

A celebration of life
Judith Elizabeth Hanna

10 March 1954 – 6 September 2021

1.00 – 2.00 pm, 24 September 2021, Enfield Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Judith was born in Nowra, New South Wales. Her father Jack was a naval aviator and the family moved with him from posting to posting, so Judith was already well travelled by the time the family settled in Kojonup. Here, her parents became sheep farmers and Judith completed her secondary education. Judith always knew that the world was bigger than the small town they lived nearby, and found a lot of that world in books. Her father talked of his earlier travels and experiences, and her mother, Valmai St Clair, told stories of the family in Scotland. She says that while Judith was doing the washing up at home she used to recite all 13 verses of 'The Man from Snowy River', a tale of the skill and endurance of a mountain pony and his heroic young rider.

Valmai had given up work to become a full-time wife and mother – after Judith she had five more children: John, Peter, Julian, Zena and Roslyn. Living off the land meant just that, so of course she kept a garden to feed her brood – for Judith and the rest of the family it was just part of life. Why would you not grow your own food if you have the means?

She did want to see more of the world for herself though, so after studying anthropology and linguistics at the University of Western Australia in Perth, she went backpacking round New Zealand for two months with her best friend, Maureen. It was the first time they had been abroad on their own and they chose it partly because it's a beautiful country full of friendly people, but also because it wouldn't be too different from Australia. They arrived in a youth hostel in Auckland on Christmas Eve, with only Mills and Boon novels to read. It was so quiet you could have lain down in the main road and not get run over.

They had a good time – no adventures in the sense of things going terribly wrong but there were a few surprises, like when they went out into the country from Auckland and stopped to admire an emerald green paddock with spotless white rounded rocks. Then one rock got up and baaed.

Oh! said Maureen, they're sheep! I thought they were rocks! Neither of them had ever seen sheep that white in their life! Not even after shearing!

Another surprise was getting a lift on the South Island along a road which went over a narrow bridge with a railway line along it and no spare space for a car. 'Ah', they asked nervously, is it usual to share the bridge with a train? 'Oh yes', said the driver, 'it's much cheaper'.

Maureen also talked of how 'We did a lot of singing to pass the time when hitching and for the sheer enjoyment; that's when Judith said she loved the imagery in Both Sides Now, because the clouds looked that way to her too. We did the "dizzy dancing way you feel" in a little town park while singing it!'

On her return to Australia, Judith went to live with her grandfather in Sydney and had a lot of fun while doing a variety of jobs. There, in 1981, she met a young Briton over on an exchange trip between science fiction fans in Europe and Australia.

Judith always said that Joseph – for indeed it was he – was her excuse for coming to the UK in 1982. But it took very little time for them to realise that they wanted to spend the rest of their lives together, and they married in 1983. There was a clear meeting of minds – they shared views on many political and environmental issues – and their skills also complemented each other. Joseph's practical, exact approach and Judith's light creativeness matched perfectly. When they both retired at 60, they had everything mapped out according to their shared interests – the travel, the lectures, the local campaigns, and of course the gardening.

Judith had always been a great lover of information – anything she came across she had to investigate fully. She once found an orchid seedling at a plant sale in Tower Gardens. Immediately a new seam of knowledge and expertise opened up, and as the topic expanded exponentially, so did the plants – all over the house!

When they bought the house in Jansons Road in 1993, they immediately set about putting the large, neglected garden to rights. Then, a little to Joseph's surprise, Judith took on the allotment at Elmar Road as well. They grew the fruit and vegetables they liked to eat, and were proud to win the 'best allotment in Haringey' award one year. There were the odd failures like the carrots which never thrived, and the sweetcorn cobs that were carried away by squirrels, but they usually had all they needed and then more. You'll hear more about Judith from a fellow allotmenteer a little later.

They started seeds off at home, so it was natural for Judith to start a seed exchange with neighbours. She was keen on trading in kind – she would probably have preferred a society which didn't rely on money at all! But as well as having practical benefits, it also brought a sense of community locally of which she was very much the centre. Joseph is very moved by the flowers, cards and offerings put through his door or left on the doorstep in recent weeks by people living nearby.

