

Eulogy for Brian Peter McConnell OAM  
Given by Darryl Benjamin McConnell  
2 December 1943 - 7 June 2016  
St Ninian's Uniting Church, Lyneham ACT  
Wednesday 15 June, 2016

Dad would have been so surprised at how many people wanted to come to his funeral. Mum, Josie and I are overwhelmed that you all came. On behalf of Mum, Josie and me I would like to sincerely thank everyone for coming to mourn Dad's passing, say one last goodbye and also celebrate his life with us today. Many of you have come long distances and juggled schedules to be here - thank you all so much. I would like to especially thank Mum and Josie who so lovingly cared for Dad at home in his last months and weeks. Dad loved home and his family and he was very grateful to be able to spend his last days at home with his loved ones by his side. Dad wanted it to be a celebration of life with bright music today but he also said funerals were for the living not the dead.

Brian Peter McConnell was born in Yass on the 2nd of December 1943, he was the 2nd child to Bill and Iris McConnell. Dad and his older sister Pat lived on a eucalyptus farm near Wee Jasper where Dad's father distilled eucalyptus, living humbly in a tent. I can't help but think that these first years spurred his love of camping. The memories of our camping holidays with family, uncles, aunts and cousins or the Alexanders and Sheppards are some of the fondest childhood memories that Josie and I have with the oldies by the campfire and us kids getting up to mischief elsewhere. When my brother Cliff and I were around 10 and 8 we decided with Dad that we needed a "Men's weekend". I can still clearly see Cliff, Dad and I sitting out the front of the tent eating our cornflakes and milk with forks as the spoons got forgotten. From their tent near Wee Jasper Dad and his family moved to Lithgow when he was 3 years old. Dad and Pat had an adventurous childhood not just together but with all the kids on the street. Pat remembers building dams in the dirt gutters and sailing paper boats and sticks when it rained. I can only imagine the washing that Dad's mum had to do back in 50s Australia. Dad did well at school. He went to Coerwull Primary and then Lithgow High where he gained the Intermediate Certificate in 1959 at the age of 15. When at this young age he took up an apprenticeship with the Post Master General's Department as a Technician in Training.

Dad's successfully became a fully qualified telephone technician gaining practical skills such as soldering and wiring and learning about electricity and telecommunications. These were skills and knowledge that he treasured throughout his life. Even in his last days, Dad fixed the plug on my headphones that I broke on the flight over with his original PMG soldering iron from his apprenticeship years. Up to the age of 25 Dad lived all over country NSW working as a fully qualified telephone technician replacing manual telephone exchanges with automatic ones.

Travelling home regularly to Lithgow at weekends to see his mother, Dad also found another attraction - "the Lithgow Rec". The most popular 50/50 dance hall in the district says mum. Two live bands (sometimes including Johnny OKeefe) brought the place alive with RocknRoll and Jive, as well as the old time dances. So many people came each Saturday night that the barn dance was shaped as a horseshoe to accommodate the crowd. When Dad was 18 he was successful in gaining a dance or two at "the Rec" with an attractive young girl called Marion Crane. Courting back then was first dancing, getting the courage to take a girl home often via Classic Cafe for a milkshake then the movies. Dad managed all of this and soon mum and dad were engaged and on

the 26th of March 1966 at Hoskins Memorial Presbyterian Church Mum and Dad were married - Dad was 22, Mum was 21. Mum and Dad recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. After their first home in Orange they soon moved to Bathurst where my Brother Cliff was born - Dad was 24. During this time dad continued his work as a telephone technician, work which he really enjoyed. With starting a family mum encouraged dad to get a job where they could settle in one place. So he took on the 2 year Traffic Officer in Training course in Sydney - where I was born in Chatswood. Canberra, a growing young city, was the ideal place to bring up a family for Mum and Dad so after completing the training Dad decided instead to become a public servant in the Department of the Interior, Parks and Gardens. Mum and dad bought their first house in Higgins in 1971 when Dad was 26 and one year later my sister Josie was born. Mum and dad lived there for 43 years. Mum told me that family, community and friends were the most important things to them as a couple. "He was always very supportive of me, always encouraged me and helped me not worry unnecessarily." Mum told me a couple of nights ago. "Don't worry about something that might never happen" was one of his lines. I was struck by the love and affection that Mum gave dad since he became ill, a testimony to their special relationship.

