

# VANDA BOGNAR nee VITI: TEACHER

## Introduction



St Albans High School fifty years on - a lot of water has passed under the bridge.

Here I am. I'm 63. I have been married for 41 years. My husband and I have raised three wonderful adults - two daughters and one son. We have five beautiful grandchildren ... and life is good. We are now retired and living in the Central Highlands of Victoria.

When I say that life is good, I have to admit that life has always been good.

I arrived in Australia with my parents and four brothers in 1950. We came from Fiume, Italy, which after World War II became Rijeka, Yugoslavia. When the transfer of sovereignty actually occurred the Italians in Fiume were given a chance to leave and declare themselves political refugees. We ended up in Venice, during which time my father, who had been in the Merchant Navy, decided that we should immigrate to Australia. Having been on a ship and having seen the world he always wanted to go and see Australia because his brothers had. He'd read about kangaroos, but his favourite animal was the platypus. He had a book on animals of the world and he was absolutely fascinated that an animal like the platypus actually existed!

After Venice and all the immigration paperwork we ended up in another refugee camp in Naples and finally went to Bremerhaven in Germany where we boarded the General Muir together with all the other immigrants heading for Australia.

## Arrival in Australia

In Australia we arrived in Port Melbourne and were transported to the Bonegilla Migrant Hostel. After spending some months in Bonegilla, we were transported to the Broadmeadows Migrant Hostel, which was part of an operational Army Camp. What a joy for us kids ... tanks, machinery, soldiers! It was fenced off and out of bounds for us kids, but we managed to get through! I was seven years old and life was one big adventure.

My parents were in their early 40s. I have been asked how they adjusted to the huge change in their lives. Well, all I can say is it was an adventure for them too. We moved to a 5-acre property down the road from the migrant hostel. My parents had come from the city but they really got stuck into country living, my mother with all her chooks and my father going hunting for rabbits every morning before work. They got right into their new life and loved it. There was always singing and laughter in our life.

There was no primary school near the migrant hostel, so us hostel kids went to the Westbreen Primary School in Fawkner. In the early 1950s there were no trains from the migrant camp to the school but there was a diesel rail bus called the Beetle that ran on tracks from Campbellfield and would meet the trainline further south.



Vanda Viti at Westbreen Primary School, Grade IV, 1953.

## Coming to St Albans

After Broadmeadows, in 1954, the family moved to St Albans to be close to the other Fiumani families already living there in their huts and sheds. For many years St Albans was famous for its half-houses, huts, and sheds. In retrospect I must admire the women who managed a full and happy life living in such humble dwellings. The migrant men went to work to get enough money to add another room to the bungalow. The children? We were happy. We were loved, secure, and well fed, and we had no idea of deprivation or poverty ... but you would have thought that Sunshine Council would have made some effort in providing some gravel on our muddy roads. We were a migrant community - quite ignored.

I loved St Albans. I arrived in time to start Grade 5 at St Albans Primary School. After having become quite expert at wagging classes for three years at St Pauls in Coburg and Westbreen in Coburg, I had finally arrived at a school I loved. A girl called Switlana came up to me on the first day of school: "You're new. Well, you can be my friend." She was the most popular girl in the school with a following of over 15 kids. She was confident and articulate and she looked like my image of Snow White. We had a wonderful time at primary school and became best friends for many years to follow.



Grade 5, St Albans Primary School, 1954.

My father was working at the Maribyrnong Munitions Factory. Though my father was an experienced diesel mechanic, in Australia he worked as a labourer and process worker in the factories. Many years later he changed to the Pram Factory. As he used to say, at first he was making bullets to kill all the people, and now he was looking after their babies.

My mother worked full-time as a housewife without any of the modern conveniences. She was boiling the laundry in the copper, making all our clothes, and living in a tin garage that was partitioned into a kitchen, a bedroom for five kids, and the master bedroom. We lived like that for about two years while my father, the neighbour, and my older brother were building the home.

It was interesting, those days. We loved it, because kids will love anything as long as they are well fed and loved and happy. As long as you have these you don't care where you live.

## Our Neighbourhood



The street where I lived was a multi-national village, and everyone got along beautifully. The women created their own language made up of Italian, English, German, Yugoslav, Polish, Greek, Maltese, and Ukrainian. It was funny to listen to them talk about children, husbands, sewing, cooking, and gossiping about others. Somehow they understood each other with a lot of laughter and mime and they were always prepared to improvise - like our neighbour who

went to Mrs Wardle's general store to buy a colander and asked for a "water she go, spaghetti she stay." The Australian traders must have had a few laughs in those days. The migrant men were more conservative and were reluctant to mix and speak until they had picked up enough English.