Judith also turned her attention to the patches of earth round about – no spare, neglected corner was missed, like the little triangle of weeds and empty beer bottles that became the Maysie Memorial Garden. Then there was FG2 – the front garden of a neighbour that they looked after in addition to their own. Judith took the initiative on reclaiming larger spaces too, such as the Elizabeth Place and Holy Trinity Gardens.

All the projects, groups and organisations Judith was involved with demonstrated her beliefs in an equitable, decent, inclusive and sustainable society, and being a natural campaigner and a very good networker, Judith made something happen. But she also lived and acted according to her principles. She was kind and supportive, open, generous with her time and as happy to share knowledge as she was tomato seedlings. She was also clever and funny, a wonderful companion and friend.

Tributes

Julian Hanna, Judith's brother

Judith was always an advanced individual. Mum often told us how she could have a conversation with Judith when she was only a 9 month old baby. Before she could walk she could rattle off her full name, address and probably telephone and social security number.

But it wasn't until Judith learned to read that she really started to "take off". To paraphrase the words and sentiments of the greatest philosopher of all time, Forrest Gump, "Now you wouldn't believe me if I told you, but Judy could read like the wind blows -- and from that day on, if Judith was going somewhere, she was reading" And when she wasn't going anywhere, she was still reading.

Judith got up in the morning with her nose in a book, read the book all through breakfast, kept reading while washing dishes, read her book while walking out to our bicycles, put the book in the basket attached to the front handlebars, and then read all the way to the bus stop three kilometres away while pedalling over sheep poo and then along a public road comprised of alternate stretches of loose gravel and boggy sand. She never arrived first, but she always arrived in time to catch the bus. She then read all the way to school without lifting her head, or talking to anyone; then read her way up to the classrooms and sat down at the back so she could continue reading without being obvious.

Occasionally a teacher, in an attempt to shame her, would ask her to answer questions on the day's lesson. But she always knew all the answers as well as the answers to tomorrow's lesson.

All day every day, and every way -- probably while she was in the bath, definitely while she was cleaning her teeth. You didn't have to see Judith to know she was reading: we could hear her from a couple of rooms away. When Judith read, it seemed she was constantly breaking into giggles. I don't know what these books were about, or where they came from, but I do know that she turned pages so fast that she was seldom reading the same book in the afternoon as she was in the morning.

Judith blended in like a carrot top in a field of mushrooms. Kojonup didn't really feel like home for her, so she went to University in Perth. All manner of bearded university students came down to our farm in Morris Minors and Hillman Imps, making shameless attempts to woo her or one of the other women by showing off their prowess at karate-chopping kindling, jujitsu-twirling Roslyn, our smallest family member, or somersaulting over barbed wire fences. But Perth didn't feel like home for Judith either, so she left for Sydney to live with Grandpa and attend university there, which was much better. Then Judith met Joseph and moved to London, and London finally felt like home. Judith blossomed, and now the petals have fallen and blown to the four winds. Yet the fragrance lingers in the hearts and minds of friends and family. Judith counted many as friends and family, especially in London, because London was her home, and Judith put home first.

Thank you Joseph and thank you Londoners for being "home" to our big sister.

Zena Hanna, Judith's sister

We exist in tribes. Judith's first tribe began small and got bigger.

Dad was from a small West Australian town and with WW2 joined the bigger world. Mum from Harbour fronting Sydney, well educated and outward looking, exposed to WW2 she became a Physiotherapist thinking of adventure. As singles, they both came to Britain to see the world...and after marrying ventured here again in 1954 with their Judith.

More locations with the Navy, more arrivals to the tribe John, Peter and Julian. Their new homes included 3 years on an Island off the North East coast of New Guinea where Dad was Intelligence Officer for the South Pacific. Our collections of Artefacts and Treasures grew more interesting.

Judith as a 9 year old in New Guinea was enjoying a broad education. Mum spoke pidgin English. The school totalled 20 kids and Judith would enjoy solving complex problems designed for older children.

Dad as an important local was given worthy gifts including a baby crocodile...Everyone was relieved when it disappeared - although for a while they were very careful as they moved about the house.

At 45 Lt Commander J L Hanna left the Navy to farm. The next family adventure included surprise tribal members Zena and Roslyn. 3 Boys 3 girls in 12 years. A full table. Judith was 12 when we moved to the farm.

