

James Lionel Dellit

It is a daunting task to give the eulogy for my father - not only because of the overwhelming sense of loss we all feel, but because the scope and scale of his life is so large. Jim covered so much ground in his life - from actor to teacher and university lecturer to curriculum expert, from member of the renal tribe to member of the Health Performance Council. Those of us here today even knew him by different names - Jim, Jamie, Dad, Sir, Mr Dellit, JimPa and there's even a couple of people who knew him as James. My father brought all his intellect and his energy to every activity he pursued, and to every person he conversed with. It is gratifying to see so many people here today, but not entirely a surprise - Jim had a knack for captivating people.

Dad was born in 1947, the son of Jean and Ted Dellit and the younger brother of John. He attended Bellevue Hill Primary School, Vaucluse Boys High School and Sydney Grammar School before winning a Teaching Scholarship and attending Sydney University. At this time in his life, Jim's passions lay in performing. Usually with his cousin Peter, he performed in revues and films, including the Man on a Green Bike and Homesdale. He also met Jillian, the beautiful woman who sat in front of him with the long hair. Jim and Jillian married in 1970.

While Jim could have pursued a career in film - he was offered minor parts in Picnic at Hanging Rock and the Aunty Jack Show for example - he instead embraced a career in teaching. While many of their peers settled into long-term professional careers with stable jobs and superannuation, Jim and Jillian decided to resign their positions, an unusual risk at the time, in order to teach in Scotland for a year. Always interested in new experiences and ways of looking at things, Jim loved travel. Of course, Jillian chose to tell him that she gets seasick as the boat steamed out of the Sydney Heads. And then vomited all the way to Singapore.

When Jillian became pregnant, they returned to Australia - to find that no teaching jobs were available in NSW. In need of work, Jim was impressed by the cup of tea offered by the South Australian Education Department, and shortly they were ensconced in Gawler, with Dad teaching at Craigmore High School. Throughout the next fifteen years, he took a variety of teaching and school leadership roles, culminating in the role as Principal at Smithfield Plains High School in 1986.

Jim was a beloved teacher throughout his career. In the last week, a thread on the Craigmore High School Old Scholars Facebook page has discussed the contribution of "one of the nicest teachers we ever had". Several students talked

about the "great influence" he had on "countless students": he "encouraged us to reach our potential, never looked down on us students".

Jim never looked down on anyone, actually; it was part of his immense charm. My father approached every person he met as a source of interest and inspiration, someone to teach and to learn from. This was as true of his approach to a waiter in a restaurant as it was to a government minister or celebrity.

In the classroom, this approach inspired and engaged students, many of whom approached him or family members later in life to explain the profound impact he had had on them. Jim's approach to education was formulated in these years - he took it as a given that his role was to teach as effectively as possible, and marshalled pedagogy, passion and where necessary, involvement in solving students' problems in order to do it. He had a strong understanding of the school as part of the community, and understood the challenges students and staff faced as part of a broader social reality.

These were also the years my sister and I grew to adolescence, through a childhood comprised of amazing family holidays - regularly driving to Sydney or travelling to Kangaroo Island, and an unforgettable six-week trip to Britain and Europe in 1984/5. On weekends and school holidays, we also often picnicked through the Barossa and the Adelaide Hills or walked the Heysen Trail with lifelong friends Ken and Barb Cock. These were times filled with adventure - usually a family euphemism for getting lost - and laughter and silliness.

Jim believed that life should be enjoyed and experienced. He delighted in celebrations, particularly ones centred around presents. He would spend months preparing for birthdays and Christmases, collecting perfect presents, the giving of which was a leisurely and sometimes ritualised process. For his own birthday he would also prepare many months in advance, by dropping increasingly obvious hints as to presents and celebrations he would like.

I was privileged to grow up in a household where devotion to service - to the public good - was a given, and I want to touch on this later. But I was also privileged to grow up in a household where having a good time was not a shameful thing, but an aim in life: To do what you enjoy, to eat what you enjoy, to listen to joyous music - even if it was the same track eight times a day.

As Jim's career progressed, he moved from solving individual case problems, to implementing school policies to resolve problems, and eventually into more systematic problem solving through departmental roles, including as a curriculum superintendent and a superintendent of school and system reviews,

before becoming the Executive Director of Curriculum in the South Australian Department of Education from 1993 to 1999. These roles gave Jim a broader canvas with which to influence and shape school education.

It seems such an understatement to say that my father was passionate about education as a force to change both individuals and society as a whole. People often described Dad as an intellectual - a word he never used to describe himself - but what they saw was a man who believed strongly in critical thinking, analysis and evidence-based approach to public services. He was less interested in ideas for their own sake, than for their utility and effectiveness in improving our world. Dad thought everything could be improved, and that it was our responsibility to do so. As a senior public servant, and later as a consultant and member of numerous boards, he helped shaped Australian thinking about curriculum and assessment.

