

## **Tribute to Thelma: 17 February 2018**

Dr. Seuss, the author, wrote:

“Don’t cry because it’s over. Smile because it happened.”

Dear friends and family of Thelma

We gather together to celebrate the life of Thelma Martha Neville. We smile because Thelma happened.....to each of us. For over a century, she touched the lives of those with whom she came into contact. Our lives are so much the richer for having known, and been loved by, her. And now is the time to reflect on her life. When I went up to Brookshaw on the night of Sunday 4 February to say goodbye to her, having received the news of her tranquil and peaceful death, I knelt down and said to her: “My soul Thelma, you have lived an awesome life”.

An awesome life indeed. It all began on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 1916. Thelma was born a Thorndike. Her parents, Albert Canterbury and Martha Catherina Thorndike, already had a daughter, Gwendoline Frieda, who was born 4 years earlier in 1912. Thelma and Gwen were close sisters who had a lot in common, including their diminutive stature and extraordinary longevity. Gwen died in June 2015, a month after her 103<sup>rd</sup> birthday. For many years prior to that, the sisters spoke to each other telephonically every week and Thelma delighted in Gwen’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in Cape Town. She also hosted a lovely birthday tea in February 2012 in her home for Dimmie Randell when she

turned 100. Thellie, as Dimmie lovingly called her, kept good company! Many of us were fortunate enough to attend the glorious lunch at the Monument to celebrate Thelma's own 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. I doubt there are many people who will be able to say that they gave their own speech, in a clear and strong voice, and danced a waltz with their brother, on the occasion of their 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Thelma did both. The waltz with Vaughan Thorndike, her brother, was as exceptional as the relationship between them over many years. Even more exceptional was the fact that when she celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, Thelma was still living independently in her own house at 13 Constitution Street, a house in which she had lived for over 60 years. Her ability to live independently for so long was the result of three fundamental factors: Thelma's fierce independent spirit, the unobtrusive but steadfast love and support provided to her by Vaughan and Molly, and then Vaughan alone after Molly's death last year, and the unceasing care of Winnifred Mdana.

The house in which Thelma lived was built by her and her husband Geoffrey Chillingworth Neville. They married on 8 February 1952 in Cape Town. Their marriage certificate states that he was a bank manager and she a journalist by profession. Thelma was 35 at the time and Geoff 55. They moved to Grahamstown the following year and built the house with the help of local farmers. The house was designed for entertaining,

something which Thelma loved, with a beautiful sitting room and three wide stairs leading to an upper level. This provided the ideal stage for speeches on celebratory occasions and, on New Year's Eve, the presentation of various skits and the singing of many songs – even by Vice-Chancellors and Judges President. Thelma adored her husband Geoff. They did not have children and their marriage was to be of tragically short duration. Geoff died in February 1966, 14 years after they married. Thelma was not even 50.

Thelma never married again but she always professed to have many admirers. Her long-time friend, confidante and political informant, Michael Whisson, visited her every week, including when she moved to Brookshaw just before her 101<sup>st</sup> birthday. Upon his arrival, he would greet Thelma with the words “Hello Gorgeous – how are you?”. And she would always say “Oh go on!” before launching into a conversation of many hours duration on the politics of the day in which she had a keen interest even into her 100s. So, of course, she was right about having many admirers and there was so much to admire. I invite you to look at the black and white photo of her on the back cover of the service booklet. It was published in the Panorama magazine and depicts an incredibly glamorous Thelma in the 70s. Her face exudes all the qualities for which we admired her – humourous spontaneity, shrewd intelligence, grace, glamour, openness, charisma and a naughty sparkle in

the eye. Thelma was a people's person. She could talk to anyone – from the electrician who came to fix her gate to the Judge President of the Eastern Cape Division of the High Court, from the youngest child, Keanin, son of Claire Cordell, to Dimmie Randell, a centenarian, and everyone in between. Combine that with an indomitable spirit, a formidable command of language, a profound interest in, and empathy with, the world around her, and a legendary photographic memory, and you have a person who was destined to make a success of her life.

And success she achieved. She was a prolific journalist, writing for all the major newspapers, in particular the Daily Dispatch and the Herald. She was a reporter for the Regional SABC for 40 years. A little known fact is that she was also a member of the censorship board in the 1960s and 70s. She bemoaned the fact that she was never given any political publications to comment on. I suspect that the censorship board appreciated that Thelma was so open-minded that she would have allowed what they considered to be politically subversive articles to be published. To Thelma's consternation, portions of many of her own forthright articles in the paper were censored, the type being blacked out before publication. Thelma worked very hard as a journalist and her abilities were rewarded when she was sent by the SABC to cover the Iranian Women's Conference attended by 2000 delegates in 1965 in Persia (as it was then known). Thelma was accompanied on this trip by her husband

Geoff and sister Gwen. She rubbed shoulders with Iranian royalty in the form of the Shah of Iran's sister, much to Thelma's delight. In December 1975 Thelma was instrumental in organising the International Women's convention which was held in the Monument in Grahamstown. It was attended by over 800 delegates and was a multiracial conference, notwithstanding the fact that it was held during the height of apartheid. The Monument was newly opened at the time. Once again, Thelma had played a pivotal role in raising the funds required for building the 1820 Settlers National Monument. She worked closely with Prof. Guy Butler on the project. He clearly identified her talents and immense charm. Thelma was a free spirit, unfettered by convention or self-consciousness. Thus she did not hesitate to approach Prime Minister Vorster about the difficulties surrounding a multiracial conference where delegates required hotel accommodation. Whilst he was non-committal, he did give money for the conference and must have turned a blind eye to the multiracial component.

