

CLAIRE LYNCH ORAL INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET MELLISH ON 15 FEBRUARY 2024 AT CAMPBELLTOWN HOSPITAL

CL Margaret, would you like to tell us a little bit about who you are and who your parents were?

MM I'm Margaret Mellish, I was Margaret Simmonds. My mother was Eva May Simmonds, and my dad was Robert Percy Simmonds. It's sad, we moved, it's sad when I talk about what my father done to my mother with eight children. We had a house in Atkinson Street, Liverpool. My dad sold it and he bought a house in Macquarie Fields with a swimming pool. It was an old tin shack with tin windows. We had to poke a stick out to open the windows, lined with cardboard or buckled masonite and the swimming pool was the Georges River. No electricity or running water. Us kids had to have shovels and we had to shovel our way to find the floor in the shack and everything. We had banks outside the doorway we'd shovel the sand we had taken out of the house. There were only two little bedrooms with a small room. My dad built double bunks and us eight kids we'd sleep head and foot in bed. That's how we all slept.

CL That's amazing. So how old would you have been when you moved to that shack?

MM I'm not sure because I'm ten years older than my brother Ken and my mum had Stanley, that's Bimbo, he got killed at Cabramatta back in 1975. A coal truck clipped his bike and ran over him. I would have been maybe ten, eleven. I would have had to been because I am ten years older than Ken and Bimbo were babies, they were the two youngest. Ken was born in 51 and Bimbo was born 52. Mum had already had them when we moved to Macquarie Fields. And all of us other six kids, the furniture from the house in Atkinson Street was all in the back of the truck and us six kids were sitting on the furniture in the back of the truck going down to Macquarie Fields. The roads were all just rocks and it felt many times that the truck was going to tip over. It was devastating, my Mum couldn't believe it she cried her eyes out. She said Bob what have you done to us, what have you done. He was a compulsive liar, he made out that he'd bought the property and owned it but he didn't. We lived there all those years illegally. It was illegal.

CL Yes it was.

MM It belonged to Bob Souter and Jimmy Faulkner. They owned the property there at the time. It was just pathetic. Mum said the life that he's give us kids, all my arms, you see the scars there on my arms, we had to chop wood and cart water by buckets, after buckets, after buckets to keep mum supplied. My sister Beverley she used to chop green trees down so they could die within months so we could keep the wood up to mum with the old fuel combustion stove. We

would come in with armfuls of wood in our arms after school. First of all after school we would have to go to the shops for mum at Macquarie Fields and then go home and do our chores. We would come in with armfuls of wood and dad would have a bottle of wine on his shoulder and he had a double leather razor strap. He would push it together one side buckle and the other side leather and he would crack it like a whip and he would belt us. We would drop the wood and we would go to school with bleeding arms, ripped skin. It was absolutely pathetic.

5 mins

We had scabs on us everywhere. We never had a life.

CL It was not a happy childhood.

MM I never had a childhood. Not a happy childhood at all.

CL So when you say you went to school which school did you go to?

MM I went to Campbelltown, Campbelltown High School. Ingleburn Primary School first then Campbelltown High School. After I left there I think I was about 16, 17, and my brother Ken we're the only two survivors left. He's the one who was born in 51 he's 73 now. he could tell you more of what happened after we left because he was still there with my younger sister, himself and Bimbo you know. He couldn't wait to get away either.

CL When you went to school was that like a bit of an escape?

MM It was.

CL Did you enjoy school?

MM Not really because I never made many friends because of the scabs and sores on us. There was one particular friend I've still got now from 1955. We lost contact for a lot of years because she married and had her own family. But as time went by we got reunited again and we're still the best of friends now. She was here yesterday, she came to visit me again. It would be nothing for us to cart 30 buckets of water every afternoon. My Mum had a big round tub and we used to half fill it with the cold water and mum had a 44-gallon drum with a copper. She would boil the water to put in to bath us. All of us had to finish up having to bath in the same water or we would have had to keep going down carting water. In the summertime we would cart all the water and make sure that mum had everything she needed wood and we'd pack it up behind the door. Then us girls, the three eldest ones would all go down with a cake of soap and jump in the river and we would have our bath in the river, so we didn't have to use the water that we had already carted up for mum. In the wintertime mum would say, no girls you have to have a warm bath. It was only a tin shack with just curtains around it.

