



Ms Jo Palmer MLC

Legislative Council

Date: 15 September 2020

Electorate: Rosevears

[12.13 p.m.]

Ms PALMER (Rosevears - Inaugural Speech) - Mr President, thank you for your very sound advice this afternoon. I thank honourable members, and apologise to those who will have my back.

I acknowledge the member for Windermere for his service to our community - a community I have shared with you for the majority of my life. You have been dedicated to your service to our community in varied roles, and today is just another example of your commitment to the protection of the people we live with. I thank you for that.

I begin my inaugural speech as the honourable member for the magnificent electorate of Rosevears. I acknowledge and pay my respects to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people as the traditional and original owners and continuing custodians of this land on which we gather today, acknowledging Elders past, present and emerging.

Mr President, on 10 April 1971 in the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, a baby was born. On that baby's birth certificate was limited information. There was the sex of the baby, a girl; there was the name of the teenage mother who had given birth; and, at the top of the birth certificate in the section usually set aside for naming a child, simply two words were written - those words were: 'No Name.'

For four weeks, No Name was indeed my name, for that was my original birth certificate. At the same time a young man from Sydney by the name of Donald joined his young wife, who was a Kiwi, Diane, and they went to that very hospital and were taken to the ward where all the babies who were there to be looked at for adoption were lined up. How very fortunate was I that my parents chose me, and a few weeks later they became parents and I became someone's daughter.

My parents met here in Tasmania at the Missionary Training College in St Leonards. They came from their respective homes, and both felt they had a calling from God to serve the people of our world in all regions. They met at St Leonards at the college; they fell in love; they went to London where they married, and very soon after they moved to Africa to the country of Chad. You will not find Chad on many tourist routes in Africa. It is perhaps the harshest of the African way of living. My mother was a nurse and while she was there, she established a medical facility that took care of women and children, a facility I am very proud to say still exists and still operates all these years later. My father, a brilliant linguist, began work on an unwritten language called 'Tama'.

They remained in Chad for four years and then went back to New Zealand so my mum could see some of her family. That is where they adopted me and a few months

later my younger brother, Callum. We were only weeks away from returning to Africa as a family where my parents wanted to continue their missionary work when for no apparent reason my father fell. His leg went from under him for no reason. Within weeks we had a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis and with that diagnosis came the end of their dream to return to Africa with their two young babies to continue their work. But with that door closing another door opened.

They returned to Tasmania. They returned to the Missionary Training College where they became staff members at St Leonards. This is where I spent the first six years of my life. It was a wonderful, carefree childhood. I had a hundred aunts and uncles; I hung out with all the kids of the other staff members, and we all ate our meals in a huge dining hall, all in together. There was always great delight when stewed apples with runny custard was on the dessert menu.

During this time, I was unaware of how my father's body was disintegrating and fading beneath him. I thought when he crawled around our small apartment using his elbows to pull himself along that he was doing it to be closer to my brother and me. I found out years later he was doing it because he detested the wheelchair, and with the illness that was consuming his body, it was his only way of moving around. As his condition worsened, it became impossible for us to stay at the college for dad to work on the staff, so for the first time, we moved to the suburbs - and how blessed we were to move to the magnificent suburb of Trevallyn.

The Cataract Gorge became my backyard. It was wonderful indeed. This is also where I began my official education at Trevallyn Primary School. I loved school. I have always had a love of learning and every single school report from year 1 through to year 6 made the same comment that some of you will not be surprised at - 'Joanne would be an excellent student if she could just stop talking.'

However, the first few months of my education at Trevallyn were fraught with anxiety and I was constantly found to be missing from the classroom. Most of the time I would be retrieved halfway down the street trying to make my way back home as a six-year-old. If not trying to make my way back home, I would be found somewhere quietly hiding in the schoolyard. By this stage my father had limited use of his body, so 24-hour around-the-clock care fell to the responsibility of my mum, with my brother and me doing the best that we could to support her. We got him up each morning. We dressed him, we bathed him, we fed him, we toileted him. We turned the pages of the books he was reading and we moved the chess pieces on the chess board as he competed in international correspondence chess.

I was constantly worried: If I was not there, who would look after him? Who would be supporting mum? Thus I kept disappearing from the classroom. On one of these occasions I was found sitting on the toilet floor in the girls' toilets. The office lady was sent to find me and take me back to class. Her name was Mrs Bev Morris. I will never forget, despite being so young, her walking into those toilets because she wore the most fabulous shade of bright pink lipstick. I was only six so it was very impressive.

In that moment she had a few options. She could pick me up, dust me off and take me back to class, but instead she chose to sit on the concrete floor with me and try to work out why this kid just kept leaving the classroom.

She soon discovered why I was suffering with anxiety, why it was just impossible for me to learn in a classroom environment. She hatched a plan and the plan was that whenever I felt anxious about my dad, I could just go to the school office and ask for her; she would then sneak me in and I would be allowed to use the old school telephone to ring home.

