

# STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Transcript of an edited interview with

**Betty McGeever**

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA — ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

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### **NOTE TO READER**

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**INTRO:** Death. It's the most inevitable part of life. Some might say it's the only guarantee. But it's also a topic that many people shy away from because it makes us feel uncomfortable, scared or upset. It's often swept under the rug, not acknowledged or talked about, until of course, we come face-to-face with it ourselves. We hope to end this taboo through a series of interviews with many different people from all over Western Australia. We talk to ordinary people about their views on the grief, loss, love and celebration that *is* death and dying. This is a conversation on death.

**BETTY:** My name is Betty McGeever. I live in Cottesloe. I originally came from the bush. I worked most of my life in public libraries and I'm here today invited to discuss perhaps my attitude and attitudes to death and how they have changed over my lifetime. I'm 84 years old and very comfortable with my life.

I think I've always been really good about death. Growing up in the country; I considered this a lot when my husband died, because we had a really good marriage for 44 years, we were great mates. And when he died, I suffered no grief whatsoever. I was actually quite worried about that. I think the fact that I grew up on a farm is quite influential on you. As a child, we had beloved dogs and the horse [that] died. My dad had to shoot a few animals to put them out of their misery when they were crook. But these were animals we were very fond of often, particularly when I was a little girl. And I think you just learned that there was birth and death and there was no point in not accepting it. You could feel a bit sad and say, oh, well, okay, I miss Bess the horse because she's gone, but you just moved on. And then there was probably a new horse. In the case of the dogs, there was a new puppy. And so, it was just a part of life. It was just so natural. I think I've never been particularly disturbed about death, but I observed that a lot of people are or have been. [But] I think we talk about death a lot more now.

**RITA:** When your husband died, was that traumatic? You said you didn't suffer grief, but the knowledge that he was in palliative care...?

**BETTY:** Yes, it was. He had suffered pretty poor health for probably a year or 18 months that had been beginning to limit what he could do. He was a very stubborn man. He did continue to do quite a lot, but also, he had many health problems, [and] he was eventually diagnosed with oesophageal cancer and that's actually what carried him off. I can still remember when he was diagnosed with that. He had lupus, he had diabetes, he was getting hernias. His body was breaking down I think before the oesophageal cancer hit him.

So, when he went into palliative care, wonderful Bethesda, a very young, compassionate, articulate doctor asked him, what did he want in these last possibly weeks of his life? And Emmett said, very clearly, I want to die tomorrow. And the doctor said, I don't think I can quite manage that, but I get the drift. He had many, many visitors in the couple of weeks that he was in there and he made it quite clear to everyone that – he was a very witty man, he was still cracking jokes, having people laughing – and he made it quite clear to everyone that he wanted to die. He was ready to die and he wanted to go. That also made it extremely easy for me, knowing that he wasn't denying death or fighting to stay alive. He was just

going out as quick he could. I actually think he might have, he stopped taking food. He was just sucking on ice blocks. I actually have a feeling that was probably to hasten it.

He was very strong. He was a divorced alcoholic when I met him. Never had a drink while he was married to me, which was his great strength, because he'd lost everything because of the grog. And I don't know... we were the right people for each other. I just said to you at the beginning, I think I've had the luckiest life for anyone I know. It was a really good marriage. We were really good friends. We had a lot of fun together. We traveled together, et cetera, but I sometimes think we each withheld a tiny little bit [from each other]. We both still had an independent streak. We didn't have to be in each other's pocket all the time. I had some interests that Emmett didn't have. I think we were both always really happy with the others enjoyment of something, but we didn't have to be with them. I think that probably also helped when he died.

**RITA:** In a society where we have the technology to prolong the end – and for many good reasons doctors do, as they say, fight to keep people alive – do you think that we have, as a society, got used to that and so actually forgotten that the end is something that will come to all of us and that perhaps fighting to stay alive is not the best way to have a good death?

**BETTY:** Yes. I would certainly agree with that. I've known a few people who are really crook and I thought they're on the way out and they've recovered and gone on to have a few more good years. So, I think maybe you fight to get back to the life that you had when you were healthier, even if you're old. That's fine. But yes, when the end is inevitable, I think, yeah. Let it go. I don't see any point in fighting to stay alive and maybe the medical profession sometimes does that to an unnecessary degree, and it just prolongs the suffering, the frustration for the family, perhaps? I don't know. I guess every case is different, but yeah, I think the technology enables us to do things that perhaps are not always desirable.

