

# CATHY ALEXOPOULOS nee HATJIANDREOU: TEACHER



## Family Origins

My family is from Greece. My father immigrated to Australia in 1955, two years earlier than the rest of the family. We eventually joined dad in March, 1957.

In Greece my father had attempted several businesses but they had all fallen by the wayside. At that point in time, 1954, my aunty married Mr Xeros, an Australian of Greek origin. They were married in Greece though Mr Xeros was born here. He encouraged my father to come to Australia, and that was the impetus for us migrating.

I was born in 1947, two years after WWII. From my younger years I recall the air raids, the flashing lights in the night and the constant tank parades on the main roads. The earthquakes we experienced occasionally were equally frightening. I had a godmother who was quite wealthy, she lived in the Peloponese. I used to go for holidays there all the time and I had the best of clothes and other treats. All in all my childhood was a happy one with fond memories and events.

## Coming to Australia

Our family came to Australia as independent migrants, so dad had to find the money for the fares not only for his wife and kids but for my grandmother, my mother's mother, as well. Olga was her name.

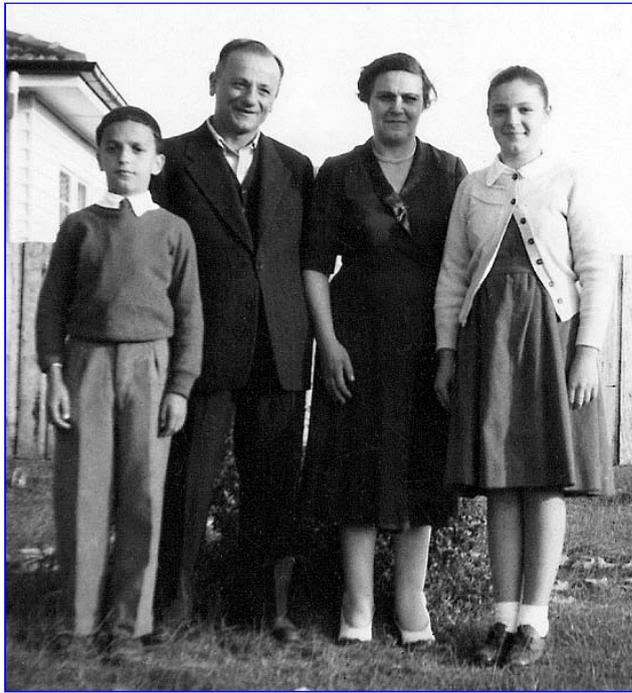
We touched Australian soil in Darwin and then proceeded to Melbourne where we were met by my auntie's family.

Dad had started working for the railways and he had a group of friends in St Albans who had bought land and most of them were building part houses. Dad had also started to create a part house because we were coming. It was the beginning of the house that would be built eventually. It was on the corner of Ruth and Kate streets opposite the old primary school.

Because our part house wasn't yet ready we lived in Richmond with another family, in the usual way that a lot of other Greeks and Italians and other immigrants started off in a shared house.

## Moving to St Albans

After living a few months in Richmond we moved to St Albans and lived under the most arduous conditions. We left Greece from a suburb of Athens that had electricity, running water, even a stove and a fridge. We came St Albans ... oh well, what a hell hole! We had no electricity, no running water and no windows, because dad couldn't afford windows at the time or the payment for the connection of the services. The part house had two rooms and he created a little shed at the back that was the kitchen. We cooked on a kerosene stove. It was very cold and so we had a kerosene heater. I recall one day that the heater caught on fire. Luckily we were in the house and managed to douse the fire, but all the smoke and fumes made the room even darker.



The Hatjiandreou family in St Albans.

Because we didn't have electricity we had one of those kerosene lamps. One day, Michael being a naughty boy as he was as a young kid, he thumped it, so you can imagine what followed ...

We were five people in those two rooms. That was the situation we were living under until dad managed to gather up enough money to extend. At that point my mother wasn't working and he was still paying off the loan for our fares. Finally we got electricity and we saw the light.... Then came water.

Water was another saga. The school was opposite, so my grandmother and I used to get some big casseroles pots and cart water backwards and forwards from the school. That was the water we had initially. I don't know how long that went on for, but for me as a young kid it seemed like a lifetime. Mum couldn't understand how people lived here. In Greece she had electricity and a refrigerator and here we had blocks of ice being delivered for the ice chest.

