

WILLIE SOLON: STUDENT 1965-1968



My family name was Solon, which came from Greece many generations earlier, and then it was French. Eventually the ancestors went to Holland and that's where we came from. My parents were Maria Keurentjes and Martin (Martinus) Solon from Boxtel in southern Holland.

There were two daughters who were born in Holland: myself (Wilhelmina known as Willie) and my younger sister (Gijsberdina known as Dina). My mother was pregnant when they left for Australia, so my brother (Louis Jacobus) was born in Australia.

We migrated in 1959 under the Migration Agreement between the Australian and Netherlands Governments. Dad's occupation in Holland was a railway track layer and before that he worked in the coal mines. In Australia he worked as a laborer. We had no friends or relatives in Australia. The reason we came is that dad's interest in migration was aroused by an information pamphlet that he saw in the Labour Office when he went there because of unemployment.

We left Amsterdam on the Zuiderkruis (Southern Cross) which was the last voyage of an old army ship. We left in January 1959 and got here in February; it was a six week journey, which was still a long time. We were lucky because my mum was pregnant, so we were put in a separate family room rather than in a dormitory. Mum got really, really sick on the ship and spent a lot of time in the ship's hospital.



Solon family emigrating on Southern Cross 1959.

In 1959 we went from the Bonegilla migrant camp to the one in Broadmeadows. I had started preps in Holland and when we were in the migrant camp I went to Broadmeadows Primary. Then we went to Oak Park and I went to Oak Park Primary. Then we moved to St Albans, at first in Leonard Avenue and I attended the East Primary. From Leonard Avenue we went to Ivanhoe Avenue and while there I still went to East Primary. When we moved to George Street in 1962 I transferred to the St Albans North Primary School.



St Albans East Primary School 3B 1961.

In 1962 we bought a block at 85 George Street near the corner of Charles Street. That was one of 27 blocks being developed by Broons Constructions which was a company based in Brooklyn. The neighbours were Muti and Vati (who were Ria and Fred Drehlich), then some Yugoslavs who later moved out, then there were the Borgs.

The Drehlich family was of German background and we always called them Muti and Vati because that's what their children called them and that's German for mummy and daddy. Muti and my mum ended up working together at Footscray hospital and went overseas together, ending up in Munich. Muti went to visit her family and my mum caught the train to Holland to visit relatives. Later Muti joined my mother and they caught the plane back from Amsterdam.



North Primary School Grade 3 1962.

I attended the North Primary School in the 1960s. Mr Ginifer was a teacher at the school and I was in the same class as his daughter Pru. He would give you the strap if you did something wrong. I used to be at St Albans East and they used to have a proper bell to sound the start of class. The first day I started at St Albans North they didn't have a proper loud-speaker bell they just had an ordinary hand bell which was hard to hear. On my first day there I was with a group in the far corner of the playground near some big rocks and we didn't hear the bell so we were late coming back. We ran back when we realised we were late. Mr Ginifer was there and said it was strap time because we were late, so come and line up. It was my first day and I burst into tears and said "But there was no bell!" He looked at me and said "How long have you been here?" I said "I come here today" so I got out of it but the other girls got the strap. Ginifer said to me "Next time stay closer so that you can hear the bell." I was too scared to venture to those rocks.



North Primary School Grade 5 1963.

Growing up, the streets were our play grounds. There were a few magpies in Helen Street and they would swoop you; they were looking for heads, those magpies. There was a pond that was a meeting place for young children, and I'm not talking about teenagers. In those days if you were seven or nine years old and walked around those other streets your mother would never worry about you. Now you can't do it. I can remember going to the pond with my old jam jar to get my share of the tadpoles, only when they started turning into frogs I got frightened.

