

IN CONVERSATION



Women of Whale Beach

Bryan Webster / Lara Boyle / Georgia Roberts / Jill Pietzker and Sara Seifeddine / Joy Cullis / Midget Farrelly / Natalie Chan / Sue Kearney



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INTRODUCTION

Surf lifesavers have long captured the public imagination as strong, courageous and highly trained individuals who risk their lives to undertake dangerous rescues and dutifully serve the community. Heroes of the surf and always at the ready, they are the embodiment of true Australian culture and values.

However, for far too many years this image of lifesavers was missing something crucial – women. As early as 1923, women were fulfilling the requirements of the Bronze Medallion but not being granted the award due to their gender. It was not until 1980 that women were given the opportunity to gain their Bronze Medallion

and serve as patrolling members. Whale Beach Surf Life Saving Club (SLSC) was a strong advocate for women during this time and played a pivotal role in realising the opportunities women brought to the Surf Life Saving (SLS) movement, training up the first female squad in NSW to pass their Bronze Medallion exam.

Since that historic day, female representation, contribution and recognition has gone from strength to strength. The inclusion of women on patrols and in management has enabled surf lifesaving to adapt and thrive. As we move forward, the growing involvement of women is essential to the continuation of SLS as

a pillar of Australian culture and will ensure that the movement stays relevant to the communities that it serves.

This book celebrates the women of Whale Beach SLSC, tracing a little known narrative to the rich community that exists today. Although focusing on our club, these stories reflect the changing times in surf lifesaving across Australia, where the history of women has short but bright. We hope that by sharing these stories, we will inspire future generations to become a part of the SLS movement in the future.



Bryan Webster, on how it all started



March 15 2016

In conversation with Ellie Keft and Tamara Scott

In the late 1970s discussions in the boardroom became heated as the Surf Life Saving movement decided whether or not to allow women to sit their Bronze Medallion exam just as their male counterparts had been able to since 1903. Meanwhile Bryan Webster, a third generation Whale Beach SLSC member, showed unwavering support for the inclusion of women as active members in the club. Having been freshly anointed President of the club, and facing a dwindling membership base, for him it was a 'no brainer.'

For a full year Bryan trained four young women in the absence of the Chief Training Officer, through all surf and weather conditions and in August 1980 they passed as the first female surf lifesavers in New South Wales. We spoke with Bryan about the good ol' days, the first ever Bronze Medallion exam for women in New South Wales and the importance of women in surf life saving.

To get started, could you give us a brief history of women in surf life saving at the club?

So girls could officially patrol and be full members of the club from August 1980.

In the previous year we had been running the training through to the end of summer/early winter with Keith Burney. He was my Chief Instructor at the time but he disappeared shortly after starting as he was a busy teacher. So I ended up handling the back end of the training and took the girls to the examination.

To give you an idea of the attitude at the time, this image was published in the local paper prior to the girls being allowed to do their Bronze [referring to cartoon image on next page]. Once it was approved that they could do the exam, this kind of attitude faded away a little bit and people started to take it more seriously.

When was this?

Just prior to the official assessment day. This photo was published in the 1979-80 Annual Report. That was the common ethos at the time.

An image like that would be controversial these days!

Well that was the attitude of a lot of people within the lifesaving movement at the time. Don't get me wrong, I'm not agreeing with that attitude. Girls were seen to be there just to look good! I took female membership very seriously though, as I needed the members and I recognised that 3 of the 4 girls in the group were terrific swimmers, in fact were better than half of the blokes in club. They were keen, they were motivated...



Cartoon by Paul Rigby, printed in the WBSLSC 1979–80 Annual Report. Attitudes have come a long way since then.

What was it like back then?

I remember being 15 or 16 year olds and having music at the club... not wild music, not a wild party, more like with tea and scones out on the deck. No alcohol because we were underage [smiles], and the mothers were in attendance. We would have little sisters there, and all the girls were invited. Some of the boys were cheeky though, they'd duck outside downstairs trying to find a bottle of beer or something!

We had a strong generation at that time known as 'The Juniors' (from the '62 to '65s era). There were 24 of us and really, at any given time, there would be up to 24 of us living in the surf club. It would overflow down into what's now the gym area. But it was just a change room in those days. You'd find a mattress or sleep down in the sand with a sleeping bag, back of the car... you'd sleep anywhere! We were the biggest group of juniors to go through the club at that time. I still refer to myself as one of 'The Juniors' [laughs] Normally, through the '50s, they would have only had 5 to 6 juniors go

through the club, and would mostly have 'Seniors'. But with us it was different.

Were women a part of the club at that point?

Well, as a result of us being such a large group the mothers got involved. They tried to do dances and hold functions to keep us interested and keep us away from the grog and other lifestyles. It was all good clean fun. So the girls would come along and we all ended up with girlfriends and we married some of them and what have you.

By the early '70s we had wives or permanent girlfriends. So we started going to local dances like 'The Stomp' at Avalon and Moby Dicks... Moby Dicks was the place for social occasions. We were 21 by then and you had to be 21 to get into Mobys.

And as we gained more independence, the 'Mother's Auxiliary' died off so things changed a little... and after that most people would do 6 to 8 years of Surf Life

“I took female membership very seriously though, as I needed the members and I recognised that 3 of the 4 girls in the group were terrific swimmers, in fact were better than half of the blokes in club.”

Saving and then earn Reserve Active membership status and then would often disappear to families and careers.

But not you guys obviously!

That's right, 'The Juniors' Patrol had young families and were still active. Most of the guys didn't live at the beach so just needed an excuse to come down in Summer. So we stayed on as a patrol doing the full load and we pioneered the 'Reserve Active' patrol.

We were a solid group, and as a result, so were our wives. The wives became more active at the club and organised functions. They made it possible, given most of the people had to travel to get here. The girls made it easy for us to spend time at the club. And we spent a lot of time at the club! We'd fill in for other people, we'd do whatever we could.

But come the late '70s, our Reserve Active patrol slowed down with changes in lifestyle and family commitments and the club went into a bit of a black hole... So

membership died off a bit, and only a few stayed on. Then I became Club Captain by default because Richie [Stewart] went overseas. I was called up by Col [Timms] who was worried about the club. We only had 23 members... it was desperate.

Only 23!? Wow, that's crazy!

A lot of people were not turning up to patrols anymore, so it was left to me to come in. I looked after the club for 3 years, from '79 to '82 and it was during that time that we started getting girls into the club.

How did you find these girls?

Well the girls had been hanging around the guys in that generation and they were good swimmers and were starting to get involved prior to being members. It was also around that time that we started having girls swimming in the Big Swim, in the third ever Big Swim. So suddenly that's when we realised these women were swimming but weren't part of the club and they were fabulous! You sort of thought 'wow how good are they



Miss Whale Beach 1947

and how great they would it be if they were to become members!?. They weren't slender, ballerina type women. So the girls didn't have the worry you might have if you were in the water and trying to manhandle a big bloke in big sea if he was in trouble.

Were others worried?

Well yes, it was a worry in the back of people's minds. I wasn't worried though. I couldn't wait for the day we'd allow women in. I always knew they were going to be a great asset to the club.

What was the political climate at the time, overall?

It was a fabulous time - women were becoming more and more equal to men. We'd had Whitlam in power and equality was being touted all along the battle lines... Helen Reddy and what have you. Change was coming but it was slow, particularly within Surf Life Saving. It was a masculine movement, and eventually it was the clubs themselves that were pushing for change. It took us a long time to make the change though. We kept

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saying ‘why can’t they be full members if they can pass the examinations?’

What was the argument at the time? Was it that they thought women may not be physically up to the task?

Well yes, it was a worry in the back of people’s minds. But I always knew they were going to be a great asset to the club. Second to that was probably the limitations caused by our facilities, without female amenities and so on. At that time surf life saving clubs usually didn’t think to get grants, so our facilities remained a limiting factor.

Let’s talk about the Bronze exam with the girls.

We had a brilliant day at Collaroy Beach for the assessment. It was 10 Aug 1980 and it was freezing. They had been training all through winter in wetsuits, because it was too cold in spring suits. They’d come out of the water blue! They really did put in the hard yards. I warned them on the day about the Chief Instructor

who would be the assessor for the day. He was known as ‘The Black Rat’. The girls complained about the way they had to ‘resus’, as they had been taught another way when training to become nurses. But they passed the test and then went back to doing resus the way they did it at the hospital [laughs].

Despite arguing, the girls did a fabulous job! They then had to do the march of the reel. I had to borrow Danny Ryan’s pick-up so I could pick up the reel for the girls to use in the examination. What they had to do was pick the reel up and march with it.

Oh, was that something that was part of the test?! Yes!

For everyone?!

Yes!

What a skill! [laughs]

After that he gave them the choice of a tube rescue or a board rescue. All they had to do was show them that

they could do a rescue. Whatever you do, say board, I told them, say board! They chose the tube! But luckily they did the rescue successfully.

Then they hoisted Marion onto their shoulders and they marched her up the beach, demonstrating a carry. They were supposed to only march just past the shore break but they marched her all the way up the bank to the assessor and asked us where we wanted her! We laughed and said ‘put her anywhere!’