CL What was your dad doing before he moved?

MM He used to work for Flegg's Bottle. Have you heard of Flegg's Bottle yard? That was on the main highway at Liverpool. I was burnt when I was four years of age and mum got my eldest sister to run up and get dad from work and they rushed me to hospital. So I do remember that as clear as clear as day.

CL So what do you think made him decide to throw that away and move?

MM I have no idea.

CL So that area became known as Simmo's Beach.

MM They named it after me mum and dad living there with eight kids. He didn't deserve it.

CL When people say he was a lovable rogue ...

MM He was a rogue, but I wouldn't say lovable.

CL Fair enough.

MM And I'll tell you the truth now. I lost my sister, the one I was very close to I lost her in 2009, and I used to go up to Queensland to look after her when I could, and I found a letter in amongst her paperwork when she died. Her solicitor wanted the papers, and a letter fell out to me, and when I read it, she said open when I am gone. My sister said, she told me he was a paedophile; he was mauling my sisters. I'm telling you everything about him because I hate him so much for what he had done.

10 mins

Before I knew this I would go and do his grave. When he died back in 1983. Once I found that letter I have never been near his grave since. I never will and my son will never do that either for what he'd done. I'm not letting him get away with nothing for what he's done. We had an old kerosene refrigerator and mum had an old ice chest and used to get blocks of ice to put in it and the fuel stove had to be going 24/7 so there was a terrible lot of wood we had to chop. Us kids even tried carving steps in stones in rocks down there, still there now. Even Maria, my son took her down and showed her. A lot of memories down there.

CL To make it easier to get down.

MM We only had screwdrivers and chisels and we broke that many the rocks were too hard. We had to jump up on rocks to get up to the road.

CL My goodness. So your dad was doing sand mining which was illegal.

MM That was illegal too.

CL How did he do that? Was it with a machine?

MM There was a big pump on the river, and I've got a photo of the truck. It's in there, Maria and David will show you later. He would pump it and the sand would go into the back of the truck and he would sell it. It was a big machine – a conveyor belt.

CL That sand was sold presumably to the building industry.

MM Yes. Jimmy Faulkner and Bob Souter worked with dad on the river.

CL He was doing that for a good part I guess of two decades about. In the 50s and 60s would you say.

MM I think it would have been in the 50s that I can recall.

CL Because you had to work so hard you wouldn't have any recreation time.

MM We had no life, we had no free time. We had no friends. Nothing. Mum was a prisoner in amongst rocks. She had rocks all round her God love her.

CL When did your mum pass away?

MM 1966, she was only 53. My sister Beverly passed away at 53 and my mother's mother at 53. We lost three generations at age 53.

CL And here you are at 82.

MM I always thought I would be the first to go out of the girls. I'm the last surviving girl.

CL Did all you siblings get on well together?

MM We did except me and my eldest sister. She was evil. She used to pinch the babies and everything to get away from washing up and things like that. She never had a good word to say about any of us. Elaine used to give my sister Beverly hell. Beverly was like a real tomboy, she would wear a belt with knives on it. One day Elaine really got to her and Beverly pulled out a knife and threw it at her, only that Elaine jumped she would have copped the knife. That woke Elaine up a bit to lay off Beverley. There was no mucking around with Bev, she was a good girl Beverley was and Barbara and Pat. I can't say that for Elaine, she died back in 2020.

CL She was the eldest.

MM She was the eldest.

15 mins

CL Do you want to tell me who they all were?

MM There was Elaine, Beverley, me, Barbara, Billy, Pat, Ken and Bimbo (Stanley)

CL That's amazing. Goodness me. How would you get your groceries and things like that?

MM Us kids would have to do that. We would go to the shop with bags and carry the shopping back. Then we would go and do our chores. We had the old flat iron on the fuel stove to get hot and had to iron our clothes inside out because we would get black over our clothes from the fuel stove. That wasn't a very pleasant thing. We used to clean our teeth with soot from the chimney because times were hard, and we couldn't afford toothpaste. It's amazing we survived.

CL It is. Oh my goodness. And what else was I going to ask you? You told me what Bob was like as a person.