The other thing about St Albans at that time and for many years later was the wonderful roads that we had, those beautiful tree-lined streets, they were just something else; spectacular stuff. If mud skating had been a sport we would have been champions. During that time it used to rain consistently. This was a time when lots of adjustments had to be made.

How can I forget the dunny ... most times overflowing and the repercussions when our playful, young dog would chase the dunny man. These experiences are unforgettable!

## **Making Adjustments**

Everyday existence was rather difficult and my mother started feeling unwell - her heart started playing up. We were very fortunate that Dr Brooks was available. He was an Englishman who had lived in Egypt and spoke several languages, one of them being French. My mother grew up in Lyon, France. She was very comfortable in seeing this gentleman with all her ailments that those we got as young kids. I always used to get chilblains from the cold. I also suffered from tonsillitis and this kind doctor was administering penicillin very often to me.

I remember that we couldn't afford things. I had a very close friend, Danielle, who lived in View Street closer to the high school. We were friends from the primary years and later in the high school. Her family were more established in St Albans and had a better lifestyle at that point in time. Once I was invited to her birthday and I wanted to go, but what would I give her? There was a hardware store in East Esplanade near the Goddard's store. I saw these most beautiful little ornaments there. In actual fact my ornaments came in a set of two. I said to mum "I want to get her this." She said it costs too much but her compromise was "tell them you only want one." I didn't realise my ornaments were a pepper and salt shaker and you can't really separate them. But that's how it was, money was tight.

We experienced some interesting episodes due to lack of language, particularly on the part of my parents, because the kids started to pick up the language quickly. One day we went to Goddard's supermarket, it was already a supermarket then because they had the wire baskets and you selected what you wanted off the shelf. We went looking for cocoa because we didn't know the name of it we found something brownish in a packet and it looked grainy, so we bought that. We came home and found it was Gravox – it was a gravy mixture. The stories you hear from people improvising ways of overcoming the language barrier are quite amazing, like walking around and clucking like a chicken because they didn't know the word for chicken.

They were difficult years, but they were fun years too because we were kids and those other things weren't important to us, we took them in our stride.

## **Primary School**

When I was in primary school running around the yard I fell over on the gravel, because the whole playground was full of gravel. I had a really bad gash on the knee, and still have the scar from that on my knee. The teachers attended to me and immediately said you must go to hospital and have that stitched. I told them I lived across the road, and they trusted, as you would then, because I used to go home for lunch. I went across with Danielle and said to mum I had to go to hospital for stitches. She looked at it: "Ah, it looks alright, look's fine. You'll be alright in a couple of days. When you get married there won't be anything there."

When I went back all I could say to them, because my English was very poor, was: "We look after. We look after." I didn't understand what that meant though I think the intent of "we'll do something later" was interpreted as "we'll take care of it." That was my reply. Sure enough, we never did do anything with it and it took forever to heal because it was a very bad gash and had so much dirt I was very lucky it didn't get infected. But hey, that made you tougher, more enduring.

When we made friends we really supported each other, and I'm talking of friendships that went through to high school. High school for me was a half-hour hike, which we did religiously every day through rain, hail, and sunshine. High school was another world because there were more people there and more that you had to master. However, I took everything in my stride.

I recall that we couldn't buy the summer dress and had to make it. I think most of the uniforms then were patterns and a lot of women did sewing. My auntie used to be very handy with her hands and we had a sewing machine which we'd brought from Greece. I remember making my clothes. In fact the high school dress that I still have still is a handmade dress.

## **House Fire**

On the 18th January 1961, when I was in Form 2 at high school, our house burnt down due to an electrical fault. It was a devastating day for a couple of reasons. At 5 o'clock that morning my grandmother died in the Footscray hospital. We didn't have a phone, so my aunty and uncle who had a phone came with their children and told us. My mother had just started working as a cleaner for the State Bank of Victoria in the city. It was her second day with the job and she couldn't ask for leave, so she had to go to work. She left for work about 3 pm because it was an afternoon shift. As she was travelling on the train she saw fire engines coming to St Albans but didn't know what was going on - she didn't know that her house was burning down.



