

Dedicated defender of public heritage

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Published: February 9, 2017 - 3:59PM

Julianne Bell, dedicated and courageous protector of Victoria's parks, public lands and cultural heritage, died at Caritas Christi Hospice Kew on January 27.

Julianne recognised the need to preserve Victoria's heritage of public spaces and land from the pressures of an increasing population and in 2003 founded an incorporated body for this purpose named Protectors of Public Lands (Victoria), based on a similar organisation in New South Wales.

The organisation operates as a coalition of Melbourne and statewide groups, overseeing and caring for public assets in their localities. Its slogan is "Keep public lands in public hands".

Julianne was variously described as intelligent, feisty, witty and "you had better have done your homework on an issue before taking her on". Her death was a shock and profound personal loss to all who knew her.

Born on May 30, 1940, she grew up in Camberwell and attended Fintona Girls' School, Balwyn. As a schoolgirl, she was a champion horsewoman, winning prizes at the Royal Melbourne Show. She was also a Victorian schoolgirl backstroke champion, and later a black-run skier and a yoga teacher.

Following her education, Julianne travelled overseas and taught English in Greece. Later Julianne taught at Loreto Convent, Toorak, where she seemed to have extrasensory perception. She altered the students' morning prayers but got away with it because a recent Vatican encyclical had identically changed the prayer!

Her last job in the 1990s before retirement was working as Minister Gerry Hand's assistant in the Immigration Department. Welcoming new immigrants one day, she referred to their previous unrecognised country as being now "recognised"; fortunately, within hours the Australian Government did "recognise" it.

Julianne had initiative, confidence and integrity of purpose. With her wicked and endearing sense of humour, great writing and linguistic skills and quick puns, she was politically astute and turned what were often daunting, overwhelming "David and Goliath" battles into somewhat more manageable but all-out campaigns against the destruction of natural and built heritage.

In 1996 she was one of the founding members of the Royal Park Protection Group (RPPG), dedicated to ensure that development was consistent with the 1987 Royal Park Master Plan. The park was being neglected – 13 hectares had been cleared for a car park and there were many other threats to its future.

In 1998, Julianne "discovered" Walmsley House near Gatehouse Road, Parkville, which was saved and listed by the State Heritage Register and National Trust. The Golden Wych Elm at the caretaker's cottage was listed on the Significant Tree Register of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria).

In 1999, battles over the location of the State Netball and Hockey Centre (SNHC) were lost because the Kennett Government introduced legislation to permit its establishment. However, through Julianne's efforts, the existing buildings were returned to parkland rather than parking lots, and the RPPG was given representation on the SNHC Advisory Board. Julianne went to court accused of "criminal damage" (protest graffiti on the SNHC) but got off the charge in court after pleading "just a little bit guilty, Your Honour".

In 2005, a successful campaign was lodged to ensure that the new Royal Children's Hospital did not result in any net loss to Royal Park.

Other wins from Julianne's PPL campaigns include saving Port Campbell's fragile cliffs and war memorial reserve from an oversized development, and Camperdown's historic elm avenue of 500 trees after an overzealous council decided to remove the whole avenue in blocks over five years. Julianne had a good laugh when the replacement trees – which were supposed to be taken from cuttings from the original trees – turned out to be a different species.

Julianne saw her greatest victory as stopping the East-West Link in 2014. PPL and RPPG engaged a barrister to present the case against the project at the hearing. Julianne was present for every minute of the six-week hearing, a commitment that took a toll on her health. The battle against a freeway through the park began in 1999.

Hard-fought losses in 2016 included attempting to save Gough Whitlam's home, stop construction of a new sports pavilion with lighting in the Royal Park and saving the Flemington Road lemon-scented gums.

So many are indebted to Julianne for assisting with environmental causes – great training from a master, a martyr to the natural and cultural environment. Julianne had high expectations of others based on her own standards, an almost impossible bar to reach.

Julianne was an entertaining story-teller and often told of her battle with the Mafia who had offered her a lifetime of free pizzas to stop her campaign. Laughingly Julianne recited: "I told them I would rather die than eat your rotten pizzas!" Only Julianne could get away with that.

Julianne loved the opera and attending classical concerts and would share tickets with her friends. In recent years she did not own a television and spent most of her time on activism, but she found great enjoyment and distraction from her illness watching TV in hospital.

She loved art, good literature, political history and crime-fiction books. With her acute knowledge from interactions with politicians, Julianne was going to write *Murder at the Ministry*, but unfortunately never did.

While in hospital Julianne was supported lovingly and devotedly by her family and friends. She was presented with certificates for her enormous dedication to the protection of parks and heritage from the RPPG, and the PPL "Golden Possum Award". Julianne's work to protect the possums of St Kilda's Catani Gardens was legendary.

Julianne's funeral service was at St Michael's Anglican Church, Princes Hill, and the respect in which she was held was obvious in the large attendance of family, friends, statewide activist colleagues and local, state and federal politicians from all political parties.

Julianne had an invincible spirit – all the more shock at her death. Her great wit, support and friendship has helped many survive difficult times. She was a breath of fresh air and will be greatly missed.

Julianne's mentoring of a statewide network of activists in advocacy and political lobbying will ensure developers and politicians will not get away with it. Her legacy and spirit lives on.

* Ernest Healy is president, Protectors of Public Lands (Victoria) Inc, and wrote this tribute on behalf of the PPL and the Royal Park Protection Group.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/obituaries/dedicated-defender-of-public-heritage-20170209-gu99s1.html>