

Margaret LEE

This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan Foundation Don Dunstan Oral History Project interviewing Margaret Lee, who worked in the law firm that Don Dunstan worked in from the '50s, '60s and I'm not sure about the '70s, but we'll explore that in a minute. The date today is the 11th December 2012 and the location of the interview is Adelaide, South Australia.

Margaret, thanks very much for doing the interview about Don Dunstan and your experiences in the law firm and your husband Lance Lee's experiences in the law firm that Don Dunstan worked for. Before we get into some of the details of that, can you just talk a little bit about yourself so readers and listeners of the interview know who you are and how you fitted into the life and times of Don Dunstan?

Well, in October 1952 I was employed as a secretary to Charles Sandery. He was a sole practitioner who used to be Public Defender before the [Second World] War. I was 17 at the time. Mr Sandery was a Catholic lawyer and acted for many legal aid clients and I learnt a lot from him. I remember typing up a Newman Lecture that he gave about the interdependence of labour and capital, which made a great impression on me. Then a few years later Lance Lee was articled to Mr Sandery and we became friends. We were both working in the same office.

After admission, Lance went to Baker, McEwen, Millhouse & Co and was mentored by Viv Millhouse there. Lance was the first solicitor of Chinese descent to be admitted to the Bar in South Australia, and there were very few Chinese families in Adelaide at the time. The Pak Poys had also come down from Darwin – they were neighbours in Darwin – and Lance's family was evacuated when the Japanese bombed.

Oh, right.

I've one thing to be grateful to the Japanese for. I would never have met Lance otherwise.

Good.

He had a right of private practice and set up a practice in Brighton. He'd been to the local primary school since 1942, and he played football and cricket in the district and was well-known, so the practice did well. And then in 1954 John Roder and Don Dunstan had formed their legal practice and they were practising in adjoining chambers to Mr. Sandery at 13 Grenfell Street, the old Register Building. So people

Margaret LEE

from each firm knew each other. We went up and down in the lift together and talked together quite often. And in about 1955 Mr Sandery went overseas for six months and so Roder and Dunstan looked after his clients and took me on as secretary as well. I'm not sure whether they actually *needed* me in the first place, but kindly they didn't want to see me out of a job so ---. They kept me very busy anyway. So that's the time that I knew Don the best, for about that six months where I worked in the legal firm.

Right. What was that year again?

About 1955, '56, from memory. And then in 1958 Lance and I were married and then in 1959 he joined Don and John as a partner in the legal firm and it became Roder, Dunstan & Lee.

And Lee. Right. So Kevin Lynch came along later on, presumably.

Oh, yes. He didn't come along until the late '60s.

Okay. Late '60s – okay, right.

Yes. After Lance joined, David Taylor came into the practice and John went off to be Planning Commissioner and then, later, David went to the District Court bench. So it wasn't until about the late '60s that Kevin Lynch came into the firm.

Right. Okay. I'd just like to ask you about Lance. He was a local lad and you said there weren't many Chinese families. Did he talk about studying law at Adelaide and how he was received by – I'd probably call it the 'Establishment' type of – mainly boys, I guess, too; there wouldn't have been a lot of women doing law in those days.

There were a couple of women at Law School with him.

Did he talk about his experiences, or did he just focus on his studies?

Oh, he was just one of the boys, you know.

One of the boys, right.

He was mad about football and cricket.

And do you know what areas he was particularly interested in, in the law?

Margaret LEE

He had this strong sense of social justice which he'd got from his father, because his father had a great respect for British law. He'd spent quite a lot of time in Hong Kong as well as China and, although he'd lived in Australia most of his life, he had a huge respect for British law and wanted one of his sons to do law.

And what did his father do, what sort of profession?

His father was a merchant.

Merchant, right.

He had a shop in Darwin and used to go back and forth between Darwin and Hong Kong and Singapore.

And when he came to Adelaide, what?

Well, his father died when he was seven, before the Japanese bombed Darwin, which was when the family came to Adelaide.

Right. And Lance went to the Bar; did he go in the courts as well?