My mother had been looking after some children at home. That was common in those days because child care was almost non-existent or too expensive. We had two children whom we were looking after, and were responsible for until my mother could see whether or not she was going to continue with her job. My aunty was there to look after the children so was I, and Michael was there as well. That afternoon the electrical wiring in the house shorted and the house caught fire. My brother was a very good sprinter and he raced across the railway line to Alexina Street where there was a fire

brigade alert box and he set off the alarm. By the time the fire brigade came we had already got those kids out and ourselves.

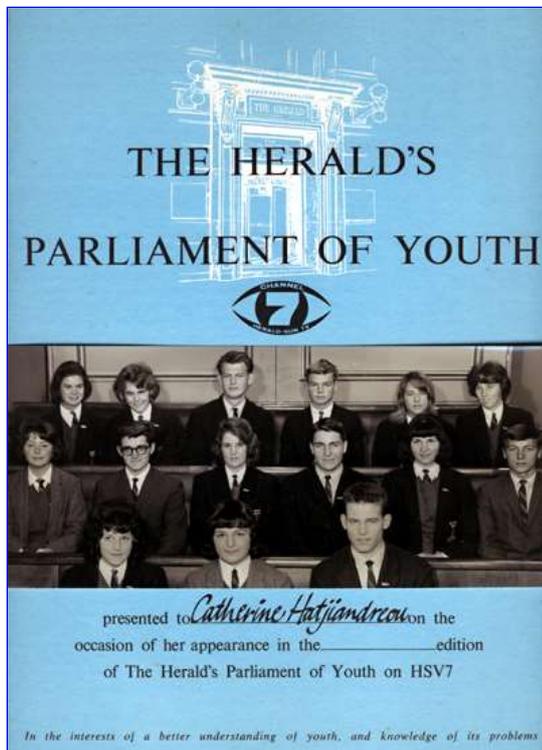
My mother had always kept some money and some valuables in the house, and she'd told me where she kept the valuables. She hadn't told me where she kept the money so that went, but the valuables I managed to get out with me, plus a bedspread that I really prized. All we could do was watch as the house burnt and my aunty was screaming and screaming. The fire brigade came and did whatever they could do. Then my dad came home. He had gone with my uncle to organise my grandmother's funeral. As they were coming back they could see the smoke but, again, didn't realise whose house it was. My mum was leaving and they were coming.

What did not burn was so water damaged by the fire hoses that we lost absolutely everything. That's when we moved to Windsor for a year. We stayed in the house where my aunty was living in for a short time and attended Caulfield Central. So I had a year of experience with a different type of crowd, mostly Jewish people, and a completely different world. At that time we weren't sure if we would come back to St Albans and I was enrolled in MacRob. I'm not sure to this day if I did the right thing in coming back, but we came back and I started again in Year 9 at St Albans High.

## Returning to St Albans High

I remember doing some maths exercises one day when I was having a problem and Mr Pavlov saying: "That posh school didn't teach you anything. Bring me your report card." I won't forget Mr Pavlov.

I recall the athletics. I used to represent the school in javelin, shotput and discus. I don't think there were too many students, especially girls, wanting to do those events. I enjoyed that and had fun. Though we didn't have many amenities, we supported each other. There were teachers who went out of their way to do things for us. There was a young teacher in Year 11 - I've forgotten her name - who organised group outings to the Dandenongs, or



maybe it was Warburton or Warrantdyte. Our world was very small: the city and St Albans. She used to take us on hikes. I went with Karen Frede, a very good friend with whom I still communicate, and there was Helga Mucke. I think we all had a fantasy to be out in the country and she gave us that opportunity on several occasions. Most of the songs we used to sing were scout songs, so she might have been with the girl guides.

We used to organise the socials at the St Albans Public Hall with real live bands. The headmasters were supportive because they understood we weren't louts and that we were doing the right thing.

I had a very good friend by the name of Tania Korinsky who had a sort of step brother, Leo Suszko, who was an entrepreneur from a young age. We

organised bus trips to Falls Creek, Lorne and Torquay. I'd never been to these places and we had wonderful times. There was a lot of camaraderie and a willingness to get out of the mould and do things you hadn't done.

I remember the plays and choirs and being involved in the SRC. I was also involved with the debating club. I remember going to Olympic Park for athletic competitions and the Olympic Pool for swimming sports. They were good years.