**RITA:** Now you are 84, you are fighting fit as I can see, you are very active. Tell me a little bit about how at this age and stage you are embracing life, not fighting death, but absolutely living your best life?

**BETTY:** I'm very lucky. I think I'm one of the luckiest people I know. I've got really good health and I don't do anything foolish. I've never smoked, but I have a few drinks. I overeat, I eat an enormous amount, but I really love healthy things. So, most of what I eat is meat, fruit, and vegetables, but I eat a lot, [and I] don't have a particularly sweet tooth, so I'm not in danger of diabetes. So, I'm very lucky in many ways. You make your luck to some extent, I think.

I've never been a sporty person, so I've always had the excuse – I worked fairly long hours, I was pretty wed to my job – of, I don't have time to exercise. I don't have time to do anything. But I didn't have that excuse when I retired. I remember the City of Fremantle enabled us all to have free health checks at one stage. I went in thinking I'm going to get gold star stuff. And mostly I did. My lungs and heart and everything were really good, but the last time I went in for the sort of interview when your results came back, this doctor said to me you're probably going to live to a very old age given your state, unless, you know, something comes up suddenly. And he said, unless you start doing some exercise, you're probably

going to have a miserable old age. I thought, oh – it really shocked me. And so, as soon as I retired, I looked around for a sport that I thought I could participate in. Mostly I looked and thought, *absolutely not*.

[But] one day we were sitting having breakfast by the river. I said to my husband, that's what I'm going to do. Some kayakers went by. So, just after I retired, 16 years ago I think now, I went down to the local Swan Canoe Club and enrolled. You did the wet induction, which was a bit challenging, and I've been kayaking, only once a week, ever since. Also, I enrolled in exercise class, a very gentle gym with sort of balanced flexibility and strength [exercises], in Cottesloe, very close to my home. I've been going there every week for nearly 16 years now. I'm sure those two things are good.

I do all my own cleaning and gardening. I don't have any help. That's probably quite, it's a bit physical, not quite as often as I should, but yeah, I'm on my feet a lot, out and about.

**RITA:** I'm intrigued by the kayaking, I have to tell you, so why kayaking rather than sailing or parachuting?

**BETTY:** Oh, that's far too adventurous for me. Sailing – funnily enough, I'm not a water person and yet kayaking, you're sort of sitting at water level. I just saw these kayaks going by and they were on the water and there were birds around and you're on the river – it's really good for the soul. The other thing about kayaking, which maybe I didn't even realize when I made that immediate decision and I never backed off from that, you can do it really gently, slowly, tranquilly. I mean, there's three or four of us who go out most Thursday mornings. Sometimes we even get to a nice spot near the shore in the shade with bushes around. We sit and talk for a while. We have a saying, what's heard on the river, stays on the river. A few secrets have been shared there. But also, if you want to really do vigorous exercise, it's good. People say, you'll get big shoulders, but actually your whole trunk is... there's tiny little bits of stress with every stroke of the paddle, because you've got your foot on pedals, on sort of stoppers. And so, every stroke you do, you are sort of actually pulling against that. I think it's very, very good for probably your bones.

But no, it's a lovely gentle sport. It's not a pretty picture now watching me get in and out of the kayak. It's quite difficult because you've got to sort of slide your weight over without tipping the kayak out. There's a technique, and I still follow that technique, but I've always had very weak knees and that's a handicap. So now I practically roll out of the kayak at the end and onto the deck and then have to get up on all fours and hobble up. Occasionally there're blokes there and they'll say, do you want a hand? And I say, no, thank you. I'll do it myself as long as I can, but it looks awful.

**RITA:** In terms of the last stage of life, if that's where you are at, you are certainly very active in the community. Tell us a little bit about your activism and community work?

**BETTY:** Okay. I think that's the other thing that's really important to me, that I'm useful. I probably didn't realise that totally until I retired, because working in a public library, a lot of it is sort of supermarket stuff, if you like. We were lending books, doing a transaction, about every 20 seconds for 60 hours a week at Fremantle in my heyday, which is amazing. But

also, you do what I would call the boutique service. We had a very good information service at Fremantle City Library, and it is true, we change lives sometimes. Even the general reading for leisure, for some people who are alone, it keeps their sanity. It gives them company, particularly before the days of the Internet. It's really important. So, I think I worked in a caring and useful profession all my life.