Dad built a cubby house for the three of us. We had everything in there and he built everything himself. We had a window and he made a kitchen in the German way with a table and bench seat that was hinged so that you could lift the seat. He made us dolls' prams and for my brother he made a little wooden gun because the boys also had to have their toys. The kids in the block loved to come and play in our back yard because we had this cubby house. They didn't buy us a lot but we had a lot because they made things. My sister and I both had a baby doll. Mum worked at Red Book Carpets and they were allowed to take the off cut wool home, so mum used to knit dolls' clothes out of carpet wool. Every Christmas sis and I would have another set of clothes for our dolls. That was the best part of our young lives. Dad even built our dolly prams. He didn't buy them, he made them. It was properly made of wood and painted.

Dad would go down to the tip and come back with a door and make something of it. We'd say don't go down to the tip but a lot of people did to find wood and tin that they brought back on the pushbike and used to build the chook shed. Dad used to collect copper and sell. When we lived in Oak Park, the other side of the river was the border of Essendon Airport and he went over there many times collecting scrap metal. There were scrap metal merchants around Melbourne buying bits of metal.

Joe Borg was a neighbour and he used to race horses at the end of Biggs Street near the river. There were no swimming pools around so that was our one spot. It wasn't a safe space but as teenagers we didn't have many places to go. It was a bit dangerous and a few people floated down the river.

My dad trusted Joe, so when I was young and wanted to go to Biggs Street I was allowed to go if Joe was going to be there. He would look after me so I was pretty safe. He would do the horse racing and there was gambling involved.



Grass fire in north-west St Albans early 1960s.

I was home when the massive fire came in the 1960s and we were told to get ready to leave. I can't remember if it was the police or the fire brigade, maybe both, who were coming around telling us to prepare to evacuate. We were at home with mum and the dog had just had a litter of puppies. The man next door was home and his name was Vati and he had a Volkswagen so he was going to take us if we had to evacuate.

Mum packed her important papers and we picked up the puppies and went to Vati's place. We were in George Street and they were in Charles Street around the corner. We all had to get a wet towel and wrap it around our faces. We couldn't see anything and had to hold onto each other to get around the corner. We were all holding the puppies because we weren't going to leave them behind. I was 11 or 12 at the time. If the fire had jumped the railway line it would have cleaned us all out but it didn't. That must have been in January during the school holidays.



Coles Store on Main Road West and Alfreda Street.

I started working at Coles when it was there in Main Road East on the corner of Alfreda Street. I started there when I was 12, because you could start working at that age. I used to work at the milk bar closer to home but was getting only 20 cents an hour. That was on the corner of Theodore and Conrad streets. I started when I was 12 years old and in my first year of high school. The man who ran that shop actually asked my father if I was willing to work there. He was a lovely guy. They only had the one son and his name was Stefan. There was another girl, Vera from Taylor's Road, who was also working there; we were both the same age.

I used to get more by working at Coles on a Saturday morning – it was just a half day because they closed at lunch time. I actually earned more working that half-day at Coles than I did working at the milk bar for several afternoons, so I gave up the milk bar. At that stage I was at high school and didn't want to work after school because at that age you want to be with all your mates but the milk bar wanted me to be there nearly every night. Working Saturday morning earned you enough to have a bit of pocket money. I would go to Sunshine to watch

Elvis Presley at the pictures and that's when I started smoking. I started at St Albans High School in 1965 and left in Form 4 in 1968.