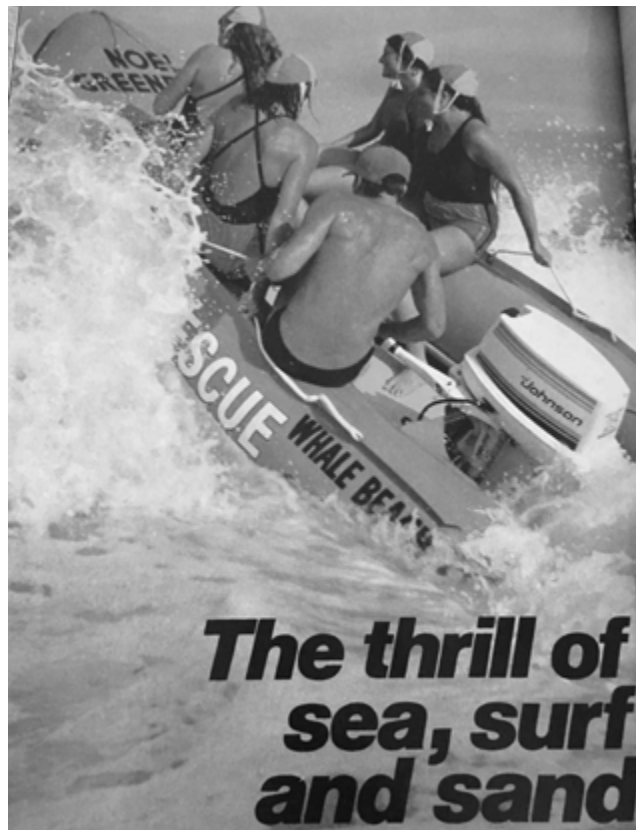
The examiner told me that it was the best pick up and carry that he had ever seen, and that they were as good as any other group that I had put through before.

We heard that Cleo Magazine did a feature article on the girls at the time, were they at that assessment?

Yeah they did an article, but the picture that they used was in September when it was warmer. It was just a photo shoot. When I was interviewed for the magazine

“So suddenly that’s when we realised these women were swimming but weren’t part of the club and they were fabulous! You sort of thought ‘wow how good are they and how great they would it be if they were to become members!?’”





Cleo No 109, November 1981 featured the first women to become lifesavers from WBSLSC

they were trying to find some dirt and they asked me if there was any discrimination during the training, but I said no of course!

Were there any other clubs that followed suit by training women?

Not immediately. Most other clubs were still trying to get registration for the season. We did the training during winter, so we were one step ahead and our squad was recorded as the first female bronze life savers to go through in New South Wales. We heard it was the first in Australia, but others made counter claims later, so it's hard to really know.

Did you have many females come through after that?

Yes, we were getting a lot of boys from Avalon at that period of time, and some of the more adventurous girls wanted to join. Often they were reasonable swimmers, but not strong on boards – they were a foreign thing.

They were pretty hard old planks back then. The soft ones these days make it a lot easier.

So there was a snowball effect...

Yeah, I was also recruiting from Barrenjoey High during the year. Firstly, I got 4 young kids who lived in Avalon and got them to come to our club and by the next year, Barrenjoey High was allowing surfing as a sport at the school, and insisting that students get their Bronze.

We put through a bunch of teachers in the course, and about 30 to 40 students. A handful of teachers then went on to get their instructors for the next season. We ensured that the girls were kept together because that was what they wanted. I was happy to see the numbers swell and they worked well as a team, so I thought why break up a good social team?

And there was our numbers boost! We had gone from the start of the season where we had 23 members,

having me in tears radioing into Surf Com one day saying 'Yes the flags are up, the beach is open and yes we're all here!' But it was just myself and my wife... To the end of the season where we had 90 odd members.

So really, that was the beginning of women at the club. We had a trickle of girls, nowhere near the torrent that we've got at the moment. I think out of the 90 or so members at the end of my 3-year reign, about 10 were female lifesavers.

Lara Boyle, on female role models



August 5 2016

In conversation with Christina Mayne

It sometimes happens that we find ourselves trapped in assumptions. If we once believed that women were ill-fitted to leadership in the surf lifesaving movement, that day has certainly ended. Holding her Gold Medallion, Trainers and Assessors certificate, Jetski Operator licence and becoming the newly appointed Club Captain of Whale Beach SLSC, Lara Boyle is one of the most qualified lifesavers in NSW. At just 21 years of age, Lara is proving that age and gender are no reason to take a back seat. A natural-born trendsetter, Lara leads with the sensitivity, assertiveness and positivity of someone far beyond her years. In the wake of her achievements, there is no doubt that she is inspiring the next generation of powerful female leaders in surf lifesaving and the wider community.

Let's start with how you became involved in Surf Lifesaving and what was your connection to the club?

Well it started at school, Pymble Ladies College and Whale Beach SLSC have had a really long association that continues to this day. Students and teachers of Pymble have been moving through our ranks for a long time.

In my year at Pymble we had thirty girls get their Bronze. I'd always been a keen bodyboarder and loved the beach... My friends and I signed up mostly when we realised we'd get to wear the uniform!

Yes the uniform! Everyone loves a woman in uniform!

[laughs] Well, at that age, things like that are a massive attraction.

Yeah, you were really young when you started becoming heavily involved in quite senior leadership roles in the club. What was that like? Exciting, daunting and full of rookie mistakes... but I wouldn't change it for the world. I was fortunate to have a great support team around me as I was encouraged to take on more responsibilities at the club, with mentors to turn to if I ever had any questions.

It's rare you get an opportunity – let alone several opportunities – so young to be able to step up into leadership positions in such a big organisation where you can make a real difference. The lessons learned so young are invaluable – they are life skills – and the experiences I've had so far have been awesome.

Who were some of those mentors you had around you?

Our trainer and past Club Captain Sally Mulligan, was an incredible role model. She inspired me and other girls to get more involved in all aspects of Surf Life Saving

and broke down a lot of walls for leadership positions in the club. She was an amazing leader, and I still aspire to her level. The hole she left behind when she moved on was huge and hard to fill, but I'd like to give it a try.

Sue Kearney was also a great role model for proving age is just a number, and Annika Harrison, as a patrol captain, encouraged her female-heavy patrol to excel in every aspect of Surf Life Saving, setting a high standard and always leading by example doing everything with her team.

It's pretty incredible how much individuals like that can inspire others. How does it make you feel that you're now part of Whale Beach SLSC's small but high calibre handful of female leaders?

I feel really privileged. To be surrounded by such inspiring women is extremely special. I'm honoured that I can call these women my friends yet still learn from them and encourage each other. When we all get together, the stuff we accomplish is pretty incredible. There are so many innovative ideas from a range of



“Our trainer and past Club Captain Sally Mulligan, was an incredible role model. She inspired me and other girls to get more involved in all aspects of Surf Life Saving and broke down a lot of walls for leadership positions in the club.”

personalities. So whilst I might be inspiring others, I think every girl and woman that steps up and gives things a go is inspirational and I feel really proud to be a part of that.

As a volunteer juggling multiple roles plus life commitments, it’s hard to continue pushing on and maintaining that energy. What motivates you?
The people (smiles) – everyone down at the club that greets you with a smile when you hit the sand. Nothing’s too hard when you remember who you’re doing it for. Leading the club into unknown waters is also an extremely exciting part of what I’m doing here. Continuing to grow the club and make regular improvements, even if they are tiny ones... In the end, even the small victories end up benefiting someone, and sometimes many people.

I’m wondering if you’ve noticed differences between the leadership styles of Whale Beach’s male and female leaders?

I’ve found it depends greatly on who the person is and I think we need to be careful with generalisations but I’ve noticed that female leaders seem to lead while working with the pack, whereas the males seem to lead from the front. Female leaders don’t tend to be phased by titles either, often coming into the role organically and doing whatever they need to meet their own expectations. Some males feel they need a title before they can be a leader and motivate others with some only craving the title and the weight it holds, but again every person is different and we’re fortunate at Whale to have a range of leaders with different styles.

As a young female in the club, what do you think have been your biggest challenges?
I think finding a leadership style that works best for me has been challenging. At times as a young female my ability has been underestimated, regardless of the knowledge I bring to the situation. The biggest learning curve for me has been figuring out how to make this work in my favour, when people misjudge my abilities.

Tough... So what about the most rewarding aspects?
Knowing you’ve made a difference. However big or small... whether through an initiative, participating in events, mentoring, sharing knowledge or just being there to support others. Watching members go from bronze trainees to becoming super involved in the club and in Surf Life Saving and becoming confident in their abilities. That’s rewarding...

Lifesaving is all about working in teams. Has there been a particular time that you felt really proud of your team?
Oh, putting 75 members through their Bronze proficiencies in one day was pretty epic! It required incredible patience and diligence from both the members and the education team. It was incredible to see the Whale Beach camaraderie and the support people gave each other, even between members who had never met each other before.



“Meeting all these amazing women you can’t help but want to give them every opportunity to grow and find their strengths, especially in surf lifesaving.”

And a time when you've been proud of yourself?

Coming in as an 18 year old Chief Training Officer with an under resourced education team and still fulfilling the education requirements (and then some) was a pretty amazing effort from everyone involved.

We went from fourteen trainers to just 2 in one season and put through 2 Bronze Medallion courses, which is no mean feat for those who have been through one. Thirty-five members gained their Advanced Resuscitation Certificates, again with everyone passing on their first attempt! We also delivered our first one week bronze course – a bit of an experiment which has been a massive success in subsequent seasons and something I'm really proud of initiating.

So to have such impressive success rates in your courses, you must have some particular techniques that you use. Do you approach training young girls differently to how you training the other incoming members?