Initially he did some court work, but gradually less and less of that because Don did most of the court work in the firm.

I see. Why was that?

Well, Don was well suited to it. (laughter) I was in awe of his ability to read something very quickly and instantly memorise all the salient points and be able to use them. It was just amazing.

He'd be briefed by Lance or one of the other lawyers?

Or John, yes.

That's interesting.

Well, in many cases, in the initial stages, he'd run the case right from the beginning because there was no separation between the Bar and solicitors in Adelaide then.

And what about – there was no QC in the firm. They'd be another separate area?

Oh well, it was only a very junior firm, not one of the Establishment practices.

You mentioned Millhouse just earlier in your outline of some of the history around this. Presumably that was Robin Millhouse's father?

Margaret LEE

Yes, yes.

That's interesting as well.

Rob was in the firm at the time and also he went to Parliament about the same time, I think.

Yes. They sort of track each other's time, Robin Millhouse and Don Dunstan.

Yes – well, both of them were individuals. They had their own opinions about things and wanted to see change.

And did Lance talk about – there was the law, but there was also social justice and ideas floating around and reform of the law and that sort of thing. Did he talk about that and were there any discussions in the firm?

Oh yes, yes. It was constant. And there were some great parties where they had people from all sorts of backgrounds. There were ministers of religion and planners and lawyers and doctors and unionists and university lecturers – all sorts of people who would contribute to a fairly lively discussion about what needed to be done, particularly in the planning, I guess.

Whose parties were these?

The ones I went to were mostly at John Roder's house.

John Roder's, right. And Don was married at that time?

Yes. Yes, to Gretel.

So he and Gretel would come along.

Occasionally, in the early ones. I think later he was too busy.

And how did Don 'perform', I'll call it, in these parties? Was he a centre of attention?

Oh, no. I think there were a lot of individuals. They'd all hold their own.
(laughter)

Right.

And Don was very good at listening, in those days, particularly. He was open to new ideas and that's one of the things that impressed me. It didn't matter who

Margaret LEE

wanted to talk to him about something, didn't matter what their background was; he'd – in those days, anyway – patiently listen.

And did you ever have a one-to-one with him at any time?

Oh, yes, I used to talk to him about environmental matters.

Oh, really?

His interest was the arts; he wasn't particularly interested in the environment, but he was open to talk about it. He used to tease me a bit sometimes and say I was a bit too passionate or something.

A bit too passionate – hmm. (laughter) What particular environmental things?

All sorts of things, like cutting up good prime agricultural land for housing and better planning of housing, and planning it rather than letting it just happen *ad hoc*.

And where were you getting your ideas from then?

From reading and talking to other people and just what I observed and the Civic Trust.

Yes – because that's a sort of early awareness, I guess.

Yes. Well, he was the first premier to appoint an environment minister.

Yes. So this was the time when he was in politics, was it, or a bit before then?

Yes. Well, from the time I first met him, which was before he was actually – well, he was canvassing at that time when I first met him.

It's interesting, yes, those various movements in the environment – the Sierra Club and all that was starting to kick up population concern.

The ACF was formed fairly early in his days as Premier, I think.

Right – the Australian Conservation Foundation.

Yes.

That's interesting. Just looking at the law firm and how that worked: what, a client would come in, and how would the allocation of work operate in the law firm?

Margaret LEE

Well, John did most of the commercial work. John was quite involved with the Anglican Church and so a number of the clients were members of the Anglican Church. Many clients were impecunious and a lot of the work that Don did arose from his doorknocking in Norwood, so he had a lot of migrants and other people coming to him with their problems and he'd do legal work for them. So there was an awful lot of pro bono work done in that firm.

Pro bono work, yes.

Yes. (laughter) Which is why – well, Don's father, F.V. Dunstan, a large man, with a mane of white hair, was the accountant in the firm at the time and he'd go round the office waving the budget at the end of the month and saying, 'Come on, you two. Time to get your bills out. We haven't met the target yet. We need a few more bills.'

And how did Don react to that?

Usually with a bit of impatience, but he knew he had to do it. (laughter)

Keep the money coming in.

