

The Life of Vanessa Kingsford fr 1979

A Legacy of Hope

Vanessa Kingsford became a fresher at Wesley in 1979, the beginning of a virtual dynasty of Kingsford girls five of them in all who graced the college with their presence till 1992. Richard, the eldest child of the family, and the only boy, rather spoiled the pattern by going to Paul's. They have all done well, in art, theatre, tourism, primary industry and ecology. And they all had a strong altruistic streak, which emerged when Vanessa, renowned at Wesley for her sense of fun, smiles and laughter and her enthusiasm about everything she did, died prematurely more than 10 years ago. A very active member of the Wesley College community, culminating in her final year there as senior secretary of the college, she did in her passing leave a legacy of hope for the less fortunate, specifically, the people she knew in her adopted country, Kenya. It is that legacy that her surviving siblings would like very much for the world to know about.

Vanessa's parents, David and Margaret, lived in Kenya, and had all their children there, in the large town of Nakuru, before moving with their family in 1970 to Goulburn, on the NSW southern tablelands, where David took up life as a farmer and house renovator. The children, born about two years apart, all flourished, and Vanessa, born 14 July 1960, was followed at Wesley by Nicola, Deborah, Felicity and Jessica. Vanessa completed at Arts degree in 1981, majoring in French, Italian and German. She went to France to teach, and then to Kenya where she too up teaching French at a girls' school. Romance intervened. She met Hamish Grant, whom she married in 1989. They started a safari business which was a success from the

beginning. Hamish took over his family's 1,214-hectare farm, Gogar, in the Rift Valley, which had been in the family two generations. The farm produced beef, corn, wheat and dairy products. The couple built a milk processing factory, named Ilara, and marketed its output.

The enterprises were major employers. Vanessa worried about the local community in the small town of Rongai, and those who depended on the farm for their income. She was also concerned for the younger people, who were sometimes not getting an education, and especially the handicapped ones, for whom education was a more distant prospect. Believing her farm had an obligation to look after everyone associated with it, she insisted that Gogar should support the school for handicapped children in the nearby town of Rongai. She was also concerned about educational prospects for young people, particularly girls. At Rongai, few girls had many prospects once they left primary school. Vanessa talked about setting up a secondary school on the farm.

Vanessa wanted a family of her own, and there she ran into difficulties. In November 1993 she gave birth to a stillborn baby Anna. Anna's death hit Vanessa particularly hard and yet she endured her loss with such bravery. She never quite believed that her dream of having a live child would come true, but in December 1994 her little boy Alexander was born. He was her pride and joy and has turned out to be an exceptional and very special person. Vanessa had two and half years of pure joy. In 1996 she became pregnant again and looked forward joyously to the next arrival. Hamish had timed his activities to be on hand for the



birth. Her parents David and Margaret were visiting Kenya, timing their visit for what was to have been the birth of their sixth grandchild. But in July 1997, about a week before the baby was due, and on her birthday, she started to bleed. She was sent to Nairobi hospital for an emergency caesarian section. Hamish, in a camp in the middle of the Masai Mara Game Park, rushed straight to Nairobi.

A daughter, Seiya Vanessa, was delivered safely on 13 July 1997, in perfectly normal condition. But during the operation, a small amount of amniotic fluid entered Vanessa's blood stream, to create a problem known as amniotic fluid embolism, which meant that amniotic fluid entered the portion of her brain for controlling all vital functions, causing a shut-down of her heart and lungs. Attempts to restart her heart were unsuccessful and she was pronounced dead at 3.40 pm on 13 July, four hours after her baby had been delivered.

Some months after Vanessa's death, Hamish decided to carry out some of her wishes and set up a school for mentally handicapped children. It was built on land he donated, near the Rongai primary school, to allow integration. Named the Vanessa Grant School, it was officially opened on 28 June 2001. A UK registered charity, the Vanessa Grant Trust (VGT) was established to fund and support the school, which was administered entirely by volunteers and funded by donations. The school's aim was to create a safe and friendly facility for

between 32 and 38 children, aged between six and 14, with mild to severe mental handicap, and to train them sufficiently to enable them to live without being a burden on their families and communities. Having done that, and talking of extending the school, the trust decided there was scope for developing Vanessa's second inspired idea, of building a secondary school; for girls, on land already available and capable of accommodating a building for up to 200 pupils.

Nicola said Vanessa's death had rocked the whole family. But with a trust to perpetuate her memory, Vanessa is not likely to be forgotten. For their own part, all Vanessa's siblings have done well. Richard is now a Professor of Environmental Science in the School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences at the University of NSW. Nicola (fr 1981) is married with three children and is in part-time employment as a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Sydney Veterinary school, Camden. Deborah (fr 1984) is married with a daughter and lives on the family fam, "Tanjenong", at Taralga in the southern tablelands of New South Wales,

where she and her husband run holiday cottages and a Bed and Breakfast, as well as a gallery in which she exhibits and distributes her art. Felicity (fr 1987) and her partner have two children live in Melbourne, and Felicity teaches after-school art classes. Jessica (fr 1989) spent some years as a theatre director and set up her own theatre company in Melbourne. She is married with a son, lives in Newtown and is doing a Graduate Diploma in Psychology at the University of Sydney.

The family's message to Wesleyans is that the trust has its own website, www.vanessagrantstrust.org/site/, and that Australian taxpayers can make tax deductible donations to the Vanessa Grant Trust through the fund administered by Rotary Australia World Community Services (RAWCS).

Malcolm Brown (fr 1965)