The 1990s were not easy years for my family. In 1993, his mother-in-law Sylvia died, his father died, his colleague Garth Boomer died - and Dad was diagnosed with an amyloid which destroyed his kidneys. For the rest of the decade, Dad juggled increasing illness, moving onto dialysis as his kidneys failed entirely, and then enduring a very rough adjustment to a new kidney transplant. In 1999, feeling that his health didn't allow him to give his job the 110% he had been able to, he retired.

As it turned out, this marked a transformation in his professional career, but very far from an end. Throughout the next decade, Jim operated a consultancy as well as taking on varied roles, including as a senior adjunct researcher at the University of South Australia, attached to both the School of Education and the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures where, until 2012, he taught post-graduate students and was involved in research and program development. He participated and led in many boards, including 10 years' serving on the Australian Children's Television Foundation board, and chairing the SA Minister's committee that monitored tertiary entrance requirements.

These were such intellectually active and creative years for Dad. As a consultant, he threw himself into work with a passion, always delivering on the specifics he had been asked for, but also bringing the full weight of his understanding of the broader environment, and in turn, using the work as an opportunity to learn and discover more. He was an involved and innovative teacher to his postgraduate students, and he brought insight, research and dedication to every board, foundation or working group meeting he attended. He loved his work with languages and with Indonesian and Indigenous educators. He also read voraciously, and developed a strong love of bluegrass music. My phone

conversations with him could cover topics as diverse as the life of Sir Francis Walsingham, the importance of improving health outcomes, to educating Indigenous kids and swapping notes on Alison Krauss tracks.

In 2003, his first grandchild, Brigid was born. In later years I liked to gently tease Dad for telling me, when my sister Katherine was pregnant, that he didn't expect he would be "particularly invested" in grandchildren. In the coming years, as Brigid was joined by Fionn, Veronica and Niamh, his grandchildren became such a source of joy for Jim. He had a strong and meaningful relationship with each child. Seeing the family at least weekly, the considerable effort he put into thinking about conversations to have, activities to do together, and, of course, presents to buy, meant these were some of the closest relationships in his life in the last decade. He was always open to a chat on the phone, or a short-notice visit, of which both Fionn and Brigid frequently availed themselves. He and Jillian took the kids to experiences, whether that was the art gallery or the Royal Adelaide Show, or a trip away. In these years, he also spent more time with his brother John's wife Pam, and his nephews Jason and Ian and their families, as well as Jillian's father Len, her brother Jim and his partner Robyn.

For all members of our family, including the youngest, my father's clear and evident enjoyment and interest in us made spending time with him delightful and meaningful, no matter the activity.

In all these years, my father was assiduously managing his health, in conjunction with the wonderful renal staff at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. After the initial and horrific shock of the diagnosis, Jim adapted quickly and tackled his health in the same extraordinary way he approached all of his life. He gathered evidence, built relationships, and focused on solving problems. He became a strongly involved patient, recognising early the importance of being an advocate for your own health, and then an advocate for stronger patient involvement in health decision making.

My father was a highly critical man, in the best sense of the word - he believed in looking at problems squarely on, at examining how a thing was constructed, and how it might be improved - but he always put his time and energy into creating solutions - even if sometimes he had a bit of vent first. So too, he moved from engaged patient to health system evaluator, becoming a reviewer for the Cochrane group and eventually being asked by the Minister to play a role on the Health Performance Council. He did not draw strong distinctions between his roles as patient and evaluator - for him, these were all contributions to the renal tribe. This mindful approach to his health manifested in the final week of his life,

when despite rapidly losing strength, he was able to work with Jillian to negotiate and manage the decisions around his health.

I wanted to say, in closing, some words about what it was like to be one of Jim's daughters. In my sister's words: "we were the luckiest of all". My father raised strong women - in a time when this was not a given. Growing up, I took for granted that life was about making the world better, serving the public good, serving justice and decreasing inequality. My parents' lives were geared around contribution and public service, and I have never known another way to look at the world but that we are put here to help improve it. For my father, this meant helping a renal nurse get her child into a gifted learning program or learning about steam punk to help a neighbour with an essay, as much as it meant revamping Australian Curriculum, or contributing to Indigenous education, or arguing for the Gonski reforms.

I also grew up surrounded by love. I have no words for the extraordinary partnership of my parents - although thankfully I think Jillian has a few - but my parents loved each other with an oft-embarrassing ferocity. As parents they presented a united front, and we took their intellectual intimacy for granted. I will be forever grateful for this, it set me a confidence to search and find joyful and intellectually satisfying partnerships of my own. It taught me how to negotiate, and the immense importance of being silly.

In this environment, I learned to value myself and to hold myself to a standard, based on how I impacted on those around me. I learned to argue what I thought with intelligence, and to use data and analysis effectively. I learned to have compassion and treat people with kindness, and to take everyone I met as equal in contribution, intelligence and potential. I learned no other way to be.

Like everyone here, I will miss my father more than words can express. I will miss his humour, his laundry obsession, his curiosity, his warmth, his laugh, his capacity to make unexpected and delightful friendships, and his joy. But I also know that I carry much of him with me always. My father was that kind of man - he changed you, and gave you pieces of himself to carry along.

Thank you.

Alison Dellit