Flexibility and sensitivity are key – some techniques work for some groups and are terrible for others. I've found that when trying to engage young women, leading by example is the best technique by far. The ocean often seems intimidating, especially at Whale on a massive day. But by getting out there with the girls for a swim or a board paddle and showing them what they're capable of, they become confident in themselves and it translates to everything else they do.

Guys can sometimes be more gung-ho, so pushing them might be more appropriate, depending on their individual personalities. For the girls though, it might take seeing a young woman doing these 'scary' things for them to try. It worked for me when Sally calmly paddled both of us into a 6ft wave during our Bronze Medallion course [laughs]!

You seem pretty passionate about getting women involved and providing them with the right kinds of opportunities in surf lifesaving. Why do you

“Coming in as an 18 year old Chief Training Officer with an under resourced education team and still fulfilling the education requirements (and then some) was a pretty amazing effort from everyone involved.”

think that is?

I think it's a combination of things. Surf Life Saving is so often viewed as a male dominated environment but there are opportunities there for the taking. Showing other women and girls what they can do within the movement is really important to me. There shouldn't be anything holding us back, sometimes we might just need a nudge in the right direction! I've also been heavily involved with girls and women at the club through the Pymble Ladies College / Whale Beach relationship since completing my Bronze Medallion as a Pymble girl, being Patrol Captain for a heavily female patrol, and having trained every girl and woman completing their Bronze Medallion since 2009. Meeting all these amazing women you can't help but want to give them every opportunity to grow and find their strengths, especially in surf lifesaving.

Where do you see female leadership in our club heading in the next 5 years?

We've got a fantastic group of women at the club



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at the moment and it's is incredibly exciting to see the responsibilities they're taking on. This season we have a Management Committee with 45% female representation which is incredible and really groundbreaking in the Surf Life Saving movement. Hopefully having a strong group of females in these leadership positions will inspire others to take on more roles on the beach, in competition and within the committees and management of the club.

Do you think there's anything else that Whale Beach SLSC could be doing or providing to encourage young aspiring female leaders?

A clear pathway of leadership positions with mentoring and succession planning for patrol captaincy and other leadership positions is vital. It's great to see the club starting to think about training beyond surf life saving skills and look at training in communication, mentoring and leadership. I think we'll see a lot of benefit from this in years to come.

Just to finish off, if you could give one piece of advice to a young women wanting to be a leader within our club, what would it be?

You're stronger than you seem and smarter than you think. There is absolutely nothing stopping you.

Georgia Roberts, on empowerment through education



August 30 2016

In conversation with Ellie Keft

It's a rare find to encounter a teacher that appreciates the importance of having a good time. As a young, female trainer, Georgia Roberts brings a fresh approach to training that leaves her trainees with the "warm fuzzies." Whilst delivering a comprehensive Bronze Medallion course which is challenging and engaging both in and out of the water, Georgia somehow manages to have trainees in constant fits of laughter which her jocular teaching style. Her courses heavily feature rigorous CPR training to a background music playlist including the Bee Gees' 'Stayin' Alive.'

Whale Beach has one of the highest Bronze Medallion pass rates up and down the NSW coast, and in her second season as Chief Training Officer Georgia seems to only just be getting started. I chatted to Georgia about the women that have influenced her when she was a young aspiring trainer, and the unique courses she delivers at Whale Beach SLSC.

So how did you become involved in surf life saving and what was your connection to the club?

Well my brother joined first with Knox so I joined mainly because of him. When I first joined PLC [Pymble Ladies College] was still advertising too, so I trained with a few friends from PLC and I knew Lara and a few others. I was 13 then.

Wow 13, that's so little!

Yeah, but I did my SRC [Surf Rescue Certificate] before I did Bronze so I had that background already.

Were you into surf stuff, like swimming, surfing or first aid before you got to the club or did it start at the club?

I always liked to train others and so over the years I was the coach of a netball team for really young kids, and also coached softball and footy. So I knew I liked the training side of it. I did swimming training at PLC, carnivals and things like that but I wasn't hugely strong at swimming. But I enjoyed it enough to want to do it

and we lived at the beaches so it was kind of a given to be on the beach although where we were at Clareville was a ‘no surf’ beach. Avalon and Whale were nearby though so I thought I might join the crew!

So becoming a trainer – how did that work?

Well I would have done my Bronze when I was 15 and then almost as soon as I could I put my hand up as a helper for Sally [Macintosh nee Mulligan], I did. I helped Sally in training mostly on the social side of it in the beginning whilst John [Lewis] was the Chief Training Officer. John was always a strong bond for me at the club. He was my mentor and he knew how much I liked training. He always helped me think about what pathways I could take in terms of certificates and training to become a trainer.

The new Bronzies were often young like me and because I was so young it kind of made sense that I would stick with Sally all day and I would help her set up fun games and swimming stuff and get to know

the kids because they were the same age. I think my training here started more on the social side by breaking the ice a bit. Also it meant that when they got their bronze they came onto my patrol with me so in a way we all kind of learnt together. So from there I figured out that you didn’t have to wait to be older to be a trainer and did the course pretty well instantly, in that same season. After that John was the one who taught me how the courses worked, and mentored my two probationary trainer courses. At first I was mainly in first aid teaching which I loved and then moved onto the other stations.

So what was being a young, female trainer like?

I remember it was sometimes just weird being so young as we used to teach a big bronze group when we had about 30 in each session and we had all different age groups and we would have school kids mixed in with adults. But it was awesome!

I’ve been looking through the Whale Beach SLSC archives for photos and there are some of you

from over the years, this tiny little girl with braces standing up in front of everyone- you were so little!! Yes it was like ‘hey guys...I’m your trainer!’ [laughs] I looked like a meerkat most of my life... [laughs] A meerkat with braces!

Excellent... a meerkat trapped in a young woman’s body...(lots of laughter)!

It was so funny – I don’t think any of them would have taken me very seriously at that time but it was really good fun! It was always funny trying to tell them your experiences. Like if you’re teaching a 45-year-old guy and he’s gone through his whole life and has experienced so much and I’m saying well this is my experience as a 16-year-old PLC girl!! [laughs]

I’m wondering, did you have any female role models that you think influenced you to stand up and become a leader in the club, like family members, friends, members in the club...?

Sally was definitely a big one because as well as training



“I really enjoy the BBQ as everyone stays together. It’s an opportunity to just chat and become friends- we talk about the day, what we like, have a general social catch up.”

and organizing stuff she actually set out to become people’s close friend and support. So when I was quite young she wouldn’t just be there to do the training thing she was also my patrol captain and friend. She would give me advice on all types of things and made me get in the water when I really didn’t want to! She was really good at helping a lot of the girls get over their fear of the ocean because she was there as your friend, not just as a trainer. It’s influenced the way I train as well. When I’m training now I try to remind myself how much of a difference it can make to have a trainer who isn’t just there to skills-train.

What’s your favourite part about the training?

I usually try to keep my training fairly flexible, allowing for time to chill out and for everyone to get to know each other.

Designated joke time?

Yep designated joke time in the middle of the day!
[laughs] Then we almost always go up to Hughesy’s

[Paul Hughes] BBQ on the deck. I really enjoy the BBQ as everyone stays together. It’s an opportunity to just chat and become friends – we talk about the day, what we like, have a general social catch up and you get to know everyone and all their different personalities.

And what do you reckon is the hardest part of the training?

I think the hardest part is sometimes the age ranges as we talked about before. You might have a course where your youngest can be 15 and your oldest can be like 60. Everyone is doing it for totally different reasons which means I also have to think about how I can provide them with what they need, to keep it relevant and engaging. It can be hard to design a course and follow it with that huge range of ages.

What about training girls, do you find that different?

I love it. I love when we do get PLC girls in and I know how to deliver the course having been through their

For example, I know that every year the pressure points are usually the same - the boards can be really scary for a lot of girls, especially since Whale Beach is not exactly the tamest beach in the world!

system. I think coming through the PLC programme has made it easier for me to empathise with the girls and I also really love becoming a mentor. For example, I know that every year the pressure points are usually the same – the boards can be really scary for a lot of girls, especially since Whale Beach is not exactly the tamest beach in the world! I like pushing them physically.

Do you like to have mixed courses or do you prefer to just have girls so you can focus on their weaker points?

I've only ever had mixed courses and I actually really like the mix. I see it as positive as it means there's more personalities and more strengths. Some of the guys who sign up to do their Bronze often have surfing experience and therefore can help the younger girls in getting over their fears.

What elements of the course make you glad you are so involved?

Probably at the end of the course when they have passed

their assessment and they realise it is not as scary as it seemed. I love seeing them on their first patrol too. I almost always come down if I know one of the guys or girls is on their first patrol. You can see that everyone in their patrol is welcoming and getting them involved, like in setting up the tent and they always mingle and everyone brings snacks down and shares them. I also love that at that point, they can start to see me as a friend too and not just a teacher. That makes me happy.

Do you think you deliver a course that is different to other trainers?

Whale Beach trains differently to many of the larger clubs in that Bronze squads are trained by the management team rather than an education team of trainers. So in those clubs you might not know the Club Captain, the Vice Captain, the Chief Training Officer [CTO]... I like Whale Beach SLSC because no matter when you've been trained, in whatever season, you've almost always been trained by the management team. So you finish the course with a lot of connections and

you feel more comfortable in approaching any of them.

How have you found your CTO role?