Yes. Well, because there was so much pro bono work, you know, you had to charge the other clients on time because if people don't get their bill promptly they're less likely to pay.

Was that discussed in meetings you went to and the balance of that – – –?

No, I don't think there was much in the way of meetings. F.V. made it quite clear.

And he was the accountant, but what else was his role there?

I think he only did the accounting.

Right – not as a business manager or – – –?

Oh, I suppose these days you have a practice manager, but in a firm that small you don't really need a practice manager.

So he wouldn't get involved in any of the law.

No, no, no.

He wouldn't say, 'You're spending too much time on this,' or –

Margaret LEE

No, no.

– **‘We’ve done a look at some of these clients and they look a bit dodgy,’ or – – –?**

There were several clients that looked a bit dodgy, I think. Usually they were in strife for something.

And you were talking about social justice; what about some of the – was there an aspect of criminal law getting covered as well?

No, I don’t know that they did much criminal law. I can’t think of any off the top of my head. Most of the people that were involved with criminal law specialised in it, like Elliot Johnston. He was doing a lot of the criminal law work at that time.

And were there any concerns about Don’s political activities that people thought might compromise the firm or –

No, I don’t think so.

– **that he was spending too much time at [it]?**

I think that was accepted. Even though it meant that he didn’t have as much time to spend in the firm, he did bring in a lot of clients so that helped to balance things.

You talked earlier about how the firm developed. When did Don actually retire from the firm?

In the early ’70s, I think.

Early ’70s.

I think it was 1974.

Right.

He hadn’t been doing much work in the firm at that time. Gradually, over the ’60s, he did less and less work in the firm. But he still had a pecuniary interest in the partnership, which I think was about 1974 when David Taylor went to the bench and then that was the time when it became Lee & Partners. Up until then it had been Dunstan, Lee, Taylor & Lynch, and then that changed in ’74, it became Lee & Partners.

Right. And what sort of work was Lance doing?

Margaret LEE

He did a lot of work for unions and union members, a lot of plaintiffs' work against insurance companies, a lot of workers' compensation, as well as all sorts of other things.

So they were looked on as the workers' legal firm.

Well, one of them. There were a couple of others in Adelaide, too.

Right – industrial law and related to that.

Yes. Yes. Well, Lance did a lot of the industrial law work, Kevin did a lot of commercial law work and John, until he became Planning Commissioner, did commercial work. They did all the usual estates and wills and things like that as well.

And did Don talk about his political activities that you heard about – people would come in and they'd be from the Labor Party or the unions?

No, not in the office very much.

No, not in the office. Right.

They'd probably visit him at home or at lunch or something. Not many of those people came to the office unless it was a legal matter.

And what was roughly the proportion of time, as he got more active in politics, that he could spend in the firm?

Well, I guess it dwindled from about a 60-hour week and gradually over time went down to probably no more than eight hours.

And what would he focus on in that more limited time?

It was mostly barristers' work.

Barristers, right. Were you there when he did the Rupert Maxwell Stuart?

No.

That was, what, earlier or – wait up. The '60s, Playford. Yes.

No. At the time I was there a lot of work was done for Meals On Wheels because Doris Taylor was just setting up Meals On Wheels.

Oh, yes – that's the link, right.

Margaret LEE

So I did a lot of typing of documents for that. And they didn't just do the legal work; they did the actual helping to organise it, too, because there's a story about Don and John taking a ute up to the Riverland with Doris strapped in her wheelchair in the back. (laughs) Long before occupational health and safety came in.

Right. Do you want to expand on that story?

Well, no. They just went because I think they wanted to set up a branch up there. So they didn't just do the legal work; they also helped people with other things as well.

Community things.

Yes.

That's interesting. Whose idea was that – Doris's?

Well, Doris Taylor, I think, had the Meals On Wheels idea originally and Don thought, yes, it was a good idea, so they went with it.

So he mucked in himself.

That's right. Well, John, of course, did most of the documentation and that side of it.

That's interesting. Did he talk about that at all, Don, and why he was doing it?