MM I've got nothing good to say about him.

CL When did he finish up doing that sand mining?

MM Ken would be able to tell you more about that love. When I left Ken and Pat and Bimbo and that were still there. So I don't know what happened much after that.

CL What age were you when you moved away?

MM I think I was about 16, 15 or 16. Sixteen I think I was.

CL Where did you move to?

MM I moved over with Elaine because Elaine had already left home because I had a job at Bankstown at Dunlop Rubber. It was too far from Simmo's Beach so Elaine said I could live with her. She made arrangements with a neighbour because he worked at Bankstown at the time, an elderly man, so he would drop me off and I would catch a train home.

CL Was that a good job?

MM It was.

CL You were happier away from your father?

MM To get away from Simmo's it couldn't have come at a better time. No life, no life at all.

CL You obviously got married a little bit later.

MM I did, I did.

CL How old were you when you got married?

MM I was 19 or 20.

CL What was your husband's name?

MM Ken Mellish

CL Ken Mellish, OK that might bring us on to the Mellish story. So, you are related by marriage to Wally Mellish.

MM My father-in-law and Wally's father were brothers. Wally is my husband's first cousin. Which is my son's second cousin.

CL And so Wally unfortunately got a bit of a rough trot in what I will refer to in inverted commas as "The Glenfield Siege" which became huge news at the time. I think it would be nice if you would be able to tell us a bit about Wally as a perspective of someone who actually knew him.

MM He was from a family of 14 children. A big family. I knew and loved every one of them. Aunty Ivy his mum and Uncle Roy.

BREAK

Those children didn't have a good life either. Their parents made them do chores before they could have their free time. They were very busy. Aunty Ivy and Uncle Roy knew this fellow who used to make clothes and they would go around selling the clothes to people. That's how they were making a living as well.

20 mins

When it came to the siege, Aunty Ivy one day I was up there because one of her daughters Claire was a darling friend of mine and I had to wait for her to finish her chores before I could spend a little bit of time with her. This was on my way back from the shop, they lived at the top of Fifth Avenue and we lived right down the river end. Her grandfather used to come out into the kitchen when I was there and he would cough and everybody would look up and he would pull his glass eye out and wipe it.

CL So he was a bit of a character, he was.

MM He was a real character he was.. They were a lovely family. They were a better family than what we were if you know what I mean. They had it hard too.

CL So tell me a little bit about Wally.

MM He was always, even when he was young, he took to me straight away, well he took to a couple of my siblings. He used to say after I got married, I married into violence and alcoholic and Wally used to say one of these days he's going to cop it. He was very protective. He and his wife used to come and pick me up weekends, this was after I divorced my husband. They would take me out to their place and make me so welcome and take me to different places I had never been in my life. He wouldn't have harmed a fly, Wally wouldn't have. The coppers set him up. They set up a job for him to do for them, and while Wally was doing the job for them they went and dobbed him in. I was up at Aunty Ivy's waiting for Claire. She was in the laundry doing the washing and I was standing outside. The next minute we heard a shot and it just missed Aunty Ivy in the laundry. The coppers were still hanging around because they were out to get Wally because they were thinking that Wally was going to name the coppers that set him up. So it was a set up, absolutely and I take that to my grave with me. Because that's what Wally told me and I believe every word that man told me.

CL It was just like on the front page of the newspapers, it was a huge thing.

MM Absolutely, even when the siege was over, when he carried the baby out, Beryl Muddle's baby, that was only to protect him because the coppers would have shot him had he had walked out on his own. The baby was his protection.

CL Was Beryl Muddle his girlfriend at the time?

MM No, she was a prostitute, Beryl Muddle was.

