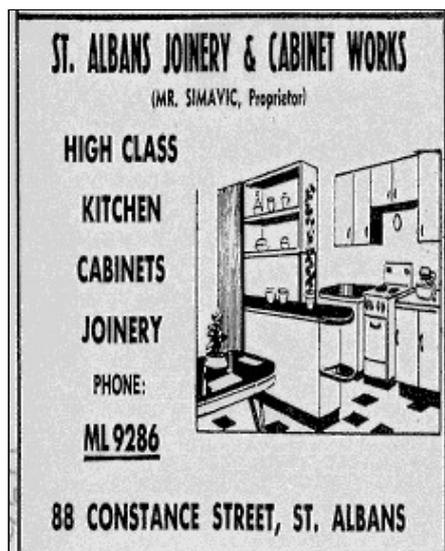


JOHN SIMOVIC: PUBLIC SERVANT, BANK MANAGER, SECURITY WORKER



My parents were Stevan and Adelheid Simovic and they came to Australia in 1950. My father was a POW in Germany for four years – he had been in the Serbian King’s army when he was captured and sent to work on a farm, which was the best thing ever. My mother was German and they obviously met during dad’s time on the farm. They married and I was their only child, born in August 1948. We came to Australia in December 1950 and like many other immigrants at the time started off in Bonegilla. My father was then assigned work with the Victorian Railways at the Newport workshops, which is how we settled in Melbourne's western suburbs.

We moved from the Bonegilla hostel to Williamstown and were living at that hostel for a time before buying land in St Albans. I imagine that some of my father's friends and work colleagues had bought land there so we followed them. We moved to St Albans probably in 1951 or 1952 and my mother still lives here since that time. My father and his brother bought land next to each other so it was a little family cluster.



My uncle was a carpenter and established a joinery and cabinet works in Constance Street near the St Albans primary school. He worked from there for many years making kitchen cabinets and such. He also did sub-contract work for the Stevens brothers when they were selling land and housing packages; he built a lot of houses in the area. His wife became very sick and my mother looked after her for a while before she died. People of their generation often did not go to the doctors so readily. My uncle eventually moved to a farm in country Victoria and gave the house to his daughter who still lives there. He loved the farm life.

When we arrived in St Albans we were living in Pennell Avenue and there were only a few houses around us. At first we were in one of the half houses, a bungalow, until we had the money to extend. We lived there a while and then moved to Scott Avenue where we built a new house and sold the Pennell Avenue bungalow. In our neighbourhood there were only a few houses, one general store and one car that I remember. Perrett’s was the closest general store not far away from us in Main Road West but later the Barbopoulos family established their milk bar on the corner of Cornhill Street. The Stevens family were the big land owners in the district with their old farm along Main Road West - the sons established several local businesses and also sold real estate.

There was only one primary school and that had over 40 nationalities enrolled when I started there; definitely multi-cultural. I remember Ahmed Ajayoglu and Peter Barbopoulos from primary school days. Ahmed was across the road from the school with their shop and the little chook farm. A few years later the St Albans East Primary School was established and a lot of my classmates from the eastern side of the railway line left for the new school, but I stayed. We met up again when we started at St Albans High School in 1961. The best years of our lives were in primary school where you had your friends, you played outside and life was simpler; there were no computer games - our electronic entertainment was the radio and then black and white TV

came along. I think we had a good group of people at the Primary School and also at the High School.



At St Albans High I developed an interest in photography. Mr Ziemelis was one of the teachers at the school in the early sixties and introduced me to photography. I was in Form 3 at the time. I did a lot of photography for the school including class photos, sporting events and silly photos in classrooms and so forth. Ziemelis was a bit of a mentor; his speciality was teaching German and I always enjoyed his classes. I went to his home and he showed me what was possible in establishing darkroom developing and printing, etc. He loaned me one of his cameras and I ended buying a Pentax, which was of good quality, and I developed a passion for that. I set up my own developing and printing at home. It was a good interest and has resulted in some good records for the school. Not too many people had cameras in those early years.



Mr Ziemelis and Form 4A, 1964. J Simovic in back row, five from the left.

I remember some of the sporting events and Mr Ziemelis asked me to photograph some of the athletics and swimming. I was involved over about four years in taking the annual form photos and other school functions and a number of my photos were included in school publications. The Victorian Association of Photographic Societies organised an annual photographic competition for secondary schools and in 1965 and 1966 St Albans won several prizes and commendations. I was pleased to get a commendation in 1967 as did Max Costa and Victor Mago. I haven't kept up with my photography passion in its old form because technology has changed so much that now you do it all with your mobile phone and don't need darkrooms and developing fluids.

1967 was also the year that I was involved in the production of the school magazine, Alba. I was part of the editorial committee with David Beighton, Maija Svares, Marilyn Hulet and Leo Dobes.



Leo Dobes, Maija Svares, Joachim Simovic, Marilyn Hulett, David Beighton.

I was tempted to take up photography as a career but went into the public service. This was just after high school. The commonwealth centre building was on the corner of Latrobe and Spring streets where the Immigration Department and other government offices were located – we called it the “green latrine” because the external cladding was all green. You had to sit an exam to determine eligibility for joining the public service, so I sat for that, passed the examination and joined the service in 1968. I stayed with the public service until 1989.

I worked in the section that was initially called Social Services before becoming Social Security and finally CentreLink. My role was being in charge of a team of 23 people in the registry where they kept track of all their pension files. Then I became a pensions officer and interviewed people regarding their applications pensions for aged, widow and single parent pensions and so forth. I had the job of a travelling pensions officer from Footscray which was our regional base to Werribee, Bacchus Marsh, Sunbury and such areas where we’d work from the court houses and speak with people.