Mr Torpey was very strict, but I had no problems with that because my father was like that. I won't forget Mrs Gliddon telling me one day from what she could understand of what I was telling her about my dad that "He seems very autocratic."

Despite everything they were all very generous at the high school. In the early days my parents couldn't afford a lot of things. When I had to buy a prefect blazer my mother said she couldn't afford it, so the school gave me half the money to buy it. To try and help my family I would always go for the studentships. Every year from Intermediate onwards I applied for those because I had the ambition of becoming a teacher and it was a good way of getting a few dollars.

## Teachers

Someone I remember very vividly, because I loved anything to do with literature, was Mrs Gliddon and the way she conveyed literature to us. She was my best teacher, but she was a my mentor as well. She certainly had time for you, especially for females because she was the senior mistress.

Mrs Gliddon opened up a whole new world, not only academically but also socially - she was a person with many attributes which she wanted to convey to her students as well. I used to travel on my own on the train or sometimes with groups of friends and after an

outing walk home after 11 at night. That didn't mean a thing because I was not afraid. The world was somehow safer and more naïve then. I remember dressing up nicely - you'd make sure all the clothes matched whenever we went to the city for a performance. Mrs Gliddon encouraged us to see Shakespearean plays, Greek tragedies, musical comedies or opera as well. We used to get a season ticket to the Youth Orchestra at the Melbourne Town Hall. They used to do this once a year and there would be a series of them. I would go with Maija Svares, Eva Radiskevics, and others. Maija and Eva were good piano players, whereas I didn't play any instrument. I would have loved to play an instrument but I never really did. One of the things I wanted was a piano, which I urged my mother to buy, which she eventually did. I even had a tutor to come and teach me, but it was a bit later in life.



We used to visit theatre groups like La Mamma. I became a member of the Melbourne Theatre Company. These were formative years that opened up a lot of things for you. I must say it was all due to Mrs Gliddon. I was not only impressed by it but it became part of me.

Mr Rayner was a person with remarkable human qualities. When I was in Form 5 I was doing science and one of reasons I did it was because some teachers pressured me. They said "You're a good student, you'll do well

in science." I never really wanted to do science and that year I didn't pass; I failed science. I was so angry. We were fixing up a house in Windsor and Barry Rayner turned up. I don't know how he found out where we were but he found out and came specifically to say to me "You've got to come back to school." I was so angry and so upset at having failed. Barry doesn't recall that, but I do. Who else would have gone to the trouble to do that?



There was a French teacher, Miss Coutts. This poor lady, the boys gave her hell: Lindsay Chatterton and my brother, Henry Goralski, and the rest of them. One day this poor woman came running out of the class crying her eyes out. She wore short skirts that were almost mini skirts and I think that's partly why the boys were so naughty. She refused to go back.

I remember Mr Henry, the maths teacher with the missing hand. He was a wonderful teacher and a gentleman. A lovely man. He had a calliper on that arm and was so dextrous with it.