CL So getting married to her during the siege was

MM It was just like a relationship, it wasn't actually a girlfriend, just a relationship Wally had lots of girls but none really serious until he met up with Lorraine, and that's when he struck the right woman. Do you know, Wally would never ever wear shoes. I never ever knew Wally when he was young to ever wear shoes. Never. Wally said her could run faster and jump a six foot fence barefoot. And that's exactly how he was. And even when he was in prison he crushed up razor blades, pins and everything and swallowed them. You never saw anything like his stomach, he was cut all the way open, all the way across, you've got no idea, the scars that man had on his body. And he used to hide up in the manhole when they thought he escaped, anyway towards the end they said they would release him if he joined the army. So Wally agreed. Anyway when the time came and they took him to join the army,

25 mins

the Major there, or whoever it is, the big head said to Wally there's all this paperwork you need to fill out and that was, oh, I forget his name, the two main police, they were there with Wally all the time, I forget their names, when Wally went to fill out the papers he said I can't, I'm illiterate, but he was promised that if he was to go and join the army they'd set him free. Because he went, and he couldn't fill out the papers, they couldn't break their promise, they said if he went, they'd let him free. And that's what Wally did. And that's how he ended up free. Not long after that he met Lorraine, got married and they had two sons. And he settled down into antique business. Absolutely immaculate, his home.

CL Did he live down Picton way?

MM He did for a while but he lived at Macquarie Fields on, what's that road David, you know when you come from the shops as if you're going down to where I used to, Fields Road, you know Fields Road? He lived on Fields Road, Wally did.

CL And where was his antique business?

MM He was renting the house, and that's where he had a lot of his antiques, and then as years went by he purchased his own home, he owned it, at St Andrews.

CL So in the end it turned out ok for Wally.

MM Oh it turned out absolutely gorgeous. Absolutely gorgeous. He had the best life.

CL And I think he only passed away in 2016

MM Yeah, that's right he did. And they buried him up at Thirlmere, we've got photos of his grave, we went to his funeral, he wanted to be buried near little Ebony Simpson, the little girl that got murdered that time, because he said he wanted

to protect her. So Ebony's here (indicates) and Wally's there (indicates) so Wally's there kind of looking after her. He was a good man. My son's absolutely loved and adored him. We've got plenty of photos of Wally.

CL Well it's really nice to know some real stuff about Wally

MM What they wrote was all rubbish. It was all rubbish, they made up their own story. I knew Wally like I know my own sons, and that's exactly how Wally was. A beautiful man.

CL Alright, so that's Wally!. Now you were going to tell me about...

MM The cooking. The fuel stove. Mum used to battle to make us a meal. Always made sure there was plenty for us kids, and Mum used to make, she had a real big boiler and she used to make bacon bone soup, and beef stews, and all of that, you know, to feed ten of us. Eight kids and her and Dad, and my father, when he come from the pub, he'd bring drunken mates down, and he'd start talking gibber gibber gibber to Mum, and Mum had to make out that she understood the gibber he was talking and she'd have her meal served out, and Dad would say in his gibber to feed his mates, and Mum would go without so us kids wouldn't eat because our Mum went without. She gave up her meals to feed his drunken mates. You've got no idea. She had a big teapot, so big, so round, where she had it on the stove all day, cup of tea to keep it hot for us

CL So on weekends I guess you were still just getting wood together...

MM No day was any different.

30 mins

CL Except no school, on weekends.

MM No different. We had more chores to do, we'd chop more wood, or we'd go with Beverly and help her chop more trees down. So that when we run out of all the dry wood we had other trees drying off to chop up. And once we started on t hose trees then we'd go and chop more trees down, further around. But after our chores, Mum would say to us of a weekend and that, go on girls, go down and have a swim and enjoy yourself. So we'd go down, where we still go now, down there and have a picnic, and we used to swim across to the other side and jump off the rocks and that's the only time we really had. A bit of freedom.

CL A bit of recreation time.

MM And it was through Mum.

CL And it's so different there now of course it's all been....

MM Absolutely, there's running water there, and toilets, it certainly is love.

CL Have you been down there, since?

MM I haven't been down since I've been sick, since 2020.

CL But you have been down since...

MM David took Marie down, not long ago, didn't you love. We've got all the photos at home, where my late sister and that, before she died, we'd all go down, because they lived in Queensland. They'd come and we'd all go down.

CL Now was this your sister Barb?

MM My sister Barbara.

CL Now was she a little bit of a special one?