One of the things I did when I was with Social Security was travel to country areas including Shepparton, Wangaratta and Geelong. I’d work at each centre for about three months at a time, staying in boarding houses or pubs and coming home on weekends to visit my mother and do the washing. I had an old FB Holden with a hole in the floor but it worked so on weekends I caught up with my old colleagues and workmates. Youd and Ziemelis became friends and I’d visit them at home or sometimes we’d meet for drinks with other friends.



Adelheid Simovic, John Simovic, Eric Youd, Martha Youd.

I did that for many years and then I became section head in charge of all the pensions and became the assistant manager at Footscray Social Security. We had 99 people there so it was

quite a big section. They built a large office for us and my task was to relocate operations from Barkly Street to the new offices.



John Simovic with classmates, late 1960s.

From there I became the manager of various CentreLink offices in Newport, Werribee, Sunshine and St Albans. I went around the traps as the manager and ended up in St Albans, which was opposite the old police station in Main Road West and close to my old home. I was at the St Albans office for several years. Working in your home town can be awkward when you are in charge of a section and living in the same locality because people know you and if they don't like the decision instead of blaming the departmental guidelines they take it personally. But that's the nature of the beast. In the end they offered us the golden handshake, because when you are above a certain level in the public service they try to get rid of you. I was willing to consider that as I had been there for 22 years and was eligible for a package.

I accepted the package and found another job within a week, which was with the Commonwealth Bank in St Albans; it was still owned by the government then. During my first year there the notorious Christopher Binse and an accomplice held up the bank with sawn off shotguns. This was about 1988 and bank security was not as extensive as it is these days. The police caught them in the end but it took a long time. I ended up staying with the Commonwealth Bank for 23 years. I worked mainly in customer service and then they made me a loans manager. I did that at various offices, interviewing people for home loans and personal loans. On occasions I was acting manager at several branches and ended up at Footscray where I was the assistant to the area manager looking after 12 branches in the training. When the job went Australia-wide I then became a business banker for my last years with the bank.

I retired from the bank in 2012 and went into security. I became involved with the security part-time during the last ten years of working at the bank. I was working on weekends doing security patrols, industrial estates, Blue Light discos and those sorts of events. When my friend who owned the company lost the contract I then applied and got a job at the National Gallery as an attendant looking after the artworks. The National Gallery is my preferred place of work because it is more interesting – there are various functions and the exhibitions are very valuable. I prefer to work on a casual basis and with other security work being available I can work as many days as I like and when I like.

Since I've left the public service, CentreLink has changed a lot and St Albans has changed a lot. The undesirable thing about St Albans is that we now have a high criminal element around where my mother lives. I've seen people shooting up near my mother's place and the police have raided neighbouring properties several times looking for drugs. Two days ago my wife and I went to see my mother and there was someone obviously under the effect of drugs staggering past her driveway - the safety aspect of St Albans is no longer there. People have been mugged even in the centre of town near the railway station. Near Cornhill Avenue, where Peter

Barbopoulos's parents had their shop, there have been gang attacks. St Albans used to be a very safe area but unfortunately that is no longer the case.

The demographics of the west continue to change. When I was working in Footscray there were mainly Europeans, Greeks, Italians and so forth, and a lot of Australians. Then the change came with the Vietnamese community moving in and establishing businesses that renewed the business district. Now the African community is taking over some of the shops and businesses near the university though the Asian businesses are still predominant around the Nicholson and Barkly Street area. I worked for many years with the Commonwealth at their Footscray area office and we had police stationed upstairs with binoculars spotting the drug deals and we had machete attacks that occurred outside the office. We had to employ security guards outside because of the drug deals, people passing out and people throwing syringes in our bins. It was not a very pleasant area at that stage.

Since leaving the bank in 2012 I have helped out a lot more in the community as a volunteer. It began in the 'eighties when my sons were at school and I joined the Parents and Friends Association and did that for several years. In 1987 I became a scout leader when my son Michael joined the First Deer Park Scouts Group and I started their Ventura unit. I was with them about three years: took part in fund raising, went to all the training courses, even went to the big World Jamboree near Wollongong. My younger boy Andrew also joined the Cubs but did not stay as long.

My involvement with the St Albans Senior Citizens Club started two years ago when my mother had a fall and broke her hip. Previously, my parents used to come to the club in Arthur Street because it was the only club going at that time and they enjoyed the company and the outings and there were other German-speaking friends who attended there. That was twenty years ago. My mother continued coming to the club after my father died, but at the age of 83 when she broke her hip it became too hard for her walk or come by bus. To support her I decided to take Wednesdays off and drive her to the hairdresser and the seniors club. So the sons who bring their mothers to the club play pool while the mothers play Bingo.

I'm also a volunteer with Brimbank Council. I help out with functions and outdoor activities such as public events on recreation reserves, directing traffic in the car parks or whatever else is required, supervising some activities or taking on some security work. Volunteering is a way of giving back to the community; even when you stop work and retire it doesn't mean you have to just sit at home and stop being active. You need to keep your brain active.

With regard to my parents, St Albans has been their home since 1951. My father worked as a machinist with the railways until he had a heart attack and left due to ill health, which was all due to smoking. He passed away in 2003 at the age of eighty-three. My mother broke her hip in 2013 so now I'm helping to care for her. I take her out to the hairdressers and other appointments at least once a week and organise the house cleaning for her.

I've been married for 42 years. My wife and I have raised two sons: one is a cabinet maker, the other was with the tramways and is now running his own gardening business. Each of them has a son and a daughter.

John Simovic, 2015.



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John Simovic with colleagues at school reunion, 2006.

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