And when I retired, I did sort of back off for a little while. I had no plans, very deliberately had no plans when I retired. I thought, I've had a plan every day, every week, every month for about 50 years. So, I just stepped back and I went to morning concert here and there and [the] opening of an exhibition here and there. I was very leisurely, and it was just very nice to wake up in the morning and think, what will I do today? But probably within months, I was thinking, I want to do something a little bit more meaningful than this, a little bit [more] involving helping other people, that's really important to me.

I got involved in a very small way with helping refugees. I tried to help an Ethiopian woman learn to drive because she wanted to be a taxi driver, and I failed her, which was probably fortunate because I think she would've killed people on the road. I did a few little things like that. And then I began to be very much aware from the time of the Tampa Incident, the children overboard, the Twin Towers and the subsequent Islamophobia, I began to feel very uncomfortable about our attitude to refugees [and] asylum seekers in particular, and our attitude to people that we seem to value less than ourselves, [we] see them as 'the other', [people] who were different. So, I got more and more involved in trying to publicise the plight of the asylum seekers who were arriving at Christmas Island. And then subsequently in 2013, they began to send them to Manus and Nauru. I went to every forum that I could. The Red Cross was doing quite a lot at that time because they were overwhelmed with the people who were coming off Christmas Island in mid-2013.

I offered accommodation. In the other half of my home, I live in an old duplex. So, it was sort of perfect because if you didn't want to be involved, you just gave them the key and walk away. I had a young Iranian asylum seeker come to live there and he's still there eight, nine years later. And [we're] like family. That's been really good for me as well as him, it's given him stability and a safe place. The first, probably, 18 months he was there he wasn't permitted to work, [which was] very demoralizing. He's a professional man with a couple of degrees and he felt for the first [time] – they get a benefit, very small – but first time in his life he felt he was taking charity. His pride was deeply hurt.

Not particularly through him, but I became more and more aware of the appalling cruelty and conditions on Nauru and Manus, and in more recent years, as many of those people have, over a thousand of them, have actually been transferred to Australia, mostly for medical reasons [and] after long delays, which caused people to lose their sight, lose limbs, lose your... No, I won't go there, terrible.

So, I've got very involved in that and I've established, almost by accident, a group in the Western suburbs called the Western Suburbs Do-Gooders. We write letters to politicians. We visit politicians. I think our local member has probably seen every one of us, some of us multiple times. We write to the press, try to inform people. My view is, I would like people, I would like the politicians to think that we know, we care, and we vote. I think I have, certainly

in public forums, I think I have a lot of people know a lot more and they do care. Almost always the reaction is shock horror from some who know nothing. And then [they say] this is terrible, what can we do about it? They don't like it. Whether I've changed any votes is quite another matter, because I think people vote on a lot of issues and refugees is probably not a very big one.

But that small group has also discovered in early 2020 a community-based scheme in Canada called the Community Resettlement Scheme. You can raise money, send it to a group of five citizens in Canada – it's not a government program, it's on top of the government program – and they sponsor a refugee. There's an agency in Australia, an agency in Canada, they coordinate the whole thing, but you have to raise \$20,000 to send to the group of five in Canada, the citizens, and then a refugee is chosen for them. They are put in touch and slowly, slowly – it's [been] nearly two years and our refugee is going, I think, this month. But that was the best thing we did, I think, because we have actually changed lives. And also, for me, there was huge approval in the community for what we were doing. People donated so generously, a lot of people, and some of them very, very generously. We got many comments saying, I'm so glad to be able to do something practical, I didn't know what to do.

We were so successful that instead of one refugee, we sponsored two couples. One of the people who helped us, who knew nothing about refugees before she read about our event in the paper, she ran an art show which raised about \$20,000 on the night, art *sale*, sorry, of donated works. And that helped us to sponsor the two couples in 2020. Their application would've gone in late 2020, but she also, the next year, ran, off her own bat, another art sale and raised over \$30,000. She sponsored another couple.

So, six people have gone out of hell hole, indefinite detention, no future, wasted life in Australia, to a new life in Canada. They're met by the group of five [who] administers that \$20,000 that we've sent them for a year. At the end of the year, the refugee gets a certificate and three years from the date of that certificate, they can apply for citizenship. It's a brilliant scheme and to be part of that was probably one of the, well, it's probably the best thing I've done since I retired. So satisfying.

**RITA:** That's amazing. So, it doesn't sound like your common garden retirees meeting for a coffee morning, perhaps discussing local weeding programs, does it?

