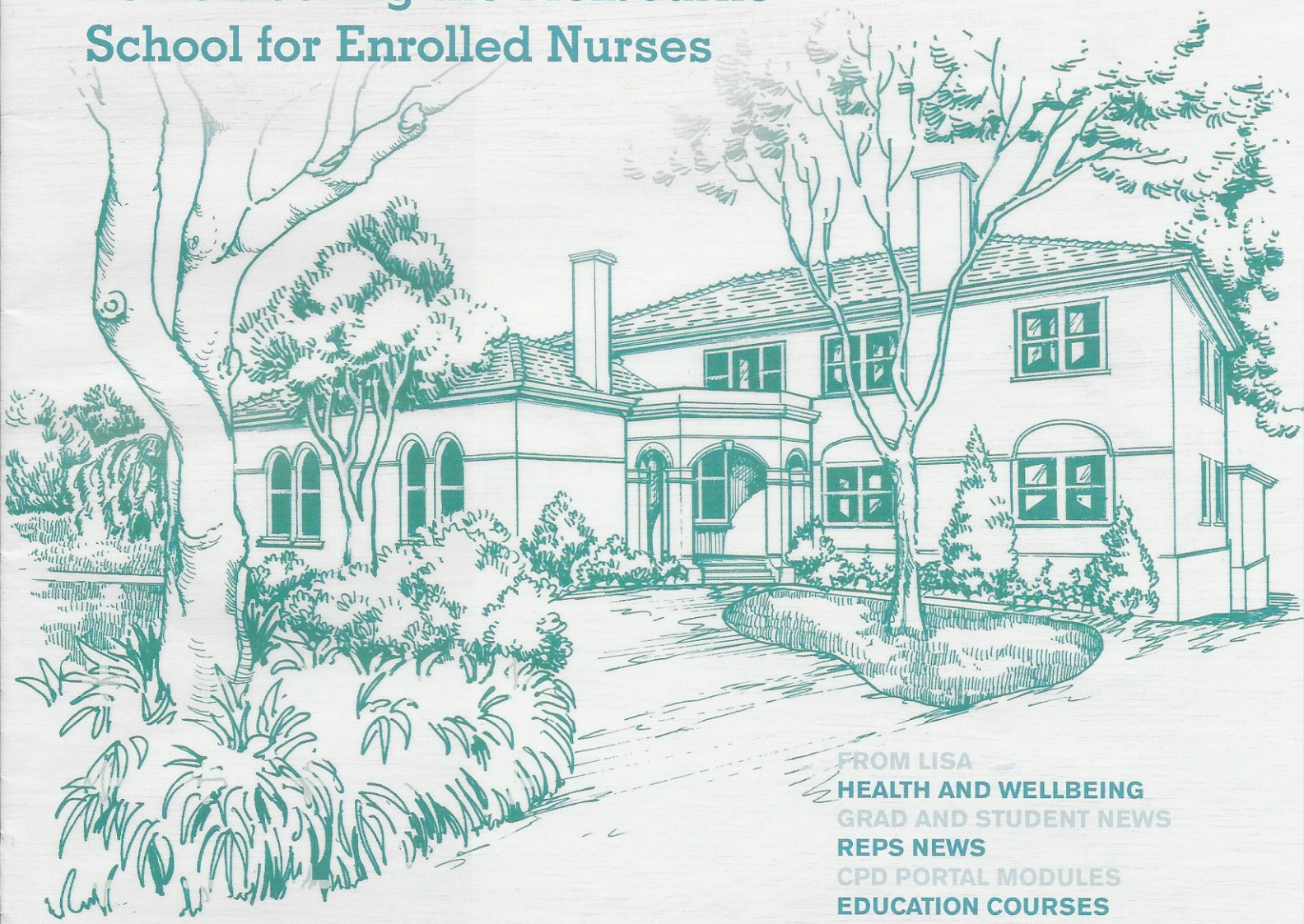


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Quarterly news for
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Remembering the Melbourne School for Enrolled Nurses



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All in the family: Therese Smyth & Nicole Semmler



Nicole Semmler and Therese Smyth with Therese's mother Lorna in the middle

'I always wanted to be a nurse,' says Therese Smyth. 'My mother was a nurse and midwife, and as kids we were always in and around the rural hospital where she worked. There was something alluring about being a nurse, and the camaraderie they all had, that inspired me to want to be a part of this group.'

When it comes to nursing dynasties, it's hard to beat Therese's family. A registered nurse and midwife at Central Gippsland Health's Surgical Centre, and an ANMF Job Rep, Therese has been a nurse since 1976. Her daughter, Nicole Semmler, has followed her into the job, just as Therese followed in her mother Lorna's footsteps.

But nursing goes back even further in their blood. 'We come from a long line of accoucheurs in the early settlement days of NSW,' Therese notes. She proudly shares a news clipping from a 1905 obituary that notes an ancestor who was 'regarded as one of the most skilled nurses in the neighborhood [sic]' who 'as an accoucheuse held the palm, having attended the principal families in the district.'