It was pretty obvious why he was doing it: because it needed to be done.

Right. But he had limited time, so he probably saw it as – – –.

Drafting those sorts of documents was not his forte.

So it happened in the Riverland. Do you know what other areas it started?

Well, it started in Adelaide. I think the first one was probably at Norwood, and then it spread throughout Adelaide and then to the country towns as well. I think they do it all over the world now.

And what sort of things would you type up? Was it – well, the legal, but also the – – –?

Mostly the documentation, because it had to be incorporated and all those things.

Yes. And what about the organisation of it, like the volunteers?

Margaret LEE

Well, the firm didn't get into the detailed organisation of volunteers, but they set up the parameters for how the volunteers would work and so on.

That's interesting. Yes. And were there any particular causes that Don talked about when – you talked about the parties, but also when he was in the law firm – that you can you recall he was particularly passionate about?

There is one occasion when he was talking about shoring up ditches – you know, when people had to dig a trench for sewerage works or something, on some roads, they never shored them up because the number of deaths was minimal, and he was outraged to hear that this wasn't done, that occasionally a worker was killed. And because it wasn't regarded as economically sound for the number that were killed to shore them up, it wasn't done. He was outraged at that and said things had to be made safer for workmen, and I think that was where he first started looking at making things safer for people who were employed to work. From his point of view, the deaths were unacceptable because it was not only the families suffered, he said even from an economical point of view it probably wasn't worthwhile because the widow might have to go onto the pension. So you needed to look at the bigger picture. He was much better at looking at the bigger picture and not just a narrow point of view.

That's interesting. Do you know who he – he was passionate – how he actually followed that up?

Well, he'd see that there were bills drafted to deal with it.

Yes. What period was this – when he was a minister?

That would have been during the – no, no. That would have been when he was first in Parliament, I think.

Right. I see.

Might even have been before.

Yes. It would be interesting to track how that happened, whether he put up any private member's bills or – – –.

No, I think he usually did it through the – don't think he ever put up private member's bills; I think he talked it through and convinced other members that it was something worth following through.

Margaret LEE

So he'd have to do it through the Playford Government people at the time.

No, I think it had to wait until he was in power.

Right. Okay. Because occupational health and safety is a big sort of legislation thing.

I think sometimes it's gone a bit too far now. But at that time it was a really good idea.

During the time I was there Don's wife Gretel was studying Economics at Adelaide University and I also spent many hours typing up her notes for her. Gretel was always kind and supportive.

And can you just remind me when you finished up with the law firm, what date was that?

It would probably have been the end of 1956.

'56, right.

'56, '57, something round there.

And you were following Don's career after that?

Yes. Well, Lance and I were married in 1958.

Lance joined the firm in about 1959. So I still did the odd job for them now and again when things were stretched. And, of course, Lance worked with them both.

So you followed Don's interests and career –

Yes, yes.

– through Lance mainly, plus when you met Don at parties or went into the firm.

Well, I was interested in many of the same sort of things, interested in politics, and I was a friend of Hugh Hudson, who was the Education Minister down here.

He was a local, yes. That's interesting. I might ask you about Hugh later on, but we've been mainly talking about Don and his ideas. How did you read him as a person, as – I'll call him a 'character', broadly; not in the sense of him being a character, but – – –.

Margaret LEE

Well, he didn't suffer fools lightly but he always listened and would give a considered opinion if asked for it, always treated everybody with respect, and he had this really strong sense of social justice and being prepared to stand up for minorities and minority points of view, and I think that's probably why he was involved with homosexual legislation and helping migrants and people who came from minority groups.

He didn't seem bigheaded and full of importance of himself?

I think he had a fair ego, which he needed – a lesser man couldn't have got through the reforms that he did. But I always found him – in those days, anyway – to be very patient and respectful.

And what about coming from the other direction? Was there criticism of him from other quarters that you were picking up?

