

## **Dr Patricia Edgar – Address to La Trobe University Mildura Graduation 20 April 2012**

Today I want to tell you a little of my story to show how a career can go in unexpected and surprising directions.

Like many of you, I was born, grew up and went to school in Mildura. My ambition as a young girl was to become an usherette at the Ozone Picture Theatre. My father took me to the pictures every Friday night to see the two features, no matter what. I loved films so Friday night was the highlight of my week.

Girls from country towns normally did not go to university in the 50s but with encouragement from my parents and one of my teachers in particular, I did go. I was the first in my family to do so. I became a high school teacher, married, had two children and when they were two and four years old my husband decided he wanted to go to America to study sociology - a subject you could not study in Australia at that time. It was a risk but I thought it sounded like an adventure.

Don got a scholarship and off we went to Stanford University in California where I discovered I could study film and television. What an opportunity! I enrolled. My advantage as a woman and wife in the 60's was that I was not expected to be the breadwinner and therefore I could indulge my interests as I never expected a career would result from studying film.

When I returned to Australia three years later I had a Master of Arts and was the only person in Australia with a Higher Degree in Film. La Trobe University was starting up a new School of Education and, fortunately for me, the new Dean, Ronald Goldman, was willing to take the risk of appointing me to head his new Centre for the Study of Media and Communication. I set up the first courses in film production and theory to be taught in an Australian University. La Trobe was the pioneering institution.

This did not prove easy. Despite a progressive Dean, most senior academics were traditional conservatives. I was a woman, and women didn't run things in the 60's. I had an American degree, so I must have bought it, some colleagues said. And you didn't study a subject like film in a University. There was no body of knowledge for such a subject and no refereed journals. I pressed on and in battling critics learned a great deal about strategy and politics.

I was saved from those wanting film courses abolished, by students. It's hard to argue against courses that attract students.

One thing led to another and in 1975 - International Women's Year – I had another opportunity. The government began to appoint women to statutory boards where they had not been before. I was appointed to the Australian Broadcasting Control Board which regulated the television and radio networks.

And so my career led down a path I would never have anticipated – that of children's television.

I chaired a committee for the ABCB which set up the quotas for Australian content and children's drama which are only now being reviewed over 30 years later.

The networks claimed they did not know what a children's program was. So I started arguing for an Australian Children's Television Foundation to demonstrate what a good children's program would look like.

Again one thing led to another and I found myself as head of this new production Foundation, now challenged to turn the claims I had been making into viable programs that children would watch. It was another opportunity.

I called on the top people in the industry - the writers, directors, and producers - to work in children's television on two anthology series demonstrating all the different program genres that could be made for kids - like comedy, fantasy, science fiction, historical drama, contemporary drama and adventure. These programs - called *Winners* and *Touch the Sun* unexpectedly attracted attention around the world and won all sorts of awards including an International Emmy - only the second Emmy to ever be won by an Australian program. Australia was then seen as a producer of serious, quality programs for children.

So I thought, with our credentials established, we could make a really fresh Australian program that would be commercially successful. A program parents would want to watch with their kids. It had to be a comedy as kids do love to laugh. I searched, and one day I picked up a book of short stories by a writer called Paul Jennings. I laughed out loud. There were no common characters, no common setting but there were some very funny, outrageous plots.

I met Paul Jennings, put him together with a very clever writer and director called Esben Storm, and they invented the Twist family, dad, twins Linda and Pete and young brother Bronson who lived in a lighthouse on Australia's most spectacular coastline - we called the series *Round The Twist*.

It took a year to get the scripts together. The show was bent, eccentric and often quite lowbrow. Always a bit of yuck and a fair amount of slapstick. There were dunny jokes, excrement, vomiting, embarrassment, where babies come from, peeing competitions - the topics children's television normally shied away from and model parents did not discuss.

The series turned the assumptions of children's television on their head and tapped into life as kids understood it.

So the greatest challenge of all was to find the more than \$3 million needed to make the first series. Every buyer I approached said it could not be done. What works on the page can never be shown visually they said; it is too disgusting to watch. But they were wrong. I did talk the BBC into buying it eventually.

When shown the series broke records in the United Kingdom going to number one as the top children's show, unheard of for a foreign-produced children's program.

*Round the Twist* went on to sell in more than 100 countries around the world. In Japan, Finland, Brazil or Zimbabwe - children loved it.

We made four series and changed the rules of children's programming, as other producers tried to emulate the success of *Round the Twist*. Twenty two years since it was first devised it is repeated round the world on a regular basis.

I have told this story as it is about a program many of you may know. You probably didn't know that it came about because someone aspired to be an usherette and would not take no for an answer.

That is my advice to you today as you enter your careers.

You never know what may lie in store for a girl or a boy from the bush.

Take every opportunity that comes your way. And expect your future to have surprising twists and turns. There is no single track in life. Opportunities come unexpectedly from directions you can't imagine right now.

Be alert. Take risks. Seize the day. It will lead to an interesting life.