Verandahs became bedrooms and the house spread to fit us. Mum gardened and lush seasonal food arrived from the vege garden and the paddocks. We had a deep freeze bigger than a London dinner table filled up with layers of frozen produce. Living the sustainable life was a core part of farm life. I remember marvelling at the thought other people used shops. We seemed to create everything from its raw beginnings.

Lunch meals were surprises. The conversation could be how to make soap, tan a lamb skin, spin wool or time travel.

It could follow ancient family story lines from the tribe of the Lordly St Clairs of Rosslyn with sea voyages before Columbus, hidden treasure, Royalty and influence, fleeing from Scotland.

Another story of an ancestor being hung drawn and quartered. Along our Grandmother's line Major-General Harrison, who signed Charles 1st death warrant. Sir Robert Peel somehow linked into Mum's stories of family past. Britain was part of our being.

We were encouraged not to be limited in our thinking by the times we were in and to use our skills and play with the situations around us.

Books, thinking big and a playful sense of working with the now were family values from Mum.

Dad gave Judith eyes and ears which were drawn to nature. Dad noticed the bird calls, the leaves on the tree and the rainbows.

The farm was 23 miles from Kojonup, 3 ½ hours from Perth, approximately 9000 miles from here.

As we spread out our big sister was always interested in the stories of us, and the stories of our own families.

Having a relative in London is a gift for an Australian and we could count on space at Judith's and Joseph's.

She regularly returned to and loved our coastal Albany family house as a home away from home. Sitting watching the sun drop down, the birds lifting and falling over the lake, was a memory golden in her last days.

As I got on the plane to come here she sent the words...."still garden strong" with a sad face to our family group. Yes the gardens are marvellous wherever Judith put her attention. And in Australia and here she will be remembered in the life of plants and by the web of nature with its insects and frogs, as well as by people.

Kind, clever, beautiful and brave. We now have another family hero...

...and this her other tribe, the tribe she chose... thank you for being here to farewell her.

Marjorie Thompson, colleague and friend

(extemporised words)

Quentin Given of Tottenham and Wood Green Friends of the Earth, read by Moira Jenkins

Judith joined the group soon after moving into the area. She was continually involved and willing to help out. She and Joseph produced some great props for

protests -- notably a fake Shell petrol pump. After that particular protest the petrol station concerned closed a few weeks later, though whether that was connected to the awesome pump we know not.

Judith always emphasised the social justice angles of our campaigns and the need to involve a wider range of people, whether young people, BAME or even older people. She was also an ardent advocate of the local -- whether using local shops, reducing local traffic or growing food and greening local spaces, not just in theory but with hands-on work.

Judith enjoyed our annual dinners at the Paramount Tandoori in Wood Green, after which she had the task of navigating Joseph, sometimes in what we might say was an advanced state of refreshment, safely back home.

For those of us who followed Judith on social media there were of course the fantastic displays of desert flowers from her Western Australian botanical forays.

Our group won't be the same without her.

Andrew Topp, on behalf of the Elmar Road Allotment Association

I first met Judith and her partner Joseph over 20 years ago when I took on a plot next to theirs at Elmar Road Allotments.

I remember them both being very welcoming, and willing to share advice and encouragement. I'm very grateful I had the opportunity to get to know Judith over the years.

Many people have come and gone at the allotment in that time, and Judith was one of very few ploholders who remained from when I first arrived. It's still difficult to take in that she's no longer with us in person, but her presence there was such that she will be with us all in spirit for many years to come.

I've spoken to many people from the allotment about Judith in the last few weeks, and some clear themes have emerged.

Everyone has mentioned how welcoming she was, how generous with her time and her advice, and how knowledgeable and passionate she was, not just about growing food, but about all aspects of the natural world.

There isn't time to read out all of the thoughts and stories people have shared with me, but I'd like to mention some of what a few have said.

"Judith had an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of insect and plant species, and growing, and was my first port of call when something stumped me on my plot"

"She always encouraged people to grow things that were wildlife and especially pollinator friendly, and made them aware of the problems with using things like slug pellets"

"She was such a huge and influential presence in our allotment community, and she will be greatly missed"

Eulogy by Joseph Nicholas

It's not possible, in a few minutes, to encompass everything about Judith -- especially what she meant to me in the nearly forty wonderful years we had together. You may have seen the short obituary of her, by me, which appeared in the Guardian's Other Lives section a fortnight ago. As I said in that, her life and career exemplified the principle of "being the change that you want to see".