I think for me training for so many years, watching so many CTOs, I had so many expectations that I wanted to meet. When I actually became CTO though it was really daunting. Also the time in my life that I took on CTO prevented me giving it more thought than I should have. In the past when I had watched the other CTOs it had seemed kind of seamless, like there wasn't much to it. There is so much that happens behind the role though and you don't see all that... The emails that happen in the evenings, all the meetings, and so on. It overwhelmed me at first and it took me a while to figure out how to do it properly, especially the time management part of things. Realising it was all now my responsibility was really full on and it still is and always will be.

What extra things in the club do you think we need to provide to young women in the club to help

“Women this season are a lot more out there!... It's encouraging for younger girls to see Lara on the beach, dealing with a largely older and largely male surf club, and they see her out there being involved, smiling every weekend...”

them achieve and become great leaders?

This season will help it a lot I think. We have a female Club Captain, female Patrol Captains and Patrol Vice Captains, a female Vice President, and myself as female CTO... Women this season are a lot more out there! I think the first step to stepping into a role is seeing other people in the role and then it's like a wave reaction. It's encouraging for younger girls to see Lara on the beach, dealing with a largely older and largely male surf club, and they see her out there being involved, smiling every weekend...

Essentially at Whale Beach we're showing the surf life saving community that we have new and exciting programmes in the pipeline, and that women making these things happen is no big deal. The role stays the same, but it just happens to be filled by a woman, that's all. I think breaking down those prejudices will be the biggest step.

“I also love that at that point they can start to see me as a friend too and not just a teacher. That makes me happy.”



Jill and Sara, on female firsts



September 9 2016

In conversation with Ellie Keft

Thirty-five years after sisters Sara Seifeddine and Jill Pietzker (nee Peters) became the first female surf lifesavers in NSW, I met with them in their family home at Whale Beach where they grew up. Every waking minute that wasn't spent at school was spent on the beach, swimming way out past the break. Ask anyone who has grown up with the ocean as their backyard and they will tell you that an intimate understanding of the surf isn't an easy thing to teach.

In the late 1970s dwindling membership was threatening the longevity of the surf lifesaving movement and the suggestion was made to invite women into the fold. It wasn't well received. It was amidst this disturbance in the lifesaving force that Sara and Jill alongside Tina Gowing and Marion Robb first

became involved in the club, training and studying for their exams, which they passed in August 1980.

In 1981 the media caught on and the girls were interviewed by Cleo Magazine (Issue 109 November 1981): "Have you ever looked with admiration at the tanned, super-fit life savers parading up and down the beach? Well, now you needn't just look- for the first time in history women are being allowed to join the ranks of life savers- formerly for men only. Two sisters Sara and Jill Peters, Marion Robb and Tina Gowing talk about how they became Sydney's first female team..."

For Sara and Jill, becoming lifesavers was part of a natural progression. It was this attitude which helped fashion the surf lifesaving movement of today that strives for equal representation of women in all aspects. Without women like them, the surf lifesaving movement as we know it today would not exist.

“I remember I was at the beach one day and there was this great big surf rolling in and one of the lifeguards said “I bet you can’t swim past those waves! So off I went and swam way out. There was no one on the beach. Then he said, “Well if you can do that, I reckon you could be a lifesaver!”

I guess I always think about trailblazers as having fought under challenging circumstances, pushing through the social boundaries for something that they really loved and were passionate about. Does that sound like you two leading up to the 1980/81 season when you did your bronze?

S: I think for us it was just a way of life... we did it but it was incidental. We were doing it all anyway so it just made sense to do the training.

Were you strong swimmers?

S & J: Oh yes!

S: Because dad was actually a surf life saver at Bondi. When we were young he started the Whale Beach Amateur Surf Swimming Club as well. We’d have a BBQ on the rocks past the pool, they would put ropes up and present awards at the end.

That’s fantastic, what a vibe! How long did it go on for?

J: Oh for a few years. It was great while it lasted. There were a lot of kids in the neighbourhood at that time. We mostly swam in the pool at that time but later on we did more in the surf.

S: We were only 11 or 12 years old when dad got us involved in Balmoral...

J: ... we would swim Balmoral on Saturdays and Whale Beach on Sundays.

S: And I swam against Shane Gould in the State Championships when I was about 17 or 18!

So how did you go from swimming for fun at Whale Beach to being involved with the club and doing your Bronze Medallion?

S: I remember I was at the beach one day and there was this great big surf rolling in and one of the lifeguards said “I bet you can’t swim past those waves!”

I’ve played that game before!

[laughter] So off I went and swam way out. There was no one on the beach. Then he said, “Well if you can do that, I reckon you could be a lifesaver!”

What was your entry point into the club, did you have friends there?

S: I remember being down at the beach with our friend Tina [Gowing]. She lived at Lindfield and she and her sister would come down to Whale Beach and Palm Beach on the weekends and hang out with the Palm Beach boys because they didn’t have any women in the surf club at that point.

J: Yeah. Then there was Marion [Robb]. She grew up in the area and she was like a sister or a cousin to us, very close. Paul Young who was heavily involved at that time, was Marion’s boyfriend.

S: And we were also friends with the lifeguards on duty because during the week we would spend a lot of time

at the beach. In those days there were no computers and our mum didn't let us watch television. So we would spend literally our whole lives at the beach. We'd go down after breakfast... if it was the school holidays, we'd come home for lunch and we'd go down again. We'd spend all our life swimming way out.

Do you still swim?

J: I had to stop swimming. I used to swim with the Aussie Masters but now have a bad shoulder. When I joined the Masters I had a really good coach and I did get better at kicking... there was a wide range of ages and it was thrilling to swim at the Australian Institute of Sport.

In the late '70s clubs were starting to realise that including females in their membership pool was vital to their longevity. I read that Whale Beach had just 23 members in the season prior to you receiving your bronze...

J: Yeah and I remember it was Bryan Webster and a few others who got it all happening.

How did it feel to be in this first group of female lifesavers in NSW? Did you feel you were special at the time?

S: No we really didn't consider it... we were totally comfortable in our abilities so it didn't seem like a big deal to us. It was just like a natural progression from what we were always doing every day anyway. It was part of our lifestyle. One day we were sitting on the beach and the next we were over there doing flags... it was no big deal.

And I think we were on that cusp of a generation where we didn't distinguish between what the boys and girls did. Well there was little bit of that but when I look back on it now I realise that we were the cutting edge of that and we didn't realise it.

You two were cutting edge?

S: No I mean our generation. By that time the contraceptive pill had become more commonly used, there was more female empowerment and

opportunities. As high school students in the the mid '70s we felt like it was our right. Whereas our mother was just so different to us. And the media had a lot to do with it too, writing about women's rights and feminism. So we were the beneficiaries of that movement in the seventies. Only looking back on it now do I realise how cutting edge it was then.

J: Only 10 years earlier - in the '60s - how different it would have been... We grew up swimming and on the beach and we were so in tune with the water we didn't see it as anything unusual. Being women didn't seem a huge barrier for us.

So can you tell me about the bronze course?

J: Well as we said, we were extremely comfortable in the water so that part of the course didn't phase us. I was a nurse and Sara was training to be a nurse too so they loved that because we knew our Advanced Resus procedures.

Did you find the First Aid training at the beach very different to what you had been learning as nurses?

J: Yes it was quite different as the nursing was generally focused on a patient in bed... and we had drugs! On the beach there were other things that came into play that kept us on our toes.

Actually when we were training one day we were involved in a rescue that really tested us. We were jogging on the beach in the middle of winter- it was very cold. I think Bryan Webster was with us and some guy came running up the beach from the north end, saying "Quick, quick, a guy is drowning". He was right off the rocks at the north end and he'd had a fit or something and fallen off the rocks. So we ended up getting the ambulance and the helicopter... I think we got all the services involved because we couldn't get him off the rocks because he was unconscious.

S: I remember once we had our bronze, bringing in a big Italian lady who nearly drowned me!



“Whale Beach at that period of time, with the people that lived here... it was absolutely perfect. It will never be repeated, that sense of freedom...”

Was surf awareness was not so great back then?

S: Oh no it was pretty bad. You'd get a lot of tourists on the weekend particularly different nationalities and they had no idea about the surf. And almost every weekend a shark alarm would go off. I remember when I was about 19 I was swimming way out the back and there was no-one else around because I always loved swimming by myself. The waves were just rolling in and I saw this shark right near me. The shark alarm didn't go off but the guys on the beach saw it. I was swimming like hell and then running along the sand and all the lifesavers were shouting "Shark, Shark!!" It was terrifying!!

Were there ever any attacks?

J: No there was a pod of porpoise killing a shark up on the north end though...

So what about the bronze exam, what was that like?

S: Well we had to do the 'run-swim-run', a belt or tube rescue I think... We had to swim out to the patient and bring them in. I remember it was high tide, there was a

full swell and it was winter so it was cold and deserted, and I remember the big stormwater drain at Collaroy beach... There was man assessing us who was very stern and they used to call him 'The Black Rat'... They said that he was surprised at how well we did. Well we were bound to be pretty good because we had been training for a year waiting for them to allow us to do the test! The other squads had mostly only been training for 6 weeks.

J: We had to do a 'patient carry' up the beach too. We were pretty strong... We hoisted them up on our shoulders and carried them all the way up to the assessors even though we were meant to drop the patient at the water's edge [laughs]. We were quite nervous as we felt there was a lot resting on this. Apparently 'The Black Rat' had been saying for so long that we couldn't be lifesavers. Bryan would keep us updated on all the committee meetings that were happening where it was being decided that women could do the exam. At one point we thought it might never happen...