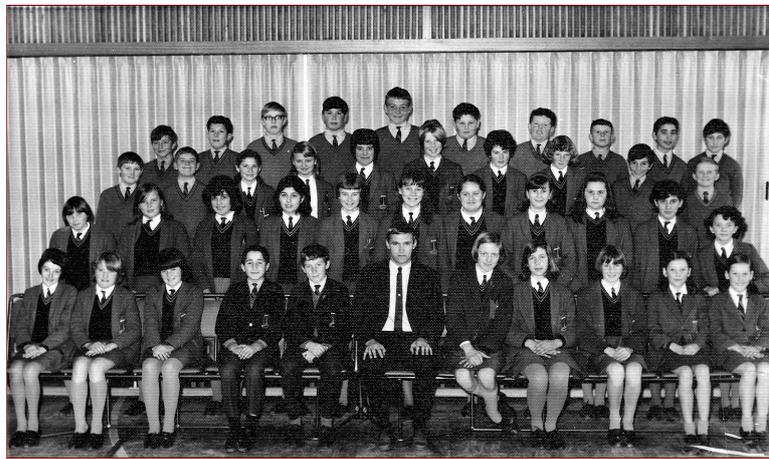


When I was at the high school the boys and the girls had separate parts of the school yard and they weren't allowed to mix at recess and lunchtimes. The girls were in the front section along Main Road East up to where the library was, which was the cut off line. There were teachers on standby there and you couldn't just walk across that line. If a girl wanted to go to the library during lunchtime you would have to tell the teacher and they would let you through.



Mr Brian Clancy with form class 1966.

The school was strict with uniforms. At the start of the year we had to wear our summer frock, our blazer and our beret. It didn't matter what the temperature was. Maybe when it got to 45 degrees we were allowed to take our blazers off, but in the street we had to have the blazers and berets on. In the winter you had your winter uniform, which was your winter tunic, your beret, your jumper, and your blazer, and you had to have your grey gloves on. That's what it was about. When the miniskirts came in was the best for us because you could have the skirt hem right on the knee. What we did was put a big elastic around our waist and hitch the dresses up. The headmistress, it might have been Mrs Gliddon, would come with a ruler and measure from your dress hem down to your knees and if it was an inch out you were in trouble. She knew what we were up to so she took our elastic waist bands with the result these frumpy dresses were down to our knees.



I only did one term in fourth form because my mother got really sick and spent ages in hospital. I left school to stay home and look after the rest of the family. I did that for about four months and after that I didn't want to go back to school. Dad said "OK, if you don't want to go to school you have to get yourself a job, as long as it's not working in a factory."

I got a job at Steelcrafts which was in Sunshine near the old picture theatre. I was a couple of months before my sixteenth birthday and I got a job in the office licking stamps. Dad was happy. I ended up in the payroll section and worked there for quite a few years. I got tired of that job and moved to Spaldings in Albion, which was where Bunnings is now located. I was in the office and Ron Irwin was the manager there. Barry Priest also worked there. I was there until I got pregnant with my first child and left after that. You had to leave when you got pregnant in those days, you didn't have a choice. I got that job through Tony Azzopardi who was the fore-man in the mouldings section. I left there in 1976 when Kylie was born. After about four months I went back to working and that was at James Hardie. Sunshine had lots of factories such as Steelcraft, Spaldings, James Hardie. Some of these were huge with more than 100 employees. James Hardie was massive and had three shifts.

I married Joseph Muscat in 1975 and we were living in a bungalow at the back of mum's house. Dad built us a bungalow because he didn't want us paying rent because we were saving up to build our own house. Just before we got engaged we bought a block of land in Bundeena Avenue. When we got back from the honeymoon the bungalow at my parents' place wasn't quite ready so we stayed with Joe's parents in Theodore Street. The bungalow was finished a couple of months after that and we moved into the back of 85 George Street. I got pregnant with Kylie and she was four months and a day old when we moved to 15 Bundeena Avenue in Kealba in the 1980s. I remember when we moved because it was only three degrees and it was freezing.

My father worked at Steelcraft for a while as a second job because he needed the money, because with mum being sick there was a lot of catching up required to cover the doctors' bills.

James Hardie was in Brooklyn near Rheems on the old Geelong Road. I had a car when I was working there so travel was not a problem, that is until my ex took the car. But I had discovered one of my neighbours was working there so he would often give me a lift and there was a lady down the road who did likewise.