We met in Sydney in 1981, where she had been doing a variety of part-time jobs, including at one point being an assistant to the Australian painter Arthur Murch. She joined me in London the following year, and from the early 1980s onwards worked for a variety of organisations which wanted to change the world, or at least Britain, for the better -- the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament; the Campaign for Better Transport, where she took a particular interest in local street environments; the Commission for Racial Equality; and finally for English Nature/Natural England, where she took the lead in promoting the now widely-accepted health benefits of everyday contact with the natural world. As she said later, when interviewed for a professional journal before she retired from Natural England, she fell into these jobs rather than aimed specifically at them -- a clear natural aptitude which helped her succeed at anything she tried.

However, it's the actions she took locally, in Tottenham, for which many here will remember her. She set up and organised the first few of the annual seed swaps, to bring local gardeners together to exchange seeds and ideas. She led or participated in local initiatives to transform unloved and overgrown open spaces into community gardens. She initiated discussions among local residents on traffic calming schemes, or low traffic neighbourhoods as they're now called, and pressed local councillors to follow through on their implementation. Above all, she had time for others and gave freely of her knowledge and expertise. She was a real light in the community, and an inspiration to others -- literally: her sister Zena's children cite her specifically for the fact that they now work for environmental causes in their native Australia.

When she wasn't working to improve the local environment, we were tripping off to places in the UK and overseas which interested us. For example, we went to Soviet Central Asia (in the years when there still was a Soviet Central Asia) because we had become fascinated by the ancient Silk Road and wanted to see the old cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. For another example, we went to Egypt on the eve of the first Gulf War, because most tourists had fled home and we therefore had the Theban necropolis almost to ourselves. We went cruising in the Adriatic, because we'd never been cruising before. We went on a cycling holiday in Brittany, and may have been among the last people to be allowed to walk amongst the menhirs at Carnac. And of course we made many visits to Australia -- going on holiday to lie on a beach wasn't for us. Our holidays were always "pound that pavement, visit that museum, take that photograph". And then come home for a rest.

We doubtless struck some people as a bit eccentric -- not just because we followed our interests irrespective of what other people might think, and because, like all couples who have been together for many years, we had evolved our own methods of signalling and communicating. We sometimes conversed in a language we called "Eurish", which (you'll have guessed this) consisted of a mix of European languages, but on top of that had our own private language, which baffled everyone else -- as an American friend once put it to me, "You have the most elaborate private language of any couple I know." And there were the Judithisms: the particular expressions that she alone used, to me. An example: I enjoy Scandinoir dramas on BBC Four, which she didn't, labelling them "Judith-repelling television". As the programmes started,

she would ascend the stairs with the stern instruction: "Remember to put yourself to beddy afterwards, dear".

I think we led a pretty full life. We read science fiction and published fanzines, the very thing which had brought us together in Sydney in 1981. We went walking in the countryside around London. We read archaeology and history, because we thought that the lives of real people (even if dead) were more interesting than the invented lives of made-up people in novels (with exceptions, obviously). We visited museums and art galleries, and enjoyed the lecture programmes they offered. In retirement, she joined a dance group of fellow retirees, just because. She constructed dolls' houses. (We have four of them.) She worked on tapestries while watching Gardeners' World on Friday evenings. She did knitting and crochet -- some of the crochet done with plastic bags which had been cut into long strips of what she called "plarn", plastic yarn, to make a hyperbolic coral reef with which she won a prize at the Lordship Rec Flower and Produce Show a few years ago. And of course there was the gardening, the great passion of her life. "I've got an allotment", she said to me one evening in 1996, and I thought that was too much to take on given that we'd only been in our house a couple of years and were still creating a garden for it. But we've had that allotment ever since, and were in the process of reorganising it when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in the autumn of last year.

She seemed to have beaten it, with the successful removal of the tumour, but what we thought was an adverse reaction to the drug she was prescribed after the operation turned out to be the cancer striking back. We were both devastated to be told that it was incurable, and that she had only a few short weeks of life left to her; but in her last days she displayed a truly amazing stoicism. "Sorry dear," she said, more than once, "I've got the easy part. I'm leaving you with all the paperwork."

What she's also left us with is the memory of her and all the things she did. And she's left me with the memory of the warm, loving, kind wife, best friend and soulmate that she was and always will be.