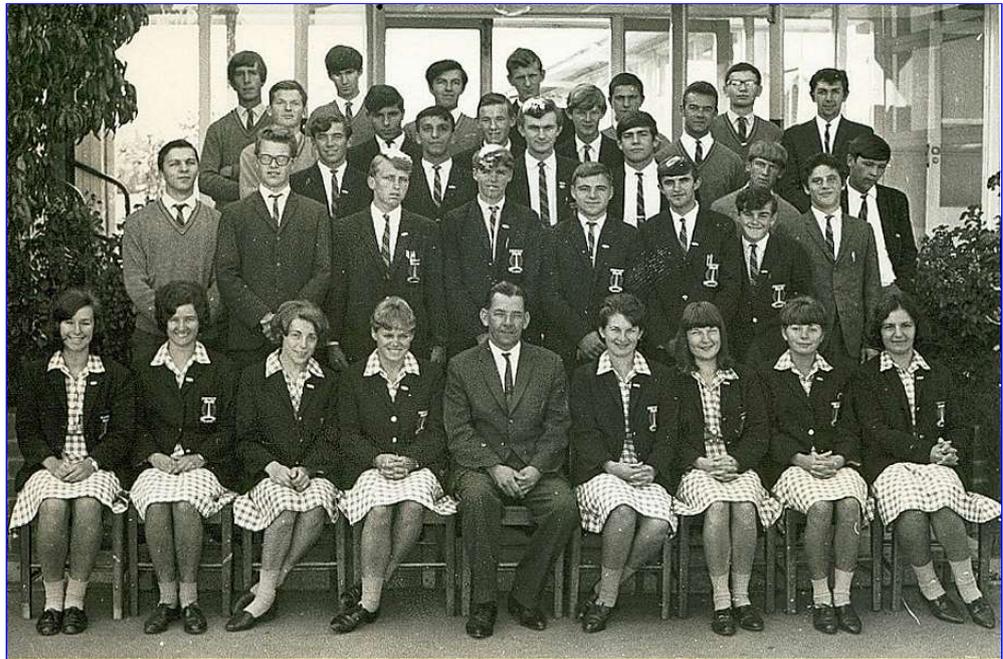
## Group Discussions

There were several students who left an impression on me. We used to have quite a lot of group discussions and some of them were very heated ones. These involved Smith and Lawrence Schwab and many others. Laurence was a different type of character to Broderick; I was very close with his sister Katrin. Broderick and Laurie were very close mates, joined by Knut Werner. There was always some sense of animosity between myself and Broderick. One day I was passing him in the crowded school corridor, when the point of his compass was sticking out and got stuck into my hand. I'm sure it was an

accident but I still have a little scar to remind me of the incident. I'm still waiting to meet up and tell him and ask for compensation.



The St Albans team on the Parliament of Youth program, 1965; Cathy Hatjiandreou in front row centre.



Mr Alcorn with school prefects, 1966. Cathy Hatjiandreou is on the right in front row.

## Part-time Work

From about the Intermediate year I always used to work full time during the school holidays. Holidays were revenue raising time. I worked for Waltons in the credit department and learnt all about credit in the main store in Bourke Street. With the money I earned I bought my first beauty case and my first suit case. I won't forget Waltons. Prior to that, with my friend Veronica Debevc (now Sutherland) we got a job working early in the morning at the Salvation Army in the city making breakfast for the homeless. We'd get there really early to make the breakfast. I remember getting my first pay in a yellow envelope. That was our first paying job and it was quite exciting. I also worked for a law firm, for National Mutual in the fire department, and for a friend running a café. All holidays and term breaks like Easter I used to work at that café, the Legend, in Lonsdale Street. You would also find me at the Herald Art Show in The Treasury Gardens, and I continued working at that event when I was in my tertiary studies. I got a lot of experience in doing things and nothing stopped me.

To get a job I would say I am leaving school and need a job. So they gave me a job. Who can do that today? One year I went to National Mutual and told them "I think I've failed and I don't want to go back." I was working in the fire insurance section and I recall when

the holidays finished I said to the manager, “Look, maybe I better go back to school and finish my education. It looks like things will be getting tougher in the future and I will need tertiary qualifications.”

She said to me: “Why? Come with me.” She took me to the top floor and there was this humungous mainframe computer. It was the latest equipment. She was showing me this to entice me to stay on. She said, “This is the future.” I was to be a keyhole punch operator or something like that. “This is the future. Don’t go back. This is where the money is.” I won’t forget that.

I don’t know what other people’s experiences were or what they took on from what was offered at the school. St Albans might not have offered much, but it’s what you made of those little opportunities that were available. I took advantage of a lot of things.

## School Friendships

The other thing I recall is this desire to open up different worlds and learn. I had a friend Lydia, who was part Yugoslav and part Italian but spoke Italian. She lived not far from my house in Kate Street. I just loved to learn Italian, so for a whole year, every Saturday morning we would go to University High to learn Italian. That was probably in Form 5, and it was another interesting experience. The French I was doing at school was only offered by correspondence. Either we didn’t have teachers capable of teaching French or perhaps not at that particular level. There were only a handful of us doing French. We did have some assistance from staff and we passed. I also did it at first year university when I was doing my arts degree.

I think in the majority of cases our parents wanted us to learn and were eager to help their children to achieve something they hadn’t. This was the country of the future and opportunity.

I made some very, very good friends but the reason these friendships weren’t lasting for me is that I moved overseas in 1971, which stopped that continuity. But it’s interesting that a few did visit me in Greece: Majja Svares came, Maria Jaciow, Melissa Jankovic, and others whose names I’ve forgotten. I kept in communication with others, such as Nick Szwed and Peter Nowatschenko who married my cousin Olga.