I finished there because I got fed up working full time, so I went part time to Tatts-lotto, sending out batches of tickets to the news agents and then processing the tickets to identify the winners which was done manually at first. Later they went high tech and I ended up in Flinders Street selling tickets. After my ex left I went back to fulltime work and that lasted for about 30 years. That business changed hands several times and people asked me how could I stay so long in one job. I said that every time it changed hands it was like starting a new job because it was a new boss and a new system. I stayed there for 30 years. It started off as ATCO, then Tridonic ATCO, then Tridonic, which is an Austrian company that makes lighting components. When I started there were just under 100 people and ended up with 500 people in Sydney and Melbourne. CMP later bought them out and they became Custom Moulding Plastics. Sydney got closed down but a smaller workforce continued in Melbourne. I was with them for 30 years and retired three years ago. I was doing accounts receivable and payable. My job had reduced from five days to two days per week so I decided to retire. Now CMP has contacted me to come back as a maternity leave replacement, so I'm starting with them again but only one day a week.

My father Martin Solon passed away in 2002. The obituary was featured in the Herald Sun on 6 August 2002. My mother Maria Solon passed away four months ago (June 2019) and the funeral service was at the Chapel of Repose in Altona.

I was doing a lot for mum. That's what you do and it keeps you busy.

I had it pretty tough because my mother got sick when I was fifteen. Even before that my mother worked afternoon shift and I had to look after my brother. I actually started looking after kids in the street when I was eleven. In those days it was completely different to now. Parents had to work because they needed money. When I was about eleven years old there was Fritz next door, so I had him, my brother, my sister, and four kids down the road who were of Dutch nationality, and there was Henry from around the corner. Every morning they came with their lunch and we all had to stay together. I was eleven and their ages ranged from nine or ten downwards. On school holidays that's what I did, look after children. I remember one time one of them had to get a needle so me and the whole lot went down to the St Albans public hall. I had to take one so I took the whole lot. The nurse was a bit angry with me because I couldn't hold the child's hand properly. My mother often told me when I grew up that I never had a childhood.

Before she got sick my mother was working afternoon shift and had to catch a train but dad wasn't home. What I had to do was come home from school to look after my brother. Every day I had to leave school at 3 o'clock rather than 3.30 and go home to stay with my brother who wasn't of school age. My mother would have everything ready. She would say when the clock came to 4 o'clock you turn the stove on so that when dad came home the dinner was ready. I did that until my brother started school, so I never got to walk home with my school friends like other kids did.

When I started high school it was the same. When I was twelve I started working in a milk bar. I had friends. As well as going down the river I went to the pictures and the Sunshine swimming pool with my high school friends.

I met my future husband, Joe, at the Sacred Heart dance. The Sacred Heart Church used to have a dance every Sunday night with a live band and I was allowed to go there but my dad picked me up. That's what dads did at that time, embarrass you by picking you up to make sure you got home alright. But my life was probably a bit different than people having fun. We never went out very much. Dad was one of these people ... he just wanted to work in the garden. He worked six days a week and if he had a day off he wanted to work in the garden. He wasn't worried about taking us here there or anywhere. I really didn't start traveling until I was married to Joe Muscat and that was soccer related. Joe started playing soccer when he was at Sacred Heart when he was only 11 years old. He became a very good player for Ajax and won the best and fairest quite often.

Mum had the nervous breakdown and I was looking after her for four months. She was in hospital for quite a few weeks and when she came home I left school to look after her. Dad would give me the money for the family shopping. I was a fifteen year old girl and every day I would walk down to St Albans and buy the food for the dinner – let's say five potatoes, a cauliflower, and five chops. I'd go home and that's what I'd cook. The next day I'd go back and buy the ingredients for the next meal. At age fifteen I didn't comprehend the idea of buying a week's groceries and mum was in no fit state to guide me. It was lucky that I could cook a bit. That's the way it worked. As far as dad was concerned, he went to work so the women looked after everything else.

He was harsh in some ways. He could be very domineering but we loved him because he would stand up for you. He was your dad and you knew you were loved. He didn't care if I was fifteen or fifty if things needed to be done because this is the way it was. In many ways our dad was a tough nut but we were never short of anything and he went out of his way to do things for us when we were young, such as the cubby house and all the toys he made.