“We were totally comfortable in our abilities so it didn’t seem like a big deal to us. It was just like a natural progression from what we were always doing every day anyway. It was part of our lifestyle. One day we were sitting on the beach and the next we were over there doing flags... it was no big deal.”

We have these brilliant images of you and the other two girls which were published in a Cleo magazine in November 1981. How did that come about?

J: I don't actually know how they found out about us. There was a featured section on women in sport though, particularly focusing on water sports so perhaps they came looking for a story and found us? I can't remember...

The images are quite clear and professional, they must have done an organised shoot right?

J: Yes, it was a shoot. It went for hours!

How long did it last?

J: Like three or four hours at least! They did it on a weekend day. The beach conditions were quite bad and they kept telling people to go away, "get off this part of the beach, go away, we're filming!" [laughs] They would be like "run this way, turn that way! There wasn't a big enough wave, run through the surf again!"

“The beach conditions were quite bad and they kept telling people to go away, “get off this part of the beach, go away, we’re filming!” [laughs] They would be like “run this way, turn that way! There wasn’t a big enough wave, run through the surf again!”

Splash more!

[laughs] We were a bit naive, we just thought they’d come and take a few photos and then go away again. We were allowed to ride the rubber duckie [Inflatable Rescue Boat – IRB] though on that day which was a lot of fun. IRBs had been around for a little while at that stage but they were still a bit of a novelty for us.

So there had been a lot of resistance surrounding the decision to allow women to become lifesavers?

J: I think there was a lot of resistance yeah. I don’t remember anyone from Whale Beach SLSC voicing any negativity but there was a lot of resistance from higher up. As I understood it, it was the authorities or branch who didn’t want it to happen. I remember it was months and months into our training and they came back with a feeble excuse- there were no female toilets in the surf club!

I’d actually wanted to do surf boat rowing at one stage but I wasn’t allowed to because I was a girl. Someone made a remark about how we would have to wear our cozzies up our backside and so it wouldn’t be a good look...

Were there other opportunities for women to compete?

J: Well I did go to a March past at Collaroy, and we

used to do the ‘Point-to-Point’ swims on the weekend. But those events were all fun and social though, serious competition was just for the guys.

Did that doubt surrounding your abilities to perform as lifesavers affect you?

S: It didn’t upset us because we knew we could swim. It was nothing to do with egos or anything but we were probably better swimmers than many of the boys!



“It didn’t upset us because we knew we could swim. It was nothing to do with egos or anything, but we were probably better swimmers than many of the boys!”



J: It did annoy me a bit that I wasn’t allowed to row as I was quite strong and probably would have been good at it. I had learnt to row at school and we had rowed all over the Basin.

You both went into nursing which was and is a female-dominated field. You must have felt a difference between that environment and being in the minority on the beach…?

S: When I started nursing they wanted you to be almost nun-like. You had to be pure, you couldn’t wear makeup or jewellery and you had this starched uniform and you had to live in nurses quarters for the first three months… Our time at Whale Beach was such a contrast… It was a golden time. We have very little constraints.

J: Our Mum wasn’t particularly a vocal feminist but in practice she did always support us. When we were young it was mum who used to take all of us to the beach. She couldn’t swim to save herself!

S: Yes that’s right that was a great contributing factor. She would take us all down in the big Valiant station wagon- no seatbelts! I was the oldest, I’d be driving! [laughs] I’d fit about 12 kids in the back! We’d all go to the beach!

J: Whale Beach at that period of time, with the people that lived here… it was absolutely perfect. It will never be repeated, that sense of freedom…

S: We used to roam from here to Barrenjoey Lighthouse- over the top of the hills… We really did feel like we owned the place.

Joy Cullis, on family commitments

September 6 2016

In conversation with Ellie Keft

Working full time as a nurse and raising three energetic children in the '80s and '90s on the Northern Beaches, you could be forgiven for thinking that Joy Cullis had enough on her plate. Between 1999 to 2005, while her husband Phil took the reigns as President of Whale Beach SLSC, Joy was a quiet wall of support. In this way, Joy's story is typical of so many others. – The success of the club in those early years was made possible by the sacrifices of the wives, girlfriends, and friends of the men at the top. I spoke to Joy about her experience as a girlfriend and later, a young wife in the “man's world” of surf life saving in the 1970s through to the late 2000s.

What was your involvement with Whale Beach SLSC when your husband Phil was President?

I was a young bride at that time and I stayed in the background. I have fabulous memories of those early years in the surf club though. We were always there or socialising in each others' homes and it was really lovely. I didn't have anything to do with the running of the club, as Phil did, but I was very involved socially. As a trained nurse I took on the role of First Aid Officer for a few years, which I liked. We were living in the area so we were often called upon to help out.

Phil had been involved with the club for quite a while before he met you, hadn't he?

Yes, Phil has always been involved in the surf club, since he joined as a 'Cadet' at 14 and back then he did rowing too. He was there when the iconic member Jack Uren used to be the sweep for the boat. They went to a lot of competitions, it was his life really...

Wow, so he's been in the club a long time!

Yeah and now he's 69! He lived at Whale Beach after

moving from the UK in 1957 when he was in year 6. He's been a part of the community for a long time. He went to Avalon Public School, our kids went there, and now our grandchildren are going there!

Has Phil always lived in Whale Beach?

He moved to Whale Beach because his brother was at Avalon and he didn't want his brother looking over his shoulder all the time!

So rowing was his main involvement as a teenager?

And patrols, yeah. When we first got married he used to go down and look after that boat, you know that awful jetski jet boat that they had at Whale Beach?

Might be before my time?

It always used to be turned upside down... I spent a lot of my evenings as a wife in those early years down at the boatshed while Phil repaired the engines [laughs]. He used to do it after they'd tipped it up so it would be up and running for the next weekend. We spent a lot of time at the beach...



That was before you had kids?

Yes, that was before kids... after we had children and I went back to work it was harder. Phil would still go down to the club and Moby's was quite a scene at that time too.

At that point were there any other wives or girlfriends around?

Yes, we all used to meet at each others' places or go for a picnic. We all had our children around the same time, so that was really lovely. One of my best friends was Lindy Webster – I used to babysit her children. It was a social scene then, I guess, as it is now?

It's different now. The girls who are involved are often there independent of the men and many people are not living in the area. Which is why I love hearing about your experiences of that close-knit community feeling...

I think that's what made it nice, you know. Some of the women had roles within the club, like Social Secretary

for example. We went to award nights and carnivals up until we had children.

How did things change when the kids came along?

When the children came things changed quite a bit because young children, particularly more than one, can be quite a challenge at the beach. My love for the beach wasn't enough to bring me down there with the kids very often. So I tended to stay at home with the kids and Phil would go down and do patrol. I did get more involved again when Phil became President but he didn't actually use me a lot to organise things. So I wasn't like a 'President's Wife' who was a head of the auxiliary or anything like that. We would all just pitch in and do little jobs. I'll tell you what I do well and that's cleaning up! I'm a good cleaner-upperer! [laughs]

That's excellent! I'm sure there was a lot of cleaning up!

I was more of a support to Phil but not the surf club as such because if I was working night duty. In my own

profession I was a real leader but not at the surf club. Maybe it was because I didn't want to impose on Phil's area... I'm not too sure.

If I remember correctly, you have three kids don't you? Were they involved in the club?

Yes, Jeffery was the youngest and he had two older sisters, Kate and Jane. They all did their Bronze when they were 14 to 15 years old.

Do you think they had a connection to the beach?

Well Jeffrey more than the girls, definitely. For the girls, I don't think the surf club meant as much to them. I think they found it a bit chauvinistic. It didn't cater well for girls and women back then. We were also all heavily involved in St. Marks Church and the contrast between the surf club and the church was significant! The church was more sheltered and didn't have the jokes on women and all that. The surf club was a bit of a Boys' Club.

“Yes, we all used to meet at each others' places or go for a picnic. We all had our children around the same time, so that was really lovely.”

“Back when we were in the club there were all of these people who were involved because they loved it and they spread that feeling of love. It’s about creating the club that gives everyone different points of entry and different opportunities.”

I know when Phil was president it was always just a man’s world. We used to go to a lot of surf carnivals and then Phil started rowing, and of course with the rubber duckies when they first brought those in... I can remember going up to Soldier’s Beach with the boys from the surf club. It was very much their day. But many of the wives wanted to do it and enjoyed doing it. The beach is not my love and my family know that, I don’t like sand! [laughs] But I did enjoy doing it because I was with Phil.

Being a boy, I guess fitting in was probably easier for Jeff.

Yes, and also I think he is a bit like Phil – a bit of a clown! The girls would go down to the club with Jeffrey and join in with the group but they didn’t have any close friends there and there really weren’t that many girls in the club at that time.

Do you think that your involvement in the club shaped your family as a unit?

Yes, I think it has in some areas. I enjoyed the companionship, and when we meet with people now it’s just like we are, you know, back at your age, it’s lovely. And I think a very positive thing for all the kids... they were always learning something new.

I guess that’s what’s different about your generation – it was more of a team effort and the wives had to be very much on board.

Well many of the wives really wanted to be. A lot of the girls had grown up at the beach and so they were always in the surf club or at other surf clubs.

