

Nicholas George Threlfall 1940-1997

We are all here this morning to say a final farewell to Nicholas Threlfall. As I look around at your faces, I see that they all register the same look of shock and disbelief that I myself felt after receiving the news of the passing of this remarkable friend and colleague. I think that you will all agree that "Remarkable" is the one word that best describes our Nick but I would like to emphasise that it is in life rather than death that we should remember him.

Nick was born in Sydney on 4th July 1940, one of three children born to Hilda and Martyn Threlfall. His sister was killed in a car accident some years ago, and Michael his brother is here with us today along with his wife Ouy. From a very early age Nick established an independent thought process, and I wonder if, in fact, it was prophetic that he walked out of school on his first day there, crossing the highway by himself to return home. He told those that he encountered on the way that his name was Roy Rogers, and for some time after this episode, Mrs Threlfall was at a loss to explain why everyone called her Mrs Rogers. This was not to be the last time that Nick walked away from institutions, and rejected authority.

His keen intellect soon surfaced during his school days at Barker College, where he developed one of the few close personal relationships that was to exist, with Robert Mills, who was to remain his best friend for the rest of his life. He sailed through Sydney University, graduating in 1964 with a credit in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, and commencing his hospital residency at Sydney Hospital in 1965. It was at that time that he first met Carolyn. Subsequent post-graduate studies continued including a senior residency in Perth, Radiotherapy experience at Sydney Hospital, various G.P. locums, and finally a 6 month period in Glasgow in 1968, where he obtained the primary F.R.C.S.

1969 was a milestone for Nick, as he married Carolyn whilst working at Hammersmith Hospital in London. Together they travelled on the Q.E.2 to America, driving from New York to San Francisco, and then returning to Sydney. He worked for a time at Newcastle Hospital as a surgical registrar obtaining the F.R.A.C.S. in 1971, and making the decision to continue his training in the specialty of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery.

He returned to the U.K., training at Roehampton, Edinburgh, and Bristol, coming back home in 1974 to live at Glebe. In this year his first daughter Jane was born, and from June to December he spent in the U.S.A. with the very famous New York surgeon, Converse. 1975 took him to Melbourne to study microsurgery with the internationally famous Bernard O'Brien, and I recall a personal conversation that I had with Bernie myself who described Nick as the best trainee that he had ever had. 1976 saw him appointed to the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, and the family moved to Cheltenham to live. In 1977 his second daughter Alexandra was born, and he obtained a major teaching hospital appointment at Westmead. 1980 saw another change of residence from Cheltenham to Warrawee, and in 89, in a snap decision, he resigned from Westmead hospital. He kept on his private practice in the west, and then took over my own practice in Hornsby when I retired at the end of 1993. He had regular lists at the Sydney Adventist hospital, where he was well-known and admired in the Plastic Surgery Dept., along with Charles Sharpe, Cholm Williams, Victor Zielenski, and Alf Lewis. His trusted secretary, Marcia has been with him for 20 years, and she of course was his right hand, and formed a major and integral part of the running of his busy practice.

I could go on all day recalling amusing little anecdotes that summed up and illustrated the complex character of Nick, but the adjectives that immediately come to mind, relate to the following:

Nick the caring husband and father.
Nick the Surgeon.
Nick the Raconteur.
Nick the Humorist.
Nick the lover of fine and beautiful things.
Nick the Gourmet and Wine lover.
Nick the absent minded Lateral Thinker.
Nick the lover of good music.
Nick the photographer, and perhaps most of all, Nick the Perfectionist.

To be on the receiving end of Nick's sense of humour was not always a comfortable experience; often bizarre, at times macabre, but always as sharp as a tack.

He was obsessed with red traffic lights, maintaining that the number of times they changed from green to red as he approached them exceeded the statistical limits of probability. He explained to me how he had decided to trick them by sitting in his car for a full minute before starting the engine, and thus leaving home a minute later than usual. He just could not understand why this did not work, and for once he was serious.

Nick appreciated everything that was beautiful in both design and construction. He owned some magnificent vehicles, from a vintage Bentley called Big Red to a Mercedes that disgraced itself by spontaneously discharging all of its hydraulic oil onto the front driveway of the Adventist Hospital.

If there was a lemon, Nick would get it, and it was. The ensuing battle with the Mercedes Benz company almost required military intervention. The pinnacle of his motoring aspirations was undoubtedly the acquisition of his pride and joy, the B.M.W. M3, regarded by many as the best car in the world. Apart from the fact that he could not drive the vehicle for more than 1/2 hour at a time due to the discomfort of the driver's seat and its reluctance to receive his bulk, he had no complaints at all, the first time I can ever remember this and a major tribute to B.M.W

Feeding Nick was not an easy or straightforward matter, and when the Threlfalls were coming to dinner, my wife would go into a state of shock for two days before the event, wondering "what on earth can I cook for Nick. His own cooking presented similar confrontations, and his family will well remember the time he spent over cooking a duck pie, only to toss it into the garbage can before the dinner guests could sample it, as it did not come up to his expectations.

When I was considerably younger, I had heard about Lateral Thinkers, but was not absolutely sure what the words meant. The Oxford dictionary says; " a method of solving problems indirectly or by apparently illogical methods."

Meeting Nick clarified what was meant by Lateral Thinking. On several occasions I have driven with Nick to various functions, and I soon learned that if I wanted him to take a left-hand turn, I would have to say to him, "we should turn right here Nick."

As a surgeon, there was never any doubt about his ability and discretion. Many of us have experienced occasions when a consultant opinion was sought, and invariably he was anxious to help and innovative in his contribution to the management of difficult surgical problems. He will be greatly missed by all of his colleagues who had professional contact with him.

Almost by definition, a Plastic Surgeon needs to be obsessional and perfection-istic. Nick personified this character type, to the extent that very little measured up to his standards and expectations. He was increasingly exasperated by the steady and continual decline of the hospitals systems and he had a very short fuse when it came to trying to accept any compromise. Compromise was not in his vocabulary. Bureaucratic complexities drove him to distraction, and were certainly responsible for him leaving Westmead Hosp. and probably other institutions

I think that Nick could only live comfortably in a perfect world, and whilst the rest of us know that there is no such thing and manage somehow to do the best we can with what we have, Nick continued to hope that his Utopia may be around the next corner.

I regard it as a privilege to have been asked to deliver this eulogy, and will conclude it by extending sincere sympathy to Carolyn, Jane and Alex, his brother Michael and wife Ouy, to Philip, Jill and Kate, Michaels children, to his half niece Sarah and her brother Martyn. We are saddened by his passing, but on the other hand perhaps grateful that he is now resting in peace with other beloved members of his family.

Though I am dead, grieve not for me with tears,
Think not of death with sorrowing and fears,
I am so near that every tear you shed,
Touches and saddens me, though you think me dead.
But when you laugh and sing in glad delight,
MY soul is lifted upwards to the light.
Laugh and be glad for all that life is giving,
And I though dead, will share your joy in living

Credit: Jim Poate 8th Dec 97