I started working and the roads came through and you had to pay for all that. Because mum was ill and I was working, I used to hand my pay over every week. They used to give me money for the train fare and a bit extra as pocket money. Being sixteen and going to work I needed a few bits of clothing, so they made sure I had a little bit. I had enough to go to the pictures and have a smoke. I didn't blink an eyelid to that. I did that for quite a few years to help them pay for the road and things like that. Mum did get better.

I met Joe Muscat when I was 21 and he was 22 and we decided to buy a block of land. We had to go to mum and dad and I said I needed \$250 for the block of land, which they did give me. After that they could see that we were going to get married and build our own home so they let me keep my wages. My sister was lucky because by the time her time came around my mum was better and did find a part-time job at the Footscray Hospital. When my sister started working she was able to save some money and had enough to go overseas when she was 21. I never had that chance because I never had any money.



Kon Danilow and Wilhelmina Solon 1987 © W Danilow

I never really travelled until I met Kon Danilow and we started going to places like Puffing Billy or Healesville. We met through the group Parents Without Partners and that's when we started going on travel excursions. We were on the committee for the children's functions and organized kids' outings, which also meant the kids could bond together.



My mother was working at Red Book Carpets in Tottenham and that's where she got sick. She made friends with Flo who was an Australian woman with husband Max, who lived in Footscray. We called them Uncle and Auntie because we didn't have any. Auntie Flo was the most absolutely gorgeous woman. Her and mum became very good friends. They'd come over for lunch and mum would make the good old wog food. Uncle Max would sit there licking his lips and making the noises to go with it to show he was enjoying the food. Then Auntie Flo would make lunch at their place and she would be so proud of herself because she made a real Aussie meal by heating some pasties in the oven. I'm sorry, she would say laughing, but we are Australian. Or she would make a roast floating in lard. Mum

was a good cake maker.

Mum was at Red Book Carpet for quite a while, even before my brother went to school. At first she was doing day shift then she changed it to the afternoon. That's when she got crook. She was home for a while but it was a few years before she perked herself up. She was trying to burn the candle at both ends, what with trying to run the family, doing the afternoon shift and getting virtually no sleep because she had to do the washing, cooking, and everything else. It got to her and she had a nervous breakdown.

After that she started at the Footscray Hospital and was there for twenty-odd years. She was a cleaner. In the hospital they used to use a lot of toxic chemicals as cleaning products. The ladies my mother used to work with, there was about a dozen, and ten of them got some form of cancer, including my mother. Mum got breast cancer; she didn't lose the breast but she lost the glands under the arm. A couple of the ladies passed away.

Mum said that in those days you didn't think about it, you were told to use the materials and the machines and you did it. She started off full time and continued full time until dad got sick.

Dad was working on a building in the city and fell down on some scaffolding. He was lucky the scaffolding broke his fall otherwise he would have gone all the way down, but he broke his ribs. After he done his ribs something else went wrong internally and he started getting heart problems. Then mum started working part time because he needed more care. He went back to work with the Keilor Council. He and a fellow called Anton used to replace the road traffic



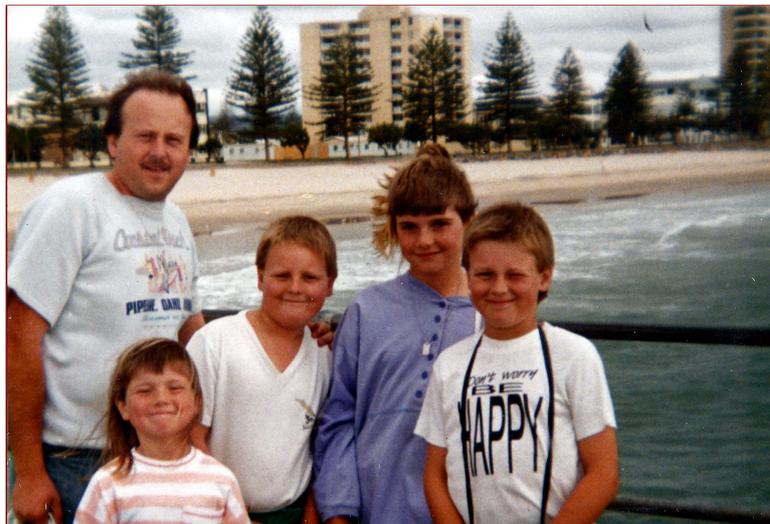
signs after they'd been demolished in car accidents. That was a lot easier than working on the big buildings.