In that moment of kindness, she actually released me to have the most wonderful education because until that point learning was impossible for me. I am so grateful to her for that gift of kindness shown to a kid sitting on the toilet floor.

I am pleased to say Mrs Morris became a lifetime friend, and remains that way. She still wears the same shade of pink lipstick, despite being in quite her senior years now.

As time went by, dad's condition deteriorated to the point where this brilliant man with a brilliant mind had been let down terribly by a completely useless body and he had very limited movement from the neck down. It became an impossible situation for my mum and for our family for him to remain at home, and a heartbreaking decision was made that this man, only 44 years old, would be placed in institutional care.

He went to Eskleigh Home. It was 22 kilometres from our front door to the car park of Eskleigh. Too far for me to ride my bike. A new level of trauma settled over our family. My father was indeed so saddened that the doctor said to my mum, 'I believe I am going to watch the first man ever die simply of sadness.'. He literally stopped speaking for almost a year.

When I was 11, out of sheer desperation one evening, he asked if I would help him to take his own life. He had run out of strength and he could not go on anymore. I was a kid and there was no way I could do that because I only ever knew my dad to be sick and I just wanted him to be with me, so I could not help him in fulfilling that request.

Somehow, our family struggled on for another nine years until my father passed away at the age of 54. But in those final nine years were some amazing moments, some amazing glimmers of hope where our family was blessed again by kindness from our neighbours and our community. On the fourth weekend of every month, my dad was allowed to come home and for nine years the neighbours, the people who lived in our street, made a commitment to our family that they would be there on stand-by at a moment's notice to come down and help care for dad. They would come and lift him out of the car and into his chair. They would help lift him into bed and out of bed the next morning. They would come anytime he needed to be lifted onto his commode. Anything we needed for that entire weekend, the families who lived in our streets simply made that commitment.

What extraordinary kindness they showed to us; they gave me, my brother and my mum wonderful moments, wonderful memories, in the final nine years of my father's life.

Dad died at the age of 54, 30 years ago last month. In a beautiful turn of events on the thirtieth anniversary of his death, I attended my first official function as the member for Rosevears. At the invitation of the Beaconsfield RSL, I was asked to present medals at Beauty Point to veterans of the World War II. I think my father would have liked that very much.

On two significant occasions, it has been kindness that has actually shaped my life. First as a child, I was freed up to enjoy a wonderful education because of the kindness of an office lady and then for my family, precious and joyful memories were given to us, again a gift of kindness from our neighbours - a gift that endured nine long years.

We must never forget the incredible power that comes with kindness. I have spent years speaking on this very matter at numerous events and indeed at schools right across our state, because you never know when the kindness you show is the miracle that someone else is waiting for. There is no denying our state has been smashed over these past months, from businesses to families to individuals who faced what no-one could have ever thought possible here in our beautiful island state.

The Tasmanian Government has been exemplary in the swift and decisive manner in which it has saved lives and kept us as safe as possible, However, the responsibility of our recovery does not solely lie with government - it lies with each one of us. We must all have an outward focus at this time; rather than looking at what we may have missed out on, we must seek out those who have lost so much more. I believe it is this sense of community that will save us in the coming months and years as we work through the trauma of COVID-19.

Yes, we have seen and we will continue to see extraordinary measures put in place by all tiers of government, as we strategically work through the economic and social impacts of this pandemic. However, I firmly believe it will be our on-the-ground community groups, our grassroots sporting clubs, our neighbours and our communities that will play a pivotal role in catching the individuals who may otherwise fall through the cracks.

As a huge part of my election campaign, I went doorknocking for hours; my husband Andrew joined me in that effort. We had a rule: when you could smell people's dinner cooking you had to come home. Once the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, I was able to go from door to door, and have conversations with everyday Tasmanians. They shared with me their very strong opinions on what I should and should not be doing, but they also shared with me their story. How they were coping, the sorrow that they had faced, the fears they had for their future.

I told them their stories would stay with me always; they drove me on then and they drive me on now.

One such story has been etched on my heart and I would like to share that story today. Mr Geoff East lives in the west Tamar; he was a young man when he married the love of his life, Roma. He was a footballer and the very first time he ever saw Roma, he was running off the field after a game and he fell flat on his face at her feet. They went on to be married, had two children and in Geoff's words, Roma was the best. She raised their kids, she volunteered for years at the canteen at the football, she made

afternoon tea at the cricket and she organised social events for the mini league. She had many years volunteering for Meals on Wheels and with the West Tamar Health and Community Service. She loved greyhounds and she loved her grandchildren.

When I knocked on Geoff's door and handed my little Jo Palmer brochure, he said, 'I do not need that, love, I already know who you are'. He said, 'My wife likes watching you read the news; she does not always like what you wear, and she does not like it when you have your hair up.'. As he spoke her name, he began to cry because just five weeks before, he had lost his beloved wife of many years. She died right in the middle of the harshest restrictions we saw here in Tasmania for COVID-19.