Things changed a bit when Lindy [Webster] died. She was my best friend. I had spent a lot of time with her. She was one of the social hubs you know, she kept everyone together and invited people over.

Having someone like Lindy really does create a sense of connectedness...

Lindy lived at Whale Beach. We’d go there all the

time...they used to have end of season BBQs there. Jan and Chris [Hendrikson] owned the kiosk on the beach, so we used to go down there a lot. In the afternoons after patrol we’d go home and get our steaks then come back and have a party. So those two couples were the ones who really held it together at that time.

This season we have 45% female representation on our Management Committee. I was wondering what you think about that?

I think that’s great! Women are more likely to be team oriented, thinking of new programmes and so on, whereas I do think the men work a bit more as individuals.

Do you think having women in leadership positions creates a more connected club?

I think so. It creates a safe place. It’s also good because it gets people feeling that they’re needed and valued, and that they have some input into the community. Back when we were in the club there were all of these



people who were involved because they loved it and they spread that feeling of love. It's about creating the club that gives everyone different points of entry and different opportunities.

I've have noticed though, that often women are reluctant to step into leadership positions, perhaps until they have seen someone else in that position.

So I'm going to ask you a question now [smiles]. Do you find that the men are supportive? Particularly the older men in Phil's bracket, are they supportive or do they undermine the confidence of the young people sometimes?

A bit of both... [smiles]

Telling everyone what to do! Theirs was the golden age remember! [laughs] Phil has always seen good in young people though. He's always reminding the old guys that they did the exact same things as the young people are doing now. Bringing up the young people in the surf club is about building up the morale and their self esteem to step up.

Which involves letting go of the reigns a little I think.

Perfect, perfect... they need to let go and stand back a little bit and realise that the young can do the job better at this stage of their life, because they're dealing with people every day in their study and their jobs. They're more connected.

Our new President this season has been really great at saying, 'Have faith, the younger members can do it! We will do it differently to how you did it but we will do it!'

Indeed, you're so right. Phil used to say 'I'm so proud of the young people in surf life saving'. But it's the same with anything, you have to move on. When you come to the top of your company you eventually have move out and let others take over.

So you look back on that time as a nice time, being with your family?

I do. For me looking back it was lovely having all those

people around. Because I came from Victoria I knew no-one when I married Phil, I didn't have a friend up here. So the surf club was the circle that I got to know. And I don't think over the years I've had an argument with anyone! [laughs]

Midget Farrelly, on the strength of women



July 3 2016

In conversation with Ellie Keft

It's a powerful thing to meet an icon. I remember our first meeting- I accosted him as he was sitting on the bench scanning the waves at Whale Beach, a morning routine for Midget Farrelly. It was early Spring and there was no one else on the beach. I left our slow chat feeling paradoxically energised and meditative at the same time. The intimate connection he had with the ocean was omnipresent.

I interviewed Midget just one month before he passed away. What I could have asked him if I'd known that this was the last interview he would give...

It was a brisk but sunny Sunday morning at the surf club and Midget told me he could only give me a couple of hours- he needed to get in the water before the day got away. He was a poetic conversationalist, an expert of the tangent, and someone you might find

yourself sitting next to on the beach, chatting to for an hour without realising where the conversation began and ended.

The white van doesn't pull up each morning anymore, and we don't see Midget's silhouette out in the surf boat sweeping for his team- but we still have his passion, his stories and his legacy.

An honour and a privilege- thanks for the chat Midge.

How about the surf this week Midget?! It's been huge! And cold!

Yeah it's been fantastic hasn't it. It was the cold upwelling.

What's a cold upwelling?

What happens is that the east coast low had a black nor'easter in it and it blew the warm top off and the cold water underneath rolled up.

Ah ok. I assumed the sudden cold was just a current. That's interesting... upwelling.
Yeah, it's called an upwelling. It happens all around the world. You'll notice through summer that when we get a black nor'easter or a run of nor'easters, water temperatures start falling.

True. Yeah it's usually warmer at this time of the year.
Yeah. Well we're actually pretty lucky because usually by July, it's starting to fall a little faster. But... it's good!

So Midget what I wanted to chat to you about today, is women!
Whale Beach Women dadadadaaaa!

Yeah! So how did you get into rowing with women?
So I started with Palm Beach in boats with females because I was approached by a female crew to teach them and I was a surfer bla bla bla. There were four girls... [hesitates and smiles] What am I gonna call

them girls or females? They were all young to start with anyway!

Girls is fine!
So with these girls we basically won it in the semis because no other boat had qualified in the time limit for the finals. And it was a huge year at Kurrawa- a huge year at Kurrawa! There's a video called "Carnage" it'll give you an idea, you know, of how good the girls were. I mean we made the final in our first year, and I was still learning about rowing and surf boats. The surfing part I already had, so to speak.

Because surf boats are what they are, people are... reluctant to get involved with them you know? They look big and dangerous and the history is they were rowed by big tough men! [laughs]. And that's what surf clubs were originally- big tough men you know. Ex-footballers, ex-coppers, ex-services.

So after that you came to Whale Beach, right?
Yeah, I was back at Freshy [Freshwater] for a while there but then came up to Whaley. We've known the people here our whole lives because we used to live here. I lived in Morella and in Byna. So I've surfed this beach most of my life.

I bet the club was stoked to have you!
Well... I was unique in as much as I bought my own boats, and at times I'd have two boats at the one time. And I just happened to be that kind of person... And I paid for my own repairs. You know, it was something I wanted to do and I wasn't gonna let little things stop me.

I had experienced clubs in the past who had some rubbish equipment like "oh you can have that" and I was like "oh I'd rather buy something good" [laughs] "So I did!"

So rowing with women at Whale Beach, tell me about that.
So I came here and started raising crews, and you sent me an image of one of the crews, a little girls crew from PLC (pictured below), under 19s. We trained at Palmy and they'd arrive in their school uniforms with their straw hats in a BMW and we'd drag the boat out and it was pretty funny because they were so young.

So how old were they?
16 or 17. Well one had her licence for sure. And it was this funny... One of the girls goes "oh can we not go out past the point because it's too choppy out there and I'll get seasick and I went yeaahhh right." [smiles] But they were really competent. They could get out and get back in. They'd done a little bit of rowing at school. The parents were rapt because here's these four little girls, their daughters, competing, with caps... in a big surf boat and managing the boat.



Yeah that's awesome!

Yeah, we had a pretty good couple of years together. I was Boat Captain here and we raised something like 12 crews in about 2 years. We had good crews, you know. Crews that could win. And crews that just loved to row boats as well. We also had three boat carnivals here at Whale Beach. They were a big deal, locals loved it, everybody pitched in. It was faaan-tastic!

How do you see rowing these days?

Well this time when I was approached, I decided to keep it really small and really internal and to pull the rowers from the club. So this time, I don't know how but I found the guys Cam [Taylor] and Angus [Wood] and Nick [Wubben] who also had a big peer group- a lot of girls. So along came the females! And straight away I had an Under 23 women's crew.

And although it started with the four guys and we'd always have a girl in the boat! 'Cause I could never get the four guys. Lucy [Stranger] was always in the boat.

And then when Lucy wasn't, Amy [Gojnich] was... and then suddenly there's 4 girls, then there's 6, then 8! They'd all told their friends how much fun they'd had! We'd be up at Long Reef early in the morning, sun just coming up and bommies just breaking gently and we'd be catching waves- three boys and a girl. I really liked the equality. I really liked the way the boys treated the girls and the girls treated the boys. I really liked it, you know. And we might go to breakfast afterwards, and sit around and bullshit about the waves we'd caught or something!

So this time round I think I did it right. We had a solid crew, great leaders- Cam really is a good leader, and Angus too... Like when we go away on trips and stuff, those guys put it all together. And we all enjoy each other's company. We have a great time, which is always the way I wanted it to be. I always wanted it to be like it is now.

“We’d be up at Long Reef early in the morning, sun just coming up and bommies just breaking gently and we’d be catching waves- three boys and a girl. I really liked the equality. I really liked the way the boys treated the girls and the girls treated the boys. I really liked it, you know.”

“I use females to teach males to row... With guys, quite often their egos- or their manliness gets in the way. And rowing is about light touch. I tell the guys ‘Hey guys, this is piano playing, if you’re gonna muscle up, we’re gonna go slow.’”

Yeah a close group of friends- more fun than competition?

Well equal, definitely equal. You know like “hey the waves are good, do you wanna go out in the boat?” “Hey Midget I hear it’s gonna be big at Palmy, I got the boys- we’re coming.” “Ok Cam, I’ll be there” [laughs]. And later “oh Midget, the girls are coming too” “Ok Cam, bring the girls too!”... That sort of thing.

And I’ve said to the club too “Look, you want patrollers? Then you’ve gotta have something here that people want.” Rowing is something that people enjoy. They catch a good wave in a boat and have a beer afterwards- it’s a lot of fun. And I’ve learnt a lot from these kids too.

Such great memories... So do you have plans to expand the team?

Well it’s on a slow grow. If I have four crews I’ll be happy. I’ve been pushing Cam and Angus to get their sweeps licence over the winter but I get “oh Midget I don’t know, I’m gonna be really busy” [laughs] “Angus!

Cam! Get in the boat!” [laughs]. So you know, I want those two guys to sort of take it. They’re probably terrified I’m gonna walk away but I’m not. I’ll always be there, sort of thing... But it’s gonna do a slow grow... I hope. And that’s where we stand today.