Mum continued working part time at the hospital. Then my dad was diagnosed with prostate cancer and his health problems started getting worse so he wasn't allowed to work any more. For him to get a pension, mum had to quit her part-time work, which she did. She was 59 and he was 60 when they retired. By that time they had a bit of money saved up because the three children had left home.

Despite all the problems my parents had a pretty good life really. Mum said to us that we struggled but we didn't struggle too much. They always had reasonable jobs but it was never big savings. They got a campervan and went around Australia two and a half times. One time they only went up the Nullabor and up Queensland but the other times it was all the way round.

Kon and I saved and took our children on holidays. Mum said "Wait till those children leave home and you won't know what to do with your money." We laughed, but it was true. When our kids left we had two pay packets coming in so there was a bit more money.

Growing up our kids had to use their imagination to entertain themselves rather than watching TV. They'd put a sheet over the table and that would be their tent and they would play all day inside on a rainy day. I'd make them lunch and they'd enjoy that under the table. Even now our grandchildren love playing outside in the back yard.



Kon Danilow with children.

My sister Dina lives three streets away and retired just recently. My sister went overseas when she was 21 and was going to travel the world. She went to stay with our Auntie and Uncle in Holland and one of the in-laws' relatives was asked to show her around, which he did. A few months later my sister said she wasn't travelling anywhere further because she had fallen in love with Jack.?? They travelled a little together to Germany and England. They got married in Holland because married couples could apply for a council house. Over there you do not buy a house on the private market like over here and council houses are the main option. When his work closed down they decided to come to Australia, so my sister came back seven years after she left. They were with Mum and Dad for a few months and then bought a house in Grevillea Street. They had a son. She went on to further and further studies and ended up with a really top job. She retired last week.

My brother left the area about 27 years ago. His marriage broke up and that may have added to his restless nature. He loved the bush and would travel around Australia working in different regions. He did come back one time for a visit but made it clear that he preferred his unfettered lifestyle rather than our suburban domesticity. He turns 60 this year but we don't know where he is at present. It would be some-where out in the bush because he does not like the life of the big cities.

Will Danilow nee Solon, October 2019.

Menu

[People](#)

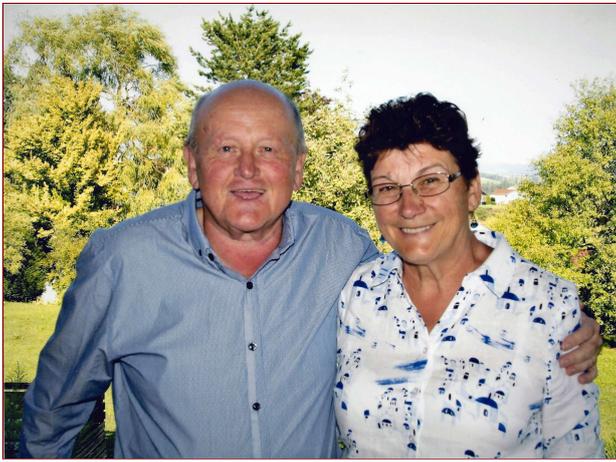
[Photos](#)

[History](#)

[Albas](#)

[Top of Page](#)

[Home Page](#)



Kon and Will Danilow.

Family images (c) Will Danilow.

School photos courtesy of Nick Szwed.