Oh! Some of the stories that used to go round in the Liberal circles – because I belonged to a few groups where there were lots of ladies who strongly supported the Liberal Party, and some of their stories were – (pauses, laughs) outrageous. I remember --- one day at dinner somebody had this particularly ridiculous story and I said, 'Oh, that is just a load of – – –.' I was usually fairly quiet, and I said, 'That's just a load of nonsense. My husband's been a partner of Don Dunstan's for 11 years and it's just not true.' And at the table – everybody shut up. Nobody said anything for about five minutes.

And why were these women saying these things? Was he in the media, or why did his name crop up?

Well, yes – well, they were usually quite personal remarks about his character or something that he was supposed to have done. You know, it's a bit like Julia Gillard these days: if you can't find anything you make up something.

Right, yes. Was that when he was – what, a Premier or a budding senior politician?

Yes.

When he was Premier, right.

At the time he was Premier.

Margaret LEE

Right. So they had observations about him. That's interesting. One of the reasons I'm interested in teasing out some of these what people thought of him and that is the interviews I've done he comes across as rather enigmatic, like on the one hand he was a brilliant orator and could talk to all sorts of people but on the other hand he seemed very private and sometimes almost reclusive and just switching off, which is understandable; but I'm just wondering about your observations.

I think that's probably true, yes.

Almost shy, in one way.

Yes. Well, he was a great actor and I think in his public life he acted, to a certain degree. But he was very sensitive and private as well.

Right. That's one of the reasons I was asking you about being at parties, because I was at a couple with him and it was very hard to talk to him because, unless you were really zeroing in on something he was particularly interested in like music –

Yes.

– and I guess the arts more broadly, or some particular issue – and this was when he was Premier, but later on when he'd retired he was interested in some work I was doing on Aboriginal affairs and he couldn't stop talking about that, so it was a very different sort of character coming across.

Yes. He didn't actually waste words. If it was a subject he knew about and was interested in he'd be lively and talking about it, but otherwise he didn't.

And what about his transformation physically, like when you would have come across him first he would have been rather geeky looking.

(laughs) Well, I don't know about that, but yes, he was young and fresh and enthusiastic and lively, and then towards – just before he retired he was terribly tired and drawn and quiet. I was sitting next to him at lunch at the Lantern Inn the day Adele went into hospital for tests, and he was very distressed and very – you know, just a grey shadow of himself, and I don't think he ever recovered from that.

And was Lance still alive then?

Yes.

Did he talk about Don and Adele? Did he know Adele at all?

No, I don't think he had anything to do with Adele, no.

Margaret LEE

Right, okay.

No; we didn't move in the same circles very much in those days, although obviously the fact that we were at lunch with him – but that was probably something to do with some union matter, I think, or something somebody wanted to put forward.

So it was a sort of business-type lunch or – – –.

Yes, I think it probably was.

And you were there, so what was your role there?

Just supportive, I think.

Just supportive, right.

.....

Right. That's fair enough. (break in recording) Just flipping back to Don and the legal profession, did you get any [impression] or talk to Lance about what lawyers thought about Don's legal expertise? You've talked about Don's skill as a barrister and the sort of cases he was interested in, particularly the battlers, but was there any discussion about Don and being a good lawyer?

I think he was pretty well regarded as being a very capable barrister.

Barrister, right. And he didn't specialise in any particular area of the law to become a super-expert or anything like that, but more of a generalist?

Well, probably workers' compensation matters. But much of his time was spent on his political work.

And did you observe any discussion or hear any discussion about Don and what the police thought of him?

No, no, I didn't.

No, right.

No. No, I wasn't having very much to do with him during that [time].

Right – because there was a couple of high-profile cases: the Rupert Maxwell Stuart one, of course, and then there was the Dawn Fraser one where she was picked up for loitering, I forget exactly where in Adelaide, but Don thought that was outrageous and followed up that case.

No, no, I can't recall his involvement in those.

Margaret LEE

Can't recall that one. So working into the 1970s you mentioned that Lance had some views about what Don was doing.

Okay. Well, I think at that time Lance thought that he was perhaps being influenced by people who didn't have his best interests at heart and he tried to advise him about that, but Don didn't take it very kindly and Lance was rather disappointed, I think, that he didn't really know who his true friends were at that stage.

