

Wintringham

CLAUDE CLIFF

Although we have been expecting this day to come, I think we are all a little shocked that it finally has come around. Claude was never going to die – he proved that time and again. In fact we used to call him Lazarrus - apart from a few other names!

But it has happened – finally that huge will to live that drove that little body, has given up. I know Jenny, her market friends and many of the staff here are very upset, and I know that it would be easy for this day to become unbearably sad.

I don't want that to happen.

Claude lived many years longer than anyone could have expected, and that is itself a cause to celebrate. We should celebrate his love for Jenny, celebrate the great friends he made, and especially to celebrate the wonderful care that he was given by the staff here at Port and in his final months, at Ron Conn, for it was these people who gave us the extra years that Claude enjoyed.

If any of us are looking around for reasons why we built Ron Conn, we don't have to look any further than Claude Cliff. Up until we finally managed to beg borrow and shame the millions from governments who should have been given the money up more graciously, our very old and sick men and women left Wintringham to die in other people's nursing homes. With Ron Conn, we can truly give a Home Until Stumps, and both Claude and us are the winners.

In many ways Claude and the Vic Market have been litmus tests for Wintringham. When I started more than 20 years ago, the Market was full of old characters like Claude. I remember, as I am sure you folk from the market also remember, the numbers of men in old grey great coats, with a brown paper bag passing the day away. Lying behind that image was a social outrage. All these men were homeless and they passed the day away at the market waiting for the night

shelters to open at 5 pm. I have used that recurring image of the 1980's as a motivation for our work here at Wintringham. The fact that we only rarely see guys like Claude at the market is an indication of just how many we have been able to house.

But back to Claude. How many times has he gone to hospital only to be discharged days later. Or on one occasion, when he heard that there was a party at Port Melbourne, he discharged himself. He turned up in a wheelchair and bottle of oxygen and held court until he asked for an ambulance to take him back.

Another time when I had a phone call that Claude was dying, I went to Royal Melbourne to say goodbye. I found him curled up in his customary foetal position. The young nurse was very worried and mentioned that he was refusing all liquids. I told her to give me what she wanted him to drink. I went over to his bed and said 'hello Claude'. One eye opened and recognizing me he croaked 'giday Bryan – I feel shithouse'. "Its ok Claude, I've brought you a beer.' Claude immediately sat up and I gave him the juice that the nurse had given me. He got half way through it and then said "this isn't a bloody beer". "Of course it is" I said "you must have dementia you silly bugger!". He gave me a grin and drank the rest. And of course he recovered and again came back to Wintringham.

We care for about 750 elderly people on any night, and many thousands since we started in 1989. Yet few have touched our lives the way Claude has. Phill told me that there is a flatness about Ron Conn that he hasn't seen before. And at our regular Managers meeting a few days after Claude's death, there was a sadness that was palpable. Lynette sitting next to me said that it just doesn't seem possible that we wont see Claude again. And Lynette never worked with him and only knew him from parties. When I told my President that we were having a memorial service for a very special bloke today, he asked me who it was. I told him Claude. Ross immediately said, "Oh I know him" Ross said he would come today, but has since found out that he has an appointment.

What was it that made everyone love him? I think that perhaps it was because there was no guile about the man – what you saw you got. Sure he conned you out of a few bob occasionally, but it was his genuiness that affected us all. His smile, particularly when his health was better, was

absolutely disarming allowing him to say whatever he wanted to. His brief moments of anger were genuine. His likes and dislikes were genuine. In a modern world of spin and falseness, Claude was different. As Jenny says, “he was one of the old ones”.

Its interesting that although he made a huge impact on all of us, we know nothing of his family. Who knows what separated them – whether it was something traumatic or just a drifting apart. Either way, I think that they might have lost something not knowing Claude in his later years.

As you all know, Claude worked for Jenny at the Vic Market. But who worked for who? Claude would travel across town to Vic Market on Saturday morning, tell Jenny to pay for the cab, and find a seat next to her hat stall. Stubby in hand, he then proceeded to sell more hats than Jenny! Dot and I have a joke at home that in the next life I want to come back as a pet in the Lipmann family. I think I now want to amend that wish. In the next life I want to work for Jenny Pike!