Therese's mother-in-law was also a nurse. 'My dad's mum was Matron McCulloch,' says Nicole, who works as a registered nurse/student midwife at Central Gippsland Health. 'And when I went to work at Maffra Hospital I was known as Matron's granddaughter. People ask me why I wanted to be a nurse,' she continues. 'It's not that I didn't have the choice; I was simply never not going to be a nurse. It's what we do and it's who we are.'

Therese concurs: 'Nursing for me is not a job; it's a way of being. It's in the blood.'

A passion for social justice

That innate sense of belonging to the profession is equally present in both women's dedication to social justice. It was her staunch desire to stand up for nurses' rights that originally led Therese to join the ANMF. 'In my soul is an aversion to injustice,' she says, before noting that for much of her career she hadn't really been involved with the union. But in 2008 she saw her colleagues being mistreated in the midst of extensive organisational change.

'I saw a lot of injustices to nurses who had done good work, hard work, for years and then they were just thrown to the curb. That really distressed me,' she says. 'I've never gone along with the notion that we eat our young; it's more apt to say that we eat our old.'

In the face of what she witnessed, Therese's reaction was blunt: 'I'm not having that!' She became a Job Rep, she says, because she needed to be part of a group who fought for nurses. 'I found that the ANMF places a huge value on social justice, and over the years I have hopped on the Gippsland buses and attended rallies at Dallas Brooks Hall and Festival Hall, as we fought in campaigns forging the way for nurses in the workplace. And Nicky as a student nurse and then as a Job Rep for the Grads has been on the buses with me. It's been good to see the continuation.'

Following her mother into active unionism was a no brainer for Nicole. 'We always had that strong social justice impetus, and mum's work and union participation has absolutely flowed on through to me,' she says. 'My graduate year was 10 years ago when we were getting on the buses so for me [active union participation] has always been a part of my practice.'

For both mother and daughter, it's about knowing what your rights are and standing up for other people. 'We worked hard for these rights,' says Nicole. 'We shouldn't have to work against the system to get what we want for our patients.'

*'Nursing for me is not a job;
it's a way of being. It's in
the blood.'*



Therese Smyth and Nicole Semmler
(second row from front, second and
fourth from left) at Festival Hall in 2011



Zennie Pendergast, Cheryl Goodwin,
Josie Hunt, Nicky Semmler, Miffy Goss
and Julie Hall



Matron McCulloch (centre), pictured in Maffra People
(1946, February 6). *Weekly Times* (Melbourne, Vic: 1869–
1954), p. 15. Retrieved October 20, 2021, from nla.gov.au

Collective camaraderie

In addition to supporting nurses professionally, union participation has been a great source of friendship and camaraderie for Therese and Nicole. Attending the Annual Delegates Conference has been a yearly highlight they both look forward to. 'It's about networking, bonding, learning, debating resolutions, developing a log of claims and fortifying ANMF strength in the workplace,' Therese notes. 'It's also about retention of the collective memory and building up the knowledge and confidence of new Job Reps.'

The traditions around it are also important, Nicole adds – getting the train together to Melbourne, attending the regional area drinks the night before. 'That's when we actually make the connections with people,' she says. 'Sometimes it's the only opportunity we have to speak to people in other fields.' The serendipitous conversations that often result from these opportunities – conversations that can help change practices for the better – are 'one of the by-products when you get this connection in this community and that's what we've been missing, and we don't even realise that half the time.'

With the COVID-19 pandemic forcing the cancellation of the 2020 conference, and shifting the 2021 conference online, those opportunities for social bonding were more difficult. And for two of Therese and Nicole's colleagues, there was an even more bittersweet element to the COVID pivot. 'In 2021, two people that have been very important in keeping us together as Job Reps were retiring,' says Therese. 'Zennie Pendergast has been to about 25 delegates conferences. And Julie Hall has probably been to about 20. So the 2021 Dels Conference was to be their last and we were hoping to farewell them in style. Unfortunately, this was short circuited by COVID.'

With a few other colleagues, Therese and Nicole organised a one-off 'Dels' event for Central Gippsland Health.

They booked a villa in Metung for the local Job Reps who would typically have gone to Melbourne, and they all logged into the event from the villa. The night before, they all went to the Metung Pub in lieu of the traditional conference dinner, where they held a farewell ceremony for Zennie and Julie, presenting them with two silver goblets that Therese and Nicole had picked up at op shop in Bairnsdale.

'They were so chuffed,' Therese says. 'We just wanted to do something to say thank you for showing us the way and to acknowledge what they've done.'

'They'll never be fully recognised for their whole impact, their consistency and their continued support,' adds Nicole. 'So we just wanted to acknowledge in some way that we stand on their shoulders, because we wouldn't be here without them.'

On top of everything else, Nicole also notes how important their event was for everyone's mental health. 'None of us have been on holidays, none of us even thought that we could take leave. We've all picked up extra shifts, we've all carried the extra burden of wondering if a patient was a SCOVID case, and the anxiety has been constant.'

Being able to spend even just a few days in a different environment was, she says, a much-needed balm. To be able to leave the mental burden of the pandemic behind, temporarily, and to focus instead on the conference and on themselves was so necessary. 'We unequivocally filled our cups that trip.'

'It was up there with some of our best Delegates Conferences in Melbourne,' Therese adds.