Right – oh, really? And these were people working with Don or his friends?

Well, people he was seeing socially but were also trying to influence him in his political views as well.

That's interesting. And what – without naming names, what sort of people were these?

Oh, quite a wide range of people.

So there were a number of them –

Yes.

– wanting to have their go.

All trying to push their own agendas rather than having the interests of the state at heart.

Right – what, like developers, or – – –?

No, I don't know that any of them were developers. No, I think it was more people that were interested in the arts.

The arts, right.

Yes.

And that was, what, their particular barrow they wanted to fund.

In those days I think it was Don that was pushing the developers rather than the other way round. I think these days it's the developers trying to run things, but at that time he was trying to encourage developers to get involved with good design and good planning.

Yes, good. That's interesting.

Margaret LEE

Because he was President of the Civic Trust while I was Secretary of the Civic Trust, so I had more to do with him, after he retired, then. And he was always interested in helping bodies that were interested in good design, which is what the Civic Trust was trying to encourage.

And did you think about Don's career and what happened to him after? Like what surprises some people is he wasn't asked to lead some important sort of body. I know he did the Victoria tourism stint, which ended disastrously for him, and he came back here and was Chair of the Jam Factory, but there seemed to be a bit of a waste of talent there, of skills.

I think he was just tired and worn out.

Just tired.

Yes, and he got involved in his cooking and I think that – it gave him time to relax and follow those sorts of things. I remember one day I went there and he was cooking Maggie Beer's rabbit and tried to impress upon me what a great recipe it was and how it was going to turn out.

So you used to see him a bit after he retired as well.

Yes. Well, he was President of the Civic Trust and I used to see him on Civic Trust matters occasionally after he retired. I used to go to the house at Norwood, which is where I – you know, if you made a phone call or you knocked on the door it was always Steven that filtered the calls and the callers, and I regarded Steven more as a bodyguard and a mentee than – – –.

Yes, Stephen Wright.

Steven Cheng.

That was Steven Cheng, was it, not Stephen Wright?

Yes. Yes. Because he had a silent phone number so you had to ring that number and then Steven would decide whether he'd speak to you or not.

So you left a message and then he'd pick up the phone or not, right.

Or he'd pass it over, yes.

Fair enough, yes. I mentioned earlier I'd ask about Hugh Hudson. Did you have much to do with him in this era?

Margaret LEE

I did at one stage when he was Member for Glenelg.

It included the Brighton area and he was Minister of Education.

Yes.

We had children at the same school.

And how did he come across to you, Hugh Hudson?

Hugh?

Yes.

Hugh was more pragmatic than Don. (laughter) Yes, he supported the same ideals, but – yes, more pragmatic.

What do you mean by that?

Well, with Don it was the ideal first and with Hugh it was, 'Is this going to be a good idea from a political point of view?', whereas I don't think Don ever worried about that.

Oh, right.

But if it was a good idea it was worth pursuing whether it was going to be good politically or not, but with Hugh it was, 'How's this going to work politically?'

So he'd be doing the numbers, because he was one of the numbers people.

Yes, probably.

Statistics and all that, yes.

And I know I was on the Brighton High Council at the time and trying to get development for Brighton High, which had a lot of temporary classrooms and wasn't terribly satisfactory. But Hugh said, 'Well, my children are here. We can't be seen to be doing too much for Brighton High while my children are here,' which was a bit sad, because my children were there at the same time. (laughs) But he had that mindset that he didn't want anyone to think that he was favouring the school where his children went.

Yes – no pork barrelling going on.

Margaret LEE

That's right.

Fair enough. Well, we've covered a fair number of areas. Was there anything that you think we've missed out on that you would like to talk about?

Good. Well, thanks very much for that. That's been most interesting.

No, nothing that I can think of, just that I particularly – he just impressed me as being so passionate about social justice and planning and improving the lot for everybody, irrespective of their backgrounds, whether it was Aborigines or refugees or the chap next door. And that made a big impression upon me.

Good. Well, thanks very much for that. That's been most interesting.

END OF INTERVIEW