It was following upon the opening of the Monument that Thelma authored her first book, *More Lasting than Bronze*. Journalists never retire – they just keep writing. She and my Dad authored the book *A Story of Rhodes* which was published in 2004. It is a beautiful book that took years of work. Bear in mind that Thelma was 88 when it was published. She neither looked nor behaved her age – ever – and of course her true age was her

most closely guarded secret until she was about to turn 100. Thereafter she had a change of heart and confide in shop assistants "I'm a hundred you know!". Thelma always expressed surprise that she and my Dad were still friends after writing the book "We're still friends you know!". Close friends they remained and the two of them also took turns in writing columns for Mike Loewe's papers, The Grahamstonian and the Makana Moon. Mike Loewe, one of Thelma's pallbearers, became her long time journo friend.

Thelma may not have had her own children but she loved everyone else's. Michael Vincent, her nephew, recalls visits to Grahamstown with his grandmother, Thelma's mother, when he was about 8 years' old. Thelma, in her late thirties, was athletic, competitive, and very active. When they went to the beach, Thelma would challenge him to a race which she always won. However, he got faster as he grew older and when he was about to turn 11 he issued a challenge to Thelma that she would lose her title the following year. She however was much too clever and retorted that she was retiring, with immediate effect, as the undefeated sprint champion of the family. Michael also recalls playing teniquoits in Thelma's garden. He says that Thelma's cheating was surpassed only by his grandmother's umpiring skills, awarding him unearned points. I also recall Thelma's cheating skills at a croquet party held by my parents in early 1980 shortly after we arrived in Grahamstown. Thelma

was one of the first people they befriended and she introduced us to Vaughan and Molly. The croquet game was accompanied by much hilarity and friendships that would last a life-time were forged.

Cherylen Thorndike, Vaughan's daughter, also remembers Thelma's charisma and free spirit. The family went on holiday together to Margate when Cherylen was about 16 and Thelma about 65. Cherylen's boyfriend was invited and she was a bit self-conscious as 16 year olds tend to be. Thelma was having none of that and encouraged Cherylen and her boyfriend to play a game with her in the sea where they all held hands and body surfed together. They had a wonderful time and so much fun. In that moment Thelma taught Cherylen a life lesson with which she so successfully equipped herself "Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind." (again from Dr. Seuss). My children too were the beneficiaries of Thelma's great love. When Michael was about 4 or 5 and Thelma was in her late 80s she played with him on the floor in her lounge, two people at opposite ends of the age spectrum having such fun together. It was then that Thelma and Michael started calling each other Poekie and Poekie they both remained whenever they spoke about or to each other. I might say that Thelma was somewhat concerned when Poekie Jnr, aged 6 or so, busied himself during one of her lovely lunch parties with removing the keys

from all the doors and hiding them in the pantry (and then promptly forgot where he had hidden them). On all subsequent visits by Poekie jnr, Poekie snr hid her keys beforehand! Thelma's ability to engage with children translated into a successful series of children's stories which she wrote for radio and which were broadcast every week. Sometimes she would tell me the stories she had written – they were the products of a clever imagination and a perceptive mind able to bridge the gap between the older and younger generations.

What was so inspiring about Thelma was that she could find joy and goodness even in difficult or sad times. She never took anything or anyone for granted and continued to marvel at how good people were to her. And people always wanted to do things for her - just because of who she was and her appreciation of even small things. There can be no doubt that Thelma was treated like royalty during her weekly visits to Pick 'n Pay and she loved shopping there. She would drive herself to her hairdresser, Gail Kolak, and to Pick 'n Pay even when she was 99. The parking area was the site of a couple of mishaps for Thelma and, whilst it is always lovely to get a phone call from Ronel Campbell, after a while I started to greet those calls with some apprehension as I anticipated what Thelma had been up to. Thelma, on the other hand, never harboured any misgivings about sallying forth on her weekly shopping trips, secure in the knowledge that there would

always be someone on hand to help her and Dr. Rudi Marx only a phone call away to patch her up!

On a serious note, Thelma contributed massively to the life of Grahamstown. She became President of the National Council of Women and a member of the Rhodes Women's Association. She was in addition the 1<sup>st</sup> woman president of the Eastern Areas Development Association, a founding member of Brookshaw Home, a member of the City Council and Chairman of the Grahamstown Ratepayers Association. Her contribution to Grahamstown was recognised when she became one of the few people invited to sign the Golden Book containing the names of those who have served the city in an outstanding manner.

In order to achieve these types of accolades one must be organised – and Thelma was highly organised. I was fortunate to be a member of the group called “Thelma's Party Planners”, together with Vaughan, Monika Gaybba, Louisa Clayton, Lumka Klaas, Gwen Johnson and Thelma herself. It was astonishing how well Thelma planned her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party. When the same group of people came together again to plan this celebration for Thelma, she too was present in that we were simply carrying out what she had already planned with Claire Hunter, down to the flower arrangements which had to be roses. There was something so comforting in feeling her presence with us as we sat down again as friends brought