**BETTY:** No, it's not my scene. That would not be my scene. No, it's good. I also work with work with, probably [because] I attend quite a lot of group meetings at the moment, I'm attending a network in WA, they're working very hard to push the government to give temporary protection visa holders like [to] the guy that's living in the other half of my house, to give them a pathway to permanency. Since they got work permits, they've been living and working here for, well, they've been living here for probably some of them a decade, and they've been working and paying tax for about eight years, and they're stuck and they can't bring their families here. In Australia, about 4,000 of them are Afghans. Their wives and children are still in Afghanistan and they're absolutely terrified. I know a guy who's got a wife and three daughters now. He hasn't seen them for 10 years. So, the girls are [at] puberty [age], [and] much valued by the Taliban. And they're in hiding, his wife and children [are] in

hiding in Afghanistan. He cannot do a thing about it. He can't apply to have a family reunion because he's on a temporary protection visa. It's cruel. So, I've got to know a few of those guys and that's been confronting, but also just lovely. I just really value those friendships. They're really good.

**RITA:** So, it feels Betty, that when most people are coming to the end of their useful working life, you've got a brand-new career?

**BETTY:** I've cranked up again. I keep saying to people after this, I'm going to retire after the election, I'm going to retire. And they say, yeah, we've heard that before! But I must [admit], I am overwhelmed sometimes. I really do need to step back a bit. I've got a lot of friends and I like to eat out and we go out to dinner, I'm going out to dinner Friday night with some friends, and I want to keep that up too. They're all interesting people. The five on Friday, for instance, nothing to do with refugees, we all have birthdays in May, actually. That's why we're going out together. I have to try and keep other aspects of my life going as well. I can be very boring. I've got to be careful not to get into the refugee mode with all people because some people don't welcome it. There's no question. And that's their right. So anyway, it's all good.

**RITA:** So, you've said that you feel that you've been very lucky in life, especially with health. You've got a good body and you've been able to not really feel the ravages of maybe a disease or even just getting older. How do you think you would feel if, say in the next 10 years, you do begin to lose that capacity? Are you ready for that?

**BETTY:** I've no idea. I ask myself that occasionally because I've very seldom been ill. I've never really been really ill. I wonder how I'll cope when that happens. Something Emmett used to say, something's going to get us and also something will get one of us first. So, you know, you should be prepared for that, and indeed it got him, but no, I don't know how I'll cope with that. That will be a big challenge for me. I think when I won't be able to do the useful things that I do.

I'm quite happy to ask for help. You know, when I'm frail, I'll get a cleaner and get a gardener and I hope I can stay in my home. It's on one level, it's easy. It's small. I quite often ask for help, if I can't do something, I'll ask a neighbour, hey, can you come and have a look at this for me? That doesn't bother me, but when I'm, well, disabled and restricted to my home and can't do anything useful... I consider myself also very lucky that financially I'm amazingly well off. I worked all my life. I didn't have kids. I mean, there's two factors that add that up. I had no idea when I retired how well off I'd be, I'd been stuffing money into super, but I hadn't really thought about how it earned or anything like that. I was hopeless. But my super's really good and because I've never been a spender [and] I've got some shares, I'm in a wonderful situation where I can help people. And I do that quite a lot.

I've helped refugees buy a car. I've helped a lot of people in very practical ways to help them to give them the leg up too. The guy I helped buy a car, he actually paid the money back. I don't know what effect that had on his life. If he hadn't been able to take that job, he was a very shy man, I don't think he would front up very well for any interview or asking for a job.



He was very shy, his English at that time was appalling. He got a job at nighttime in a bakery, but you know, I get such pleasure out of that.

**RITA:** You've said to me, something that's a little bit intriguing when we spoke earlier, you said to me, I never grieve for people who die who are old. What do you mean by that?

**BETTY:** I just don't see any point in it because you are born, you live, and you die, and their life has ended and I'm not going to grieve about that. I would grieve probably more for, perhaps things that didn't happen in their life, if they hadn't had a good life and maybe I could have done something about it or someone else could have done something about it. I would be really sorry about that.

I think that comes a little bit from country life. You know, we were incredibly cash poor when I was a kid. Dad was developing the farm and my brothers did very well out of that, but we really were very cash poor. What you had was what you had. If you are lucky enough to have that attitude to life, you accept it how it is, this is how it is, just see what you can make of it.

**OUTRO:** Thanks for listening. This interview was recorded on the lands of the Whadjuk Nyungar people, and we pay our respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging. This oral history collection was commissioned by the State Library of Western Australia and produced by Luisa Mitchell from the Centre for Stories. Narration by Luisa Mitchell, editing by Mason Vellios and special thanks to executive producer and interviewer, Rita Alfred-Saggar.

**END**