MM She was, I was very close to Barb. I'd go and look after her up in Queensland, I had problems but when she was sick, her husband, he was in the army for 38 years, he used to retrieve Blackhawk helicopters and things like that. Well they posted him to Darwin, he shouldn't have gone, he was supposed to have retired, he promised Barbara he was going to retire that year. Apparently his boss asked him would he sign up for another 12 months. And Barbara was all prepared with her caravan and everything to go travelling around Australia with him. Anyway he came home and told her that he'd signed up for another 12 months. Well she sold the caravan, she sold everything, and she was so angry with Bill for doing that, anyway they posted him to Darwin and it's the only time Barbara never ever went on a posting with him, because he cheated on her, you know, for doing the wrong thing. And they sent him out to retrieve a Blackhawk when he had a bad turn and they rushed him to hospital, a few days later he was dead. And that was in 2007. But when he was home he'd chop all the wood for her for her big combustion and pot belly stove up there in Queensland, but when he died she had to do it herself. And a piece of wood went up in the air, came down, went through the back of her leg into the bone, and the doctor that treated it for a few months, it had gone septic, and turned into bone cancer and from there the cancer went right through every part of her body, and she had a, like a golf ball here, and a tennis ball behind it, and she'd say "Hey Margie" (croaky voice) "I need a drink of water". I had to sleep with her because I couldn't hear her from the other bedroom and so on. God love her. And then I was in bed with her one night up there and she woke me up and she said "I can't feel my legs" in her little voice so I got up and rang her doctor, Dr McNichol, and they said, first thing in the morning Margaret I'll get Dr McNichol to come, so when he did come he examined Barbara and he said Barbara you've had a stroke and you've gone paralysed. So when he was leaving, he went like that (beckoned) as he walked from her bedroom out into the dining room, and I followed him out, and I said to Barbara first, "sweetheart, I'll just go and see Dr McNichol off, and I'll come back in", and she said "all right Marg".

35 mins

So when I went back out he said to me, "Margaret we've got to put her in hospice, she's not coming home this time". And she was only there a couple of days when I lost her as well.

CL Oh, you've lost a lot of people along the way. Yep.

MM Yep. So she lost her husband in 2007, and I lost her in 2009, exactly 20 months after losing her husband I lost her.

CL Mmm, it's sad isn't it.

MM Sad. I couldn't understand too, why Barbie chose that life with her potbelly and combustion. She had electricity and everything too. And I thought, it's just like living down the river. But then my brother Ken, he's living the same way! He bought a property, 42 acres, up in Merriwa. Have you heard of Scone, Aberdeen, well he's in Merriwa. Beautiful little home he's got up there. He's got it so lovely, hasn't he David. Yeah, and he's got no electricity or running water, he's got seven tanks, he purchased all that, there was only one tank there...

CL No carting water!

MM No, only for his grass! He's got the river running through his property too! And yesterday or the day before his batteries were arriving for his solar power, he's got all the solar power

CL So he's kind of living off the grid.

MM He doesn't have to pay electricity bills, water bills, he's got everything, everything's done so beautiful, absolutely. And he said when he dies, he wants to be cremated and spread over Simmo's Beach. That's his wish.

CL That's interesting.

MM And if you were interviewing him now, he'd tell you that himself. That's a wish of his, he wants to be spread over Simmo's Beach. And where our house was, that's carpark. Exactly the spot.

CL Aah. Where the carpark is.

MM Where the carpark is, that's where our house was.

CL So the house that you lived in, well the shack that you lived in..

MM Tin, corrugated tin,

CL Did it have anything lining it on the inside?

MM Cardboard and buckled masonite.

CL Yep and what was the floor made out of?

MM Dirt.

CL Just a dirt floor. Gosh.

MM Just a dirt floor.

CL Gosh, that's incredible. Oh my gosh. That's a hard, hard existence isn't it.

MM It was a hard existence, Mum never had a life, you know, and she only had the copper, and she had the old wind up wringer to do the washing, she'd put the clothes through the wringer and we had the big long wire line that you had a stick,

CL The prop stick.

MM The prop stick, yeah God love her. She had it hard. She had a hard life and I think that's what killed her so young. Only 53, you know.

CL She did have though, all you kids helping her and ...

MM Oh absolutely. Oh yes.

CL All pitching in.

MM Oh yes, we'd never let Mum do everything on her own. No, we weren't like that, we loved our mother so much.

MM Your great grandmother, your Nan, and your Aunty Bev, all 53.