I went to school with the Dobrowolski girls: Helga, Maria, Anna, Regina, and Olena. The Dobrowolskis lived in the four houses opposite us. Each Saturday the men worked on their extensions, like everyone else in Pennell Avenue, but Saturday night was party time. I loved it. Us kids would go from our four Italian houses across the road to their four houses watching the men laughing and singing and wiping out the cares of the world. I loved the Dobrowolskis, their happiness, their tragedies, their sorrows. They will always be a part of me.

## Starting at Sunshine

In 1956 we were off to high school. That was an exciting year: the perfect school uniform, the timetable, being so grown up ... complete with locker keys and catching the train. Our high school in St Albans was in the process of being built, so for the first year of St Albans High School we were housed in the Hall of the Presbyterian Church in Sunshine. We boarded the Bendigo train at St Albans, got off at Sunshine, and walked over the overpass to the Hall. On the overpass the boys would have a great time grabbing each other's caps and dropping them on the passing trains. Parents spent a lot of money on school caps that year!

The year at the Hall was wonderful. There were 120 of us divided into four forms. We had great teachers. They were so nice and calm and they treated us like we were special. Mr James Barker was the Principal and his wife Mrs Bernice Barker was the Headmistress. I remember Mr Alcorn, always smiling with his twinkling eyes, Mr Murphy, gentle and kind, Mr Walsh, with his dramatic way of bringing History to life, and Mr Lahy, young and very funny.

The Hall was surrounded by a beautiful garden. My friends and I would go to the farthest corner as our spot for lunch. One day we got a bit of a shock because one of the nice gardeners started flashing at us! We were quite incensed. Switlana, who was our leader, decided that we should report him to the Headmistress.

Switlana knocked on the staffroom door. Whoever answered the door said, "No. I'm sorry, Mrs Barker is having her lunch." We made it quite clear that it was very important. When she came to the door we told her one of the gardeners was showing us "his thing". That was the last we saw of that gardener. The "thing" had lost him his job.

The term Multiculturalism hadn't been coined yet, but our School Concert that year was quite a spectacle of multiculturalism. I joined my friend Switlana in a series of Russian dances. Here I was with my Italian background doing a Russian dance with all the streamers and the costume.

1956 was not only important because it was the birth of our High School. It was also the year of the Olympic Games in Melbourne and much of our curriculum was devoted to the Olympic Games. That was interesting, but more interesting was the start of Television! Patersons Furniture Store on Main Road West had a television set in the window and after tea people would go for a walk to watch the television. We loved it.

## Starting at St Albans



St Albans High School, Form 3A, 1958.

In 1957 our new school in Main Road East was ready to be occupied. I remember our first school assembly and how excited we were. There were more teachers, and of course the new lot of first formers, but we were the special group and as the school grew through the years we always remained the elite!

That year my father, my brothers, and some neighbours got our house completed to "lock up" stage. There was a tradition in St Albans that when the house frame was up and the roof pitched, someone would place a bunch of flowers on the highest point. At that time St Albans was full of flowers on rooftops. Our house being at lock up stage meant that we could live in it, although there were no internal walls. My mother partitioned the bedrooms with sheets, and for the first time in my life I had a bedroom of my own. Eventually the sheets were replaced by plaster.

As I think back to my High School years I have only good memories. I had a ball, surrounded by happy friends and great teachers. We were good at sport and singing and drama. Mr Reid entered us in the High Schools Drama Festival and we took out first prize, competing against so many well-established schools and private schools. After that I decided that I would become an actress and win the first Academy Award for Australia. Mr Reid got me interested in going to the National Institute of Dramatic Arts. When I mentioned it to my mother she nearly had a fit. She



wasn't going to have her only daughter on a casting couch! So I became a Primary School Teacher.

## Dramatic Arts

It was wonderful to see Mr and Mrs Barker at the 25th celebration of St Albans High School. Mr Barker told me: "You know Vanda, all these years I've been watching television and films always waiting for you to come on." My reply was: "Well, I became a teacher, which is not very different from being an actress. At least I have centre stage every day!"



Miss Kennedy was a St Albans girl. She was our Home Economics teacher ... a lovely, gentle person. Switlana and I gave her a fright one bitterly cold lunchtime when she came to collect the tea towels from the drying cupboard, and there we were sitting on the floor eating our pies!



Mr Mill was great. How wonderful of him to spend his Saturdays taking our softball team to play in competitions around Melbourne. He was a good Geography teacher too. I still know how to read a weather map: the cold fronts, the warm fronts, the highs and lows.

Mr Reid had a great influence on me. I loved him. As a member of his Drama Club I developed so much confidence; too much actually. I always had the leading part so I had come to expect it over the years - and I always got it - so I strutted around with my airs and graces, with my buddies Switlana and Silvana by my side.

Every