Classmates of 1963, Form 4a. Cathy Hatjiandreou is in the back row, second from right.

## **Tertiary Studies**

I started doing an arts degree at Monash. That's when we moved from St Albans to Glen Iris, because both my brother and I were studying at Monash University, Michael was doing Civil engineering then. I was doing an Arts degree as the basis for secondary teaching. Then I decided to do primary teaching and transferred to the Melbourne Teachers College. That was two-year degree then. They were another wonderful two years. I finished the course and started teaching at Clifton Hill where I taught for two years. Then I went to Greece.

## **Living in Greece**

One of the reasons for going to Greece was that I'd had enough of studying and working and I just wanted to have a holiday. One other thing that really prompted me to go was that I had an uncle whom I really loved a lot and he was in his dying days, so I just managed to see him, which was a bit of a shock, but I did see him before he died. I went on my own and travelled around, but only in Greece. While I was there on holidays I was offered jobs, which were mostly tutoring in English. The opportunities there were great.

Then Jim (my future husband) came back to Greece. I had met Jim in St Albans where he used to live with his brother. He had left about a year earlier and was working with Kodak. We met up again, I decided to stay on, and we got married the following year in April of 1972. It was easy for me to get a job so I was working without problems. Europe is different to Australia. Europe has the roots of my background and that was an important part of finding yourself. It has an aliveness which you cannot feel unless you live there. It is a living component in your life. Because I'm interested in history, I suppose, and archaeology, the world was there for me. Not that you could travel every day.

In Athens you tend to live in apartments. We had two children. Alex is now 31 and Dianne is 30. They started their education at the British Embassy School, because there was always this idea in the back of my mind that we might come back to Australia.

## **Returning to Australia**

We came back to Melbourne in 1984 and Kodak was able to transfer Jim here to the Kodak factory in Coburg. He was Marketing Manager at that point in time. Coming back meant I had to upgrade my qualifications, which I did. I studied full time and completed two years in one. That was back at Melbourne University.



Marilyn Hulett, Cathy Alexopoulos, Luba Uwarowa, reunion 2005.

I went back to teaching at St. Anargiry school, which is a private Greek School in Oakleigh. I was the coordinator of the primary school. That was a most fulfilling job. Initially we had 108 students in the primary school, and a decade later I ended up with 360 kids. That was quite an adventure and I had a tremendous time. It was a time when my children were growing up and starting to be independent. I used to sometimes work for ten hours a day. I gave a lot of my time and effort in spite of a lot of other things that were going on. It was a fulfilling job because not only were you developing as a teacher but you gave yourself as well.

I left there in 1995 and had very long break. We went to Greece for another holiday, renovated our house, had friends over from USA and Greece and list goes on... Then I started getting jittery again and started doing a bit of emergency teaching, a lot of tutoring, and some extended contract teaching. Eventually I said if I'm going to go back the only school I'm going back to is a government school which is up the road, which is Lloyd Street Primary School, which is within walking distance of home. We had just come back from holidays when they phoned me up and offered me a full-time job. I worked there for about 4 years and got sick with ovarian cancer, in September 2001. Then I stopped working full time and since then have been doing some casual relief teaching on and off.

## **Current Activities**

In the meantime I became the president of the Greek-Australian Cultural League, which demands a lot of my time. Voluntary work always does, doesn't it?

I also try to fulfill my life with other things which I enjoy such as travelling, walking, enjoying the company of friends and having a good time with them when I can. You still devote yourself to your family, helping your parents. My father is still alive. Dad is 91 and is in an aged care centre. I visit him 3 or 4 times a week. Mum, 86, is still at home, and has her own health problems. My brother and I help both of them out. We also try to help other people. I like to keep in touch with my aunty and see her often. I do what I can, but I'm pacing myself as well.

My health is up and down though I'm okay at the moment. I'm in remission, which is a word I hate with a vengeance. I would like to say that I'm free of cancer. I'm saying to myself that I don't have it and will not get it again. That is just a word, but it has to be a belief as well.

You go on, no matter what, and have a positive attitude.



**Cathy Alexopoulos, 2006.**

**Menu**

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Jim and Cathy Alexopoulos, at the 50th Anniversary dinner, 2006.

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