Were there ever strength imbalances in the boat, when you had a three boys and one girl in the boat?
Well it’s a funny thing [smiles].

I use females to teach males to row. Ella [Vial] in the fourth seat, which is the seat closest to me, with three men behind her. I would use her technique to teach them. Because the boat’s 26 feet, 200 kilos, you go ‘oh, you gotta be strong’, but I say ‘no you don’t!’ Four people doing the same thing, at the same time. With females, they learn to do stuff together sooner. So initially you get there a little quicker with females because they feel their way into it. With guys, quite often their egos- or their manliness gets in the way. And rowing is about light touch. I tell the guys “Hey guys,

this is piano playing, if you’re gonna muscle up, we’re gonna go slow.” And that’s what happens. Because the boat is sensitive, and it’s fine, and twitchy, if you’re outta sync with the rest of the crew the boat’s bucking and kicking- it won’t go forward!

It takes longer for it to sink in with guys?

Yeah, that it’s all touch and feel, and you move with the least disturbance to the boat because it just slows down once it starts wobbling, and yawing and rolling and pitching! It’s really hard for people to get that. I learnt it from old guys who’d been rowing all their lives, and they said “We’re silky smooth Midge” and I went “hm, there you go!” (laughs). It’s all about touch.

Were you ever surprised at how women performed in the surf?

Well I was gonna tell you this little story. The surf kept getting bigger and bigger and I’m going “they won’t run the females today- no way!” I’d been out there surfing in the morning and I was sitting out at the gate

cans and there was whitewater rolling through the gate cans and it's 6 to 8 feet and I'm going "this ocean is really challenging." And there's currents and endless sets and it always breaks another bank out just when you think you're out further.

So I had my surf early, and I went to breakfast. I didn't think I'd be in a boat that day. And we're walking back down after breakfast and they're calling me! Because my crew's put the boat together- they've connected the batteries, and they've put the rowlocks in, they've put the sweep oars in, and we're about to race! And I'm going "You're kidding!" And I wouldn't have gone out, but they were going out because they'd been winning, winning, winning, winning. So that blew me away [smiles].

And how did they go... make it out alive?

Well, we made it to the final. I'd ocean trained them so intensely that nothing unpredictable could happen. We learnt to go forwards, backwards, sideways, upside

down- the whole thing. They were so familiar- it's like a car, after you've driven it for a year, you know all about it don't you?

Yep.

It's not entirely related, but here's a story I wanted to tell you.

Sure thing Midget...

Barrenjoey has a wave that runs around the back of it and crosses the Pittwater to Resolute Beach, and it breaks in 4 metre North East swell. In other words, an East Coast low. And three women who have rowed with me have rung me up and said "We wanna go out" and I go "Well what about the fourth?" and they said "Well, we're struggling" but later rung me up and said "Midget, we've got a girl!" I said "Does she know what she's doing?" "Oh yeah, she's so and so" "Oh yeah, I know her, let's go."



“And that’s the way boats are. Because there’s five of you, if you get it right, it’s a scream. That’s been my experience and that’s why I’m involved. If I was in it just to teach people to race and try to win I’d probably go back to surfing. I like the people, and as long as that’s happening, it’s good. We’re moving in the right direction.”

So we go round the back of Barrenjoey and there’s half a dozen other boats there all trying to catch that magic wave that goes all the way around across Pittwater. Only the biggest wave really does that anyway, and to catch the biggest one, you sort of almost gotta get it breaking on you. Because you’re in a river. So we’re up against the Joey, and the biggest one’s coming and there’s all these boats rushing out to get past me. And I’m pointed in and I’m talking to my stroke and saying “I want you to tell me when it starts to break”– ‘cause I can’t look back you know, I’m trying to steer, ‘cause you can’t screw up, dropping over the front. So she’s looking, we’re starting to row and I say “is it breaking yet?” and she says “yeah, it’s starting to break now” and I said “Ok, GO!” And we catch the wave and we turn the corner into Pittwater. These waves come in a sequence of four or five– the first one dies, the second one dies, the third ones jumps.

So we ride about three waves and we got across the Pittwater and the girls are yelling and screaming

and carrying on and they’re going “Can we do that again!?” and I go “No, there’s only one wave like that in the ocean– and we got it.” Then one of the girls said “Midget, is this better than sex?” and I said “Only you would know the answer to that!” [laughs]. And then when we got back– these are 25 or 26 years olds– and it’s pretty scary out there when it’s 4 metres here. There’s whitewater all the way out. And later on one of the girls said to me “Midget you’ll love this– when we asked So-And-So to row with us, she said ‘Oh is he any good, what’s he like as a sweep?’” But she got in the boat and it was probably the best wave she ever caught in her life!

And that’s the way boats are. Because there’s five of you, if you get it right, it’s a scream. That’s been my experience and that’s why I’m involved. If I was in it just to teach people to race and try to win I’d probably go back to surfing. I like the people, and as long as that’s happening, it’s good. We’re moving in the right direction.

But I gotta go have a surf before it drops! Thanks Ellie, see ya!

Yep, thanks Midget!

And then he was gone...



Natalie Chan, on female education



September 5 2016

In conversation with Ellie Keft

From 2004 to 2010 Natalie Chan trained squad after squad of Bronze Medallion hopefuls. As a young physiotherapist, Nat cut through the superfluous administrative clutter and delivered courses that were straightforward, logical and successful. As the first female Chief Training Officer at Whale Beach SLSC, Nat brought unrivaled professionalism to her training, creating order from chaos. She oversaw the transition from the antiquated paper filing systems of the pre-2000s to the use of Surfguard, an online, centralised membership database system, as well as completing a statewide revamp of the Bronze Medallion course involving the retraining of all active members at the time.

What struck me about Nat, was her unphased attitude towards life's challenges. Whale Beach needs a Chief Training Officer... no one else will do it? Ok I guess

I will! She would lead large groups of men, as well as competing with the men with an attitude that said 'why not?!'. Nothing was too hard and with her attitude that being a woman would not affect her capability as a life saver and a trainer, Nat has contributed to a community that now celebrates and encourages women wholeheartedly.

So Nat, you started with the club while you were still at school then trained as a physio?

Yes, I was at Abbotsleigh, I had done pool lifesaving in the past and I thought 'I'm going to be a lifesaver!' I thought it'd be a bit of fun and I could go to the beach more often. We used to holiday at Palm Beach, but you had to be 18 to join their surf club. So dad and I looked around and the people at Whale Beach were really nice... so I joined up.

That's cool... Did you become a trainer to use your physio skills?

No, I just felt that the club needed trainers. My skills were relevant though. Things like how do you put a bandage on, practical things. Also I was seeing how important these skills were in real life and I wanted to pass that on. At one point rowing was starting up and the teams would contact me saying 'they just need a bronze medallion so they can row!' They were trying to hurry through it and I said 'No, they need a bronze medallion and then they can row!' I was passionate about actually giving people useful skills, not just moving people through the production line.

Did you take on other roles in the club?

I ended up as patrol captain at one stage because no one else was going to do it. The patrol captain is a hard position to fill. I actually quite enjoyed doing it because my board skills aren't great so... I was able to use my other talents.

Did having weaker board skills affect your training?

I tried to make sure when I was training people that I had some people who had more experience with board skills than me. I got their help when it came to doing board rescues. I wanted to have their years of experience around. If the surf was big and rough when I was training new kids I would say "no, not today"!

So were you the first female Chief Training Officer?

Yeah, I think I was. I think at the time, there weren't that many other people wanting to do either job, Chief Training Officer or Club Captain, so I was asked which one do you want to do? I chose training.

Was it challenging moving into training so early?

Well I suppose I worked hard. I wrote up how I wanted it to be done, which wasn't how it had been run before.

What was different about your training?

It was a bit more structured than in previous years, but still flexible. If the surf looked ok to take a board out we

“We know that Surf Life Saving in general is male dominated, so the challenge is to include all women, from 8 to 80 and support them in their involvement with the club.”





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would do that rather than doing bandages and vice versa if the surf was terrible we would change the schedule around for the day to suit the conditions. Obviously I wanted to make sure the people I was training were competent before sending them to an exam! [smiles]

How were your success rates with trainees passing their exams?

There were quite a lot of comments from the assessors around the region saying they were very well prepared. We never had any major issues.

Were there any women around at the club that you looked up to or considered as role models?

Not women, no. There were plenty of men I looked up to. They would said “you wanna go for a swim, great, just join the boys” and I think there just weren’t enough women around for me to see them as role models.

Whale Beach SLSC is actively trying to boost female numbers but we have a long way to go.

What do you find helps include women?

For me, encouragement and having the backing of people. I think rather than just saying you're good at doing things so continue on with what you're doing, you need to ask if there's anything they would like to work on. Then catch up every now and again... Having a group of women who can get together often and share and support each other is really important. We know that Surf Life Saving in general is male dominated, so the challenge is to include all women, from 8 to 80 and support them in their involvement with the club.

What's hard is encouraging girls to be curious and be comfortable with not being good at stuff... you've got to find some way to create an environment where they feel safe to fail or fall. I always felt safe when I was there- you'd probably say it was a big family. There was no judgement if you couldn't do it. I'd look at other people and go, "how do they do that"? That was how I learnt. Also encouraging

in-house competitions is important. Giving everyone the opportunity to come down and go out for a paddle on Sunday morning.



