"The core Christian value of 'doing unto others' positioned me to be a woman who changes the world for the better and feels able to change the things I can," she concludes.

After school, Sue graduated with a Bachelor of Science (microbiology and biochemistry) from the University of Sydney and worked as a medical biochemist for two years.

"I was always an environmentalist at heart, but was unsatisfied in a lab. It didn't take me long to realise that, as a people person, I loved sharing science with others, especially young people. It was something I had experienced firsthand from our teachers at School.

"I finally understood the passion of my own teachers for teaching us and sending us out to make the world a better place. This was the gift I received from Roseville and is something that remains at the core of everything I do."

Sue returned to university to complete a Diploma of Education, then joined the Science department at a government school. Once teaching, she noticed how the issues facing our world so quickly overwhelmed and disheartened her students. She needed a way to turn the information into inspiration "so they were empowered – the light came on". This became Sue's life research.

"In 1989, I started at Freshwater High. We found ourselves investigating a local environmental catastrophe: industrial off-flow polluting and killing fish in a nearby lagoon – it was completely outside the textbooks and was real-world learning. Resourced with the right tools, I watched my class transition from being children daunted by such a big issue close to home, into informed students brainstorming ideas and implementing them to make a

difference," she says, adding that this was a precursor to Sydney Water's Streamwatch Program, which still operates and that Sue helped establish.

Sue's inspirational work was nominated by the Department of Education for the Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence, and Freshwater High became a Centre of Excellence for Environmental Education.

"People came to see what we were doing. Then, in 1991 (and quite outside my sphere of thinking), I received an invitation to travel to Varanasi, India. I was uncertain how I could really help, but, equipped with water-testing equipment, Colin and I organised funding and went.

"Talk about daunting! I recall the very moment when, standing on the bank of the Ganges River in India, I watched children drink its water; the very same water that we had just tested at tens of thousands times above what was safe and healthy for human consumption."

Sue explains that their testing was among the first faecal coliform testing of the river, which recorded pollutants in the 50,000 to 5,000,000 cfu/100ml range. By comparison, she says, Australia's standard is zero for drinking and less than 150 cfu/100ml for swimming.

"Seeing children going down to drink directly from the river broke my heart," she recalls.

Sue and Colin equipped and trained 40 volunteers in a project that later became the Swatcha Ganga Research Laboratory, the subject of "River Keepers", a *60 Minutes* documentary in 1997. The couple found a kindred spirit in the late Professor VB Mishra, Founder and President of the Sankat Mochan Foundation, a scientist and a holy man whose life mission was to end pollution of the sacred river by human sewage and waste.

The experience touched the Lennoxes so deeply that, on their return to Australia, they both resigned from their comfortable, celebrated and edified roles as teachers, and with the support of their three children, set out to establish OzGreen and position themselves to enable change.

This commitment included more than 30 subsequent visits to India over the following decades to partner with the Professor's Clean Ganges campaign. (In 1999, the Professor was named as TIME Magazine's "Hero of the Planet" for his leadership in cleansing the Ganges.)

"It sounds so risky, doesn't it?" ponders Sue. "We usually make dramatic change if we are discouraged or if what we are doing is not working, but, for us, things were going so well that the possibility of making an even greater difference inspired us to take bigger risks. What could we lose? More importantly, what could others gain?"

"OzGreen was a family project. We did it together. My daughter and two sons came with us to India for six weeks, which had a profound impact on them. We sold the family home, moved in with my mother-in-law and established OzGreen in a garage in Dee Why..."

"With both parents as science teachers, I'm sure my children felt life was a bit of an experiment! India taught them how privileged we are, and that comes with a responsibility not to indulge in our own comforts, but also to bring comfort to others," she says.

Today, OzGreen projects operate in Australia, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Latin America and East Timor. Over 30 years, Sue and Colin pioneered projects in more than 1,600 communities globally and trained more than 50,000 environmental leaders around the world, equipping and empowering them to tackle – and solve – sustainability challenges.

What stands out most about Sue is her humility and warmth. It is in her genuine love of her family and of her past, and her deep desire for a peaceful and sustainable future for each person. She is not wasteful or ostentatious, she leads by example and takes a personal interest in each person she meets.

"A decade after I started OzGreen, I returned to the creek where it all began with a group of young people in our leadership program," she says.

"We all paused as I momentarily 'saw' myself ten years ago, before OzGreen began. Then, I sent lots of love and encouragement to my past self to give it a go and don't give up. In the same way, if I could do the same to my young Roseville College self, I would say 'Just go for it, Sue!'"

As a community, we celebrate the achievements of Sue and her late husband, Colin, who sadly passed away suddenly, after 45 years of marriage, in February 2017.

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