

Joy Durst - VFMC video presentation

Joy Durst (nee Cruttenden) was born in Wellington, New Zealand, on 13th January 1916. She grew up in Palmerston North, a small town approximately 140 km north of Wellington, and attended Palmerston North High School. Later she attended Wellington University. She studied Arts and became a teacher. According to Janie Alcorn-Durst, the oldest of her three children (she had two daughters and a son), her upbringing by her mother, Alice, and two maiden aunts was very conservative. For example, they knitted her woollen underwear which she was required to wear to university. Writing to her friend Alan Marshall, the author, many years later, in 1963, she said: *My father died when I was 11 months old and I was brought up by my mother and a woman she paid to care for me. I was spoilt and pampered and smothered in a narrow-minded, conservative quasi-religious spiritually, impoverished environment. Against this suffocating atmosphere I rebelled vigorously from an early age.*

Joy moved to Sydney, Australia, where she joined the Communist Party. She also worked for the Communist Party in Broken Hill for a time. She then moved to Perth to marry journalist Graham Alcorn, who was Editor of the Workers Star, a newspaper associated with the Communist Party of Australia. Exactly where and when she met Alcorn is not clear, however.

Joy worked as a schoolteacher in Perth but left the Education Department in 1949 to become publicity director for the WA branch of the Communist Party. She also worked for a time as secretary of the Australia-Soviet Friendship League, and secretary of the Native Rights League in WA. She had a strong interest in Aboriginal culture and welfare. She was regularly quoted in The Tribune newspaper, the official newspaper of the Communist Party, throughout the 1940s. She also wrote the 'Dear Bill - Letter to a Soldier' column for the Workers Star newspaper, signing off simply as 'Joy.'

Janey, Joy's first child, was born in 1945, in Perth. Joy and Graham's marriage failed soon after. Joy re-partnered with Claude Durst, and they moved to Sydney, taking Janey with them. They married soon after. Claude had been born in Austria and, being Jewish, had fled Vienna with his parents in 1938, at the age of seventeen. Joy, Claude and Janey lived on a farm approximately 40km west of Sydney. Joy resumed teaching. She also worked in a laundry during the weekends for a while.

Joy manipulated Graham through the legal system such that he did not see Janey again for many years, by which time she was a young adult. Nevertheless, Janey is keen to paint a balanced view of Joy. She describes her as being highly intelligent, with an enormous sense of humour. They often sang duets together at the kitchen sink while doing the washing up. Joy sent Janey to the Conservatory of Music to learn the piano, for which she has been forever grateful.

Claude was a civil engineer. He worked for a large company, who moved him down to Melbourne in 1953. They lived in Box Hill. Joy had a daughter, Joanna, in 1956, and a son, Christopher, followed two and a half years later. It was probably not until she arrived in Melbourne that Joy learned to play the guitar.

Jo's memories of her mother are generally very positive, though she feels she was somewhat neglectful at time, especially by today's standards. For example, Jo was expected to ride her tricycle by herself to kindergarten at the age of four. It was quite a long ride. Similarly, she had to make her own way to primary school. This was a much longer journey. She also remembers visiting an Aboriginal community near Warrandyte with her mother. Joy gave one of Jo's books to the community. Jo was furious.

On the other hand, Jo feels Joy gave her children a much broader education than they would have received at school alone. During the school holidays, she would take them to see amazing films for children that had been made in Europe. Jo remembers collecting rocks out in the bush somewhere with her mother. Joy then said, "Right. Now, we're going to the museum, and we're going to get those rocks identified!" She contacted the museum and arranged for a geologist to meet them there and discuss all their rocks in detail. The rocks were then labelled appropriately, either by Jo or her mother. There was always music playing in the house - classical music such as 'Peter and the Wolf', 'The Blue Danube' and 'The Nutcracker Suite.' The children were often expected to perform on Sunday evening. As a special reward, they were allowed to eat dessert. (As a rule, they were not allowed to eat sweets or lollies.)

Joy also organised for the family to travel from Melbourne to Cooktown to witness the last running of the Cooktown-Laura train, which took place in 1961. (The train-line had been built in the 1880s to carry gold from the rich Palmer River goldfield in northern Queensland down to the coast.) Claude had a van, which he adapted for use by the family. For example, he cut a hole in the side to put in windows. It was during this trip that Joy discovered the Queensland version of Waltzing Matilda and brought it back with her to the southern states.

Joy founded The Billabong Band in 1955, with the aim of promoting Australian folk music. She was especially keen to show visiting folk singers from the UK or Ireland that Australia had its own folk music. (Martyn Wyndham-Read remembers her fondly.) The Victorian Bush Music Club followed in 1959, but Joy changed its name to 'The Victorian Folk Music Club' in 1963 to allow for the inclusion of contemporary songs. When the American folk singer Pete Seeger needed money to fight his legal battle with the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Joy was closely involved with fundraising efforts in Australia. Janey remembers being personally introduced to Pete Seeger and Harry

Belafonte when they toured Australia. As a prominent member of the Communist Party, Joy was subject to surveillance by ASIO.

Joy struggled continually with her mental health, however. She had severe mood swings and may well have suffered from what we today would call bipolar illness. Earlier I quoted from a letter she wrote to Alan Marshall, also a member of the Communist Party, in 1963. I will quote from it again.

One thing I always wanted to be was a good mother. I wanted to have at least 4 children. Having lacked a warm family life this seemed (and I'm still convinced is) one of the most important things in life. Because I felt so deeply for young things who need love and understanding I became a teacher and loved it as a real vocation. I really thought I was a very good teacher and perhaps compared to some I was. But it dawned on me finally that I suffered great disabilities in my preparation to be either a teacher or a mother, or for that matter, a human being. And the older I get the more critical I become of myself.... It dwells with me daily, this realisation of the inadequacy of my beginnings and my subsequent training for life. I'm often not sure if I'm right or wrong in my attitude to a situation and this uncertainty further cripples me. I try not to brood on it for what good would that do?

The following year, 1964, she took herself down to Claude's tool shed where, remarkably, he manufactured his own telescope, and took a fatal overdose of barbiturates. She was 48 years old.

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