CL Oh well, you've beaten that by a bit!

MM I think I have! I think I have Claire!

CL Yep! And would you say that, I know your marriage wasn't happy,

MM No.

CL But since then, um, how many kids did you have?

MM Three. Three sons.

CL Three boys!

MM Yeah, I've got one older than David and one younger than David.

CL And would you say now that you had had a happy life since being divorced and just having your own space and your own life?

MM Definitely, definitely. I couldn't believe it when my sister, Elaine, and I, were married to brothers. Elaine married Ike Mellish, his real name was Clive, and I married Ken Mellish, and we lived two doors apart. We finished up first two sons first.

40 mins

What was I going to say?

CL We were talking about being happier.

MM One day, like, I was divorced from him, and Elaine rang up one day, 'cause I've got my husband Ken, my brother Ken and I have a nephew Ken, so this particular day David and John were sitting in my kitchen doing a bit of arm-wrestling as brothers do, which was lovely, and my phone rang, and when I answered it was Elaine, my evil sister. Anyway she said, Marg have you heard

the news? And I said no Elaine, what news? And so to make it easy for her she said Ken's dead. And I said, which Ken? And she said your Ken. Well you know when I'd go shopping I was too frightened to go on my own, I had to look over my shoulder, because many a time even when I was going through a divorce and divorced, he would be standing at Mainsbridge Hotel at Liverpool, and many a time he'd come out and pull the back of my hair and belt the hell out of me in the main street of Liverpool. His solicitor was having him up for contempt of court, he almost pushed her out the elevator. Anyway I must have been dumbfounded when Elaine said, "your Ken", and I didn't say nothing, and David looked up at me and said, "what Mum, the old man kicked the bucket?". And I said "yes darlin', he did" and would you believe this big breath come straight out of me.

CL Relief.

MM I didn't have to look over my shoulder any more. But then a couple of hours later I still couldn't sink it in, I rang Elaine back and I said to Elaine I don't believe it, I have to go and see him, you've got to take me to the morgue, I've got to make sure it's him, this is how bad it was, and so she said, alright love, so anyway, the next day I went in, and sure enough it was him, and then I said to David you've got to come to the funeral with me. You've got to son. He said no Mum. I'm not going to his funeral. I said darling do it for me, he can't hurt us any more. He'd take his belt off and belt the hell out of the kids and all. For no reason. He had two other kids between mine, he had a daughter between David and John, and I'm in hospital giving birth to John, when his girlfriend's 5 months pregnant. Another girlfriend, she had a son to him. And he'd come home and belt the hell out of us for what he was doing wrong. Yeah, we done him no wrong. So anyway, she took me in, and it was him alright. So the following day

CL Good riddance hey!

MM Good riddance to bad rubbish. But you might think it's evil of me, but when I saw that it was him I went with my camera over to the cemetery, and I've got them pictures at home, I could pull them out and show you, I've got a photo of the hole he was going in.

CL See ya later (laughing)

MM And I said to the boys "he's down there, he can't hurt us any more". It sounds an evil thing to do...

CL Yeah, but you're not the evil one.

MM So with the life with Dad, and the life with my husband, really that was all the life we knew.

CL So you'd earned a little bit of peace and joy, hadn't you.

MM We did. And since then we've never looked back. I love me kids and I never thought I'd live to see them grow up, and now I've got eleven grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

CL How good is that!

MM Absolutely lovely. Wouldn't swap it for the world, love. Wouldn't swap it.

CL Good for you.

MM Now how are you doing, are you tired, are you alright?

CL Is there anything else you want to talk to me about?

MM No, not really love. From where I've left off, my brother could fill in the gaps. So that's all I can tell you darling, I don't think I've really missed anything. If it is, it wouldn't be a big major thing.

CL That's fantastic.

MM At least I've told you the main things.

CL Yep. Your story.

MM My story. And Ken can fill you in from there.

CL Yeah, good for you Margaret.

MM Thank you Claire.

CL You're a trooper.

MM Thank you darling.

CL It's been so amazing to talk to you, and I wished I'd gotten myself a bit organised sooner, but thank goodness I rung up when I did.

MM I'm glad you did too love, with me being in hospital. You never know what could have happened.