Dad played an active role in so many aspects of our lives as kids. He was Coach of Little Athletics and Manager of the Belwest Soccer Team. He was an active Chairman of the Board at Ginninderra High School, organising a computer lab to be setup at the school thanks to the ATARI users' group of which Dad was president. Also He and mum played a major role in the Ginninderra Art and Craft Fair for many years, a key fundraising event for the school. The computer program that Dad wrote provided a big drawcard to attract artists as it allowed them to be paid on the day. Thanks to Dad, Josie, Cliff and I all knew how to fix cars. We all have many fond memories of working on the cars together with Dad. Dad believed in us kids making our own way in life but was there immediately if anything went seriously wrong to calmly reassure us and simply fix the problem. When I said goodbye to Dad a few days before he died and thanked him for everything he had given me. He said "I shouldn't have made you kids get jobs to earn your own pocket money." I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to put his mind at rest on this topic as I loved those jobs. In any case I told dad that teaching trumpet on Sundays at home was certainly repayment for any apparent wrongdoings on his part. Josie and I will be ever grateful for all these precious gifts that Mum and Dad have given us for life's journey.

Dad loved making things and fixing things (our garage, the gazebo, numerous cars, anything that was electrical and many more). He also experimented. Dad loved photography and when he was courting Mum back in the 60s he wanted a flash gun for his camera and of course as dad often did he decided to make his own. He asked mum to hold the flash while he took a photo of them having a picnic with friends when mum got thrown to the ground with an electric shock when the flash went off. Dad built a computer from parts he had purchased from the US in the late 70s. The whole Higgins neighbourhood enjoyed coming over to Dad's Study to play the "Stomp Snails" game that he had programmed. A further experiment to get that little bit extra out of the computer unfortunately resulted in a smoke filled study and no more Stomp Snails. Dad was never idle, he always had a new interest or hobby some of which were , photography (he won a state award for a colour slide portraiture) fossicking, painting, cheese making, jam making, gardening, chooks, an avid reader (sometimes reading 3 books in a week) and listening to ebooks on his iPod often while gardening or going for walks. He was a member of the University of the Third Age art group which he was attending weekly until the last couple of months when it became just too difficult for him. But in his last week he did draw on all his strength to touch up a painting that he thought was unbalanced

Dad never stopped educating himself, demonstrating his belief in the importance of education and his thirst to learn new things. He obtained his first degree a Bachelor of Arts from the University of New England in 1981 at the age of 37. He did this degree by correspondence over a period of about 7 years while holding down a full time job in the public service and travelling to Armidale twice a year for residential study, not to mention being an active father and blowing up the odd computer. He gained his second degree, a Graduate Diploma in Computing Studies (one of his big passions), in 1989 at the age of 45. During this period of study Dad transferred from the Department of Interior to the Health Commission and finally to AGROBO and then ComSuper in 1982 at the age of 39 to head up a unit called Special Projects and later Human Resources and Property, retiring in 1997 as Director. I've been told by a work colleague that Brian was a great believer in professional training. Staff members, who have become long-time friends of Dad's, remember those days as the most joyful of times, though they did confess to suffering an overdose of Peter Drucker training films. Usually this work called for innovative solutions and Brian was a strong advocate for emerging technologies. One epic breakthrough was the introduction of the very first PC into the office – against, I'm told, a considerable amount of scepticism and resistance. Brian was a tech-head, but he was also a great humanitarian and cared a great deal for his staff and their welfare. When one member, who was fighting cancer, found it sometimes difficult to get to work – even though he desperately wanted to – Brian just quietly arranged for him to work from home. That was an idea about 20 years ahead of its time! And of course there was no internet then so Brian sent other staff members out to the his home to fetch and carry the work.

In 1992 my brother, Cliff tragically and suddenly died. Something no parent should endure. Mum and Dad have dedicated so much of their life trying to help families in similar situations and trying to ensure that the same thing doesn't happen to others. This lead to them founding the organisation Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform (FFDLR) in 1995. Dad's fellow Drug Law Reform advocate and long time friend Bill Bush will speak more on this involvement. But I would like to make special mention of the book that Mum and Dad wrote to commemorate 20 years of FFDLR, this was completed on time even after Dad was diagnosed with Mesothelioma, and despite receiving chemotherapy, highlighting Dad's irrepressible determination. Mum and Dad have also spent many hours as volunteers on the 24 hour telephone line for Family Drug Support supporting those in need

In latter years Dad immensely enjoyed caravan travel into the outback parts of Australia together with Mum and mum's brother Graeme and wife Janice. He really enjoyed setting up camp, firing up the camp fire, stirring the stew cooking away in the camp oven and boiling the billy. We'll have a fire going back at Mum and Dad's afterwards. He loved travelling to Vienna to visit us and improving his German. I was so impressed how both he and Mum learned the language. Dad's fearless practicing of his German on innocent Viennese pedestrians was wonderful to watch. He also enjoyed train travel around Europe, loving the journey just as much as the destinations. Last but certainly not least, he enjoyed being a grandad, watching Marty, Evan and Nicko playing basketball and soccer and in earlier years reading them books or painting and playing with Amy

Dad had a hunger to learn and a passion to create  
 Dad was a fiercely determined but quiet achiever  
 Dad was a man often ahead of his time  
 A man who's time has so sadly come to an end

Dad we will miss you.