Sue Kearney, on female superheros



September 4 2016

In conversation with Ellie Keft

Sue Kearney is a legend. A legend who hides her light under a bushel. Every young woman that has come through Whale Beach SLSC in recent years will undoubtedly name Sue as one of their key role models in tackling the surf, in swimming, board and ski paddling. Sunday morning events regularly see her as one of the top three finishers, leaving the ‘big, strong men’ for dead!

Approachable and humble, Sue’s laughter can be heard from all corners of a room. The surf life saving movement is epitomised by Sue Kearney- a can-do attitude, optimistic, vigilant, passionate, and skilled in the water. As a self-confessed ‘Westie,’ Sue tells about how she went from swimming in the local ‘water hole’ in Parramatta, to becoming eleven time Australian Ironwoman champion.

You’ve had a long association with Surf Lifesaving – how did it all start?

Well, I actually grew up in Parramatta and when I moved to the Northern Beaches about 23 years ago (I was already 35 years old) I joined Dee Why Surf Life Saving Club. I was at TAFE and I met a lady whose husband was Club Captain at Dee Why. She said she was about to do her Bronze and encouraged me to as well. I thought oh ok, I’ll go along! I didn’t actually like Dee Why Beach all that much, it gets a lot of weed. But when I did my Bronze everyone was really good to me and they said ‘are you going to join the club?’ and I said [smiling] ‘oh ok...’

I stayed at Dee Why for a couple of years and competed in the patrol comps, as well as the Masters Competitions down there, Branch, State and Aussies.

Was that in swimming competition?

‘IronWoman’ comps. Also the surf race with the tube and board. Then I went to Queenscliff, because they

had a huge Masters squad and were a more competitive club. I stayed there for six or seven years and was an age manager for Nippers too. In big clubs like that where they have a big Nippers programme it's just kind of taken that you will help out. And I like working with kids too, so I enjoyed it.

So what brought you to Whale Beach?

My brother-in-law and sister had a house here. I use to come up do some of the surf races, even though I wasn't part of the club, and I started doing The Big Swim. When they built their retirement house, they built a granny flat and that's where I live. So when I moved up here, it just made sense to join the club. I think it's been about 10 years that I've been with Whale Beach.

Whale Beach is quite a bit smaller club than your prior two clubs – does that change the club atmosphere or competitive element?

Yes, there aren't really many people in the same age bracket as me who like to ski and board paddle.

Some of the neighbouring clubs have a lot of Masters competitors and they train on Saturdays and Sundays. I went a couple of times when I first moved up here but they wanted me to compete again for their club and I just thought nah...

One of the benefits of Whale Beach is that it is smaller, you can get lost in a big club. What you get out of the club depends on your motivation for joining, whether it's for the social and fitness side or competition. I got to the stage where I didn't want to compete anymore. Your body aches more [laughs]... especially when you first get back on the board...

Not just when you're old! I went out for a paddle this morning and my shoulders...!

My stomach used to hurt, from lying down! Oh the pain! I would go in a lot of events when I was at Queenscliff and the next morning after an event, I would think 'oh my goodness, how much longer can I do this'? [laughs].

“My stomach used to hurt, from lying down! Oh the pain! I would go in a lot of events when I was at Queenscliff and the next morning after an event, I would think ‘oh my goodness, how much longer can I do this’!?”



But it was great while I was doing it. It was fun being there!

I guess swimming is more friendly and it is something that you can continue to do. Do you still swim competitively?

Yes, I'm going to a carnival in 2 weeks. I'm not competitive like I use to be. I've found since living here and travelling long hours to work, it's just too hard to get up and swim every morning. Now I tend to train at lunchtime, but I just go 3 times a week. I would like to do some more competitive swimming... I'm still in my swimming clubs in Manly and I go to about two swim carnivals a year. But they are the more social rather than competitive ones.

Have you always been a swimmer? Growing up in Parramatta, did you use the local pool?

Yes, probably since I was 4 or 5 years old, when Parramatta Pool opened. We spent all our holidays down there. I also played water polo. I had three siblings

but I was the only one who did swimming club, I just loved it!

My dad liked the surf. He grew up in Parramatta but he used to go to Freshwater and camp when he was younger. When we were in primary school we would go to the beach each Sunday in Summer. We use to go to Manly Beach – we'd catch the train and the ferry because we didn't have a car and it was the easiest beach for us to get to. I always loved the ocean. My dad taught me to body surf. I always wanted to stay in the surf – I loved the surf.

Well it definitely makes a difference having an affinity with the ocean that is forged as a child rather than an adult.

Yeah and not being afraid to go right out back and deal with big surf. We just loved the beach – our whole family still loves it.

So how did you transition into club and competitive swimming?

I moved to Manly when I was 25 and I started swimming at Harbord Diggers. One day, one of the women stopped me and asked me if I wanted to swim with her club. I didn't know many people on the northern beaches so I joined various swimming clubs and from there I met so many people. The club in Manly was very social, sort of the social scene in Manly. A lot of the older men that were part of the swim clubs were part of Surf Life Saving Clubs on the northern beaches. That is how I met most people when I moved to Manly.

And how did you get your board and ski training? You were clearly a really good swimmer but boards can be hard...

When I was at Queenscliff, I was lucky to have a group of guys who trained me. We used to do Ironman training at Manly Dam together. That was pretty hard, training on flat water. They were encouraging and if

“I was quite fit then, that's when I was doing all my IronWoman training and everything helped. That was the fastest I've ever swum in my life. They were all Australian records. But I was like ‘oh wow, I can't believe I actually swam that fast!’ I surprised myself.”

they knew that you were keen they would help you. They took me up to Manly Dam to learn the ski so that they could teach me on flat water. Following that they took me to the harbour, so it would be a little rockier. Then I finally went to the beach, so they didn't throw me straight into the ocean. I think it was a good way to learn.

I've seen your name up on various Surf Life Saving Club Boards. How many awards have you got?
I've won 11 Australian titles.

What?! No biggie! Have you got a trophy wall?
No, everything is in a box. [laughs]

I've got a few trophies, a few favourites – the NSW Masters of Excellence Award. I was the first female to win that award. It's my favourite trophy [laughs]. When I went to the World Masters Swimming Championships in Christchurch in 2002, I won the 200, 400, 800 metre and 3 kilometre swims.

“We'd be starting a race and they'd be like “Do you know where to go Sue?” and I'd be like “No, I'm not really sure!” and they'd say “Do you mind swimming over rocks? Run down the beach and start swimming from there.” So you know, you can always learn something from someone. Doesn't matter how good you are; you don't know everything.”

All of them!?

[Smiles] I was quite fit then, that's when I was doing all my IronWoman training and everything helped. That was the fastest I've ever swum in my life. They were all Australian records. But I was like 'oh wow, I can't believe I actually swam that fast!' I surprised myself.

Do you think guys were ever jealous of you?

I did find that if you did well people would play down how good you were. Like one time when I went to the Australian Championships and did pretty well and some of the guys were quite negative about it. But that's just like life isn't it? In work and personal life you always have to deal with these things.

In surf lifesaving women are outnumbered. How have you found that?

Well most of the guys are pretty good. You do get a few of the older guys who like telling their stories – maybe over and over again! [laughs]

But when I was competitively swimming a lot of the men taught me how to read the ocean. We'd be starting a race and they'd be like “Do you know where to go Sue?” and I'd be like “No, I'm not really sure!” and they'd say “Do you mind swimming over rocks? Run down the beach and start swimming from there.” So you know, you can always learn something from someone. Doesn't matter how good you are; you don't know everything.

Down at Queenscliff they used to have these old men that used to sit and chat each morning on the 'Seat of Knowledge.' They'd go out for their body surfs of a morning, and sit there and chat. They were always good for some tips.

Are there any female role models that you think that have encouraged you to compete and pursue your life saving?

Well he's not female but my dad was a big part of my love of the surf. Even though we were 'Westies' my dad

still taught me all I know about the ocean and the surf. Another guy from Queenscliff also had an impact on me – Col White. He was an older guy, an instructor and just knew how to read the ocean. He taught me quite a bit.

If people knew I was interested in the sport and was serious, they would come up and give me advice and anyone who did that automatically became a role model for me. I always welcomed it. Sometimes it was even people who were competing from other clubs. One gave me the advice of never catching a wave on your knees. Some people can do it, but it depends how experienced you were. I found that helpful as I wasn't that fast on my knees, and was faster lying down because I was a swimmer. Then I'd just practice it and see what works. Sometimes it wouldn't work. I'd always watch and then I go and try it myself...

So no particular women who stood out as role models?

Well Naomi Flood was and still is a fierce competitor. She just went to the Olympics for Kayaking and she's won the NutriGrain IronWoman before. I always looked up to her. That passion came from the surf ski and being a lifesaver.

Many of the younger women who have taken on leadership roles in the club have mentioned that women like yourself were key role models in their surf lifesaving journey. Could the club use you as a mentor to some of the women coming though?
I think this club is going really well with involving women to be honest. Lara's our Club Captain, there are a lot of girls getting involved. I'd be really interested in being involved in a mentoring program with women in the club. I'm passionate about passing on my skills because I've learnt so much from others. I wouldn't have achieved what I did if I hadn't have had the people surrounding me that I did.



Special Thanks

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BECOME A SURF LIFESAVER

Have you been inspired to join Surf Life Saving? If you are interested in learning more about the club and membership send email info@whalebeachsurfclub.org or visit whalebeachsurfclub.org and join an organisation that saves and changes lives both on and off the beach.



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