The story of Claude and Jenny is a genuine love story. Not the stuff of Hollywood or literature, but real life, real love. Claude was so proud of Jenny, and so proud that she loved him. Everytime he saw me, he would tell me something about Jenny: its her birthday; I saw her yesterday; she’s coming to see me tomorrow; she’s in India.

Every year we have a birthday party to celebrate the opening of Port, and every year Jenny comes. On one occasion I was running late. I found Claude sitting on the fence outside waiting for her.

When I asked Jenny of all the anecdotes about Claude, which did she want me to recount, she said “tell the Channel 10 story”.

A couple of years ago, we were celebrating an event here, I cant remember which one, but it was one where there was numerous media – so I guess there must have involved some politicians. When these events are over, the pollies leave and normally, so too does the media. But on this occasion, some of them stayed and had a drink with the residents and wandered around the building, enjoying the atmosphere. I was talking to a few of them from Channel 10 and they

were saying that they had been here before. I couldn't remember them and so I asked what function it was.

It turned out that a year or two earlier they were doing a news item about the Vic Market and inevitably, met Claude. When the shoot was over, he asked if they could take him home. Media types are not usually soft hearted, but they saw this old man, felt sorry for him and after a quick phone call to the Station Boss, agreed to rush him to Port before their next appointment. They all piled into the TV truck and got half way home, before Claude said to one of them, 'got a cigarette?' When none of them did, he managed to talk them into stopping at a milk bar, where one of them rushed in and bought him a packet. By this time they were running late for their next news story.

A few minutes later, Claude told them to stop as he wanted to buy a 6 pack. Unbelievably he managed to get them to do that. He then 'borrowed' \$10 and disappeared into the pub. Meanwhile the Channel 10 is ringing the crew asking where they are! By the time they got Claude out of the pub and down to Port, the Station has angrily cancelled their shoot (they told me that they were the only TV channel that didn't cover the event!). Claude then invited them in to Port, took them on a guided tour, and introduced them to everyone!

I think all of us should be very grateful that Claude Cliff was not a shyster property developer because if he had been, we would all be broke. His wonderful smile, his cheeky manner and his basic decency made it impossible to refuse anything he wanted.

His cheeky confidence allowed him to get away with anything. Every time I would come down here, he would yell out "Giday fungus face". He always seemed to be around and in fine voice when I brought politicians down. It was interesting to watch the reaction of the politicians – most thought that the place must be ok if Claude could get away saying that to CEO.

Basically he just loved being the centre of attention. Sometimes it worked to our advantage. I know that you folk from the market will have noticed more regulations and rules in the way you now have to run your business at the Vic Market. Well nothing you have to experience can prepare you for what aged care operators now have to do to become and remain accredited.

Auditors from the Commonwealth Government arrive and spend two days going through everything from food temperatures, medication procedures, complaint mechanisms, OHS, fire safety, etc They can open any drawer or cupboard in the facility and empty the contents and search for anything they want, they can quiz any staff member no matter how young or inexperienced, they talk to family and residents, they can look at the minutes for every meeting held whether that is in the kitchen or the Board of Directors. In short it is a grueling affair and for inexperienced staff, extremely intimidating. I have heard stories of staff in other organizations, bursting into tears under the grilling they receive.

So we are always on our best behaviour when the Auditors arrive. A few months ago, we had our Accreditation Audit at Ron Conn. Helen Small, Sue Bruman and myself met the auditors at the front door. I was wearing my best suit! As we ushered them into the building and took them to the room they would use as an office, Claude and Lindsey turned up. These guys have an antenna which immediately recognizes when any thing interesting is about to happen. That few feet that separated the auditors from Claude and Lindsey was about as far away as they got over the next two days! Wherever the auditors when, Claude and Lindsey went. They became our roving ambassadors. Serious expressions on the faces of the auditors were soon replaced with smiles. Laughter was heard. After two days they were on the verge of being asked home for dinner. When the auditors completed their work they gathered the staff together and gave their report. It was glowing, but I did notice that on almost every item they had to report on, Lindsey or Claude seemed to get a mention!

Its not hard to tell anecdotes about Claude. We will all miss him.

Bryan Lipmann