In those final weeks, he was allowed to visit her only twice a day for one hour. His daughters were allowed to visit once a day for half an hour and their grandchildren had to stand outside the glass door and wave. As this strapping man who was a stranger to me stood in his doorway, he was simply overcome with emotion as he spoke of her funeral with only a few people present. Geoff said Roma's funeral should have seen hundreds of people gathered to celebrate her life, her children, her grandchildren, her friends and her community. He said to me, 'I have let her down, she did not deserve to slip away like this and I cannot get over it'. We know Geoff did not let her down, but that is not the way he saw it.

After I was elected, I went back and I found Geoff's house. He was still a broken man, still had not recovered from the fact he had not been able to farewell his sweetheart in the manner in which he felt she deserved. I asked if I could share his story today for two reasons.

First, his beloved wife's name, Roma, would resound in this Chamber, and a little of her life would be honoured in this place in front of all the honourable members who represent every corner of our beloved state. Mr East, the day will come when you can have a huge celebration for Roma's life but right now I hope this gesture will find you a little peace.

Secondly, to remind each one of us that there will be thousands of untold stories of heartache just like this right across our community. There are broken people living in the houses we drive by each day and as members of this community we must find ways to seek out these families and to seek out these individuals. It will be up to every single one of us. We will all need to play a part.

Mr President, what an extraordinary honour to be elected as the member for Rosevears to serve in this place at this time.

I acknowledge today that I have achieved nothing as an individual. Indeed, standing with me today is the Premier, Peter Gutwein, and his team who just kept encouraging me every step of the way and I am so grateful for your support. In particular, my heartfelt thanks to Michael Ferguson and Sarah Courtney, to Guy Barnett and Bridget Archer, Claire Chandler, Jonathon Duniam and Wendy Askew. Much thanks also to Liberal Party president, Rod Scurrah, and state director, Stuart Smith; and local party leadership from Simon Wood and Dorothy Dehays.

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To the Leader of the Government in this House, the honourable member for Montgomery, Leonie Hiscutt, thank you for assuring me that one day I will understand what is going on.

To the members of the Legislative Council staff, my sincere thanks. Also, for your reassurance that I will be okay in this place.

To the honourable member for Huon, Bastian Seidel, we have begun this extraordinary journey together and I am so grateful that on my first day in this place we were able to attempt to navigate the many corridors together. Your height played a big part in ensuring we got where we needed to go.

I wish to pay tribute to all the families and all the loved ones who held my family's hand during our life journey and to the strong women who held mine, including my aunt Lyn, my aunt Sal and Muriel Heron. As a kid I never could have imagined that I would have a career spanning more than two decades in a thriving newsroom. This opportunity was given to me by the then general manager, Bruce Abraham, and then how fortunate to be guided for 18 years by my news director, Mr Grant Wilson. To these two friends I say, thank you, and of course my on-screen nemesis but dear off-screen friend, Peter Murphy, who indeed is a trusted friend.

My many thanks also to my old colleague, Tim Robertson. I am so grateful for your friendship and for your loyalty.

To my birth father, Chris, and my sisters, Janine and Susie - we did not find each other for 35 years and it is a jolly miracle we did but now we are family and I love you.

To my family in-law, Kevin and Karen, Dave and Jen and children - I love you dearly.

To my adored friends, way too many to list, but in particular the Page family who are indeed my family.

My dearest friend, Deb Abraham, and my oldest friend, Grant Collins, who at this very moment is undergoing brain surgery whilst in lockdown in a Melbourne hospital - my love and prayers are with you today my dearest friend.

To my adored brother, Callum, there is not a memory from our childhood through to adulthood that we have not shared. Part of my heart has always been and will always be yours.

My beautiful sister-in-law, Meg, and my nephews who mean the world to me, my eldest nephew who is 16 and currently campaigning in the current New Zealand election - I am a very proud aunty.

To my dad, well I simply wish you were here.

To my mum who is watching on line today as she is not well. Six months after my father died she returned to the mission field, this time to serve in Iraq in the middle of

Desert Storm. Again, her faith never faltered despite living in the middle of a war zone. I have indeed been raised by a mighty woman.

To my own little family - my children, Henry, Lily, Charlie and Alfie - from the moment they were born, everything I have done has been for them. They are indeed, as I look back over my life, the thing I am most proud of.

My husband, Andrew - this was a big ask.

My decision to stand turned our family on its head and I asked you to risk everything that I might have this opportunity and even when I doubted myself you never did and I will love you forever for that.

Finally, to the thousands of homes whose front doors I knocked on. The western suburbs of Launceston, Prospect, Summerhill, West Launceston and Trevallyn through to Riverside and Legana, continuing all the way up the West Tamar to Greens Beach and Beauty Point. Thank you for your openness and your honesty. Even when you said to me I was such a lovely person but you did not think you could vote for me, you shared a little of your life with me as you allowed me to share a little of my life with you.

The electorate of Rosevears is indeed where I have lived through my greatest moments and my deepest heartaches. This is my home and the people who share this magnificent place with me and my family have my heart. They always have and they always will. Thank you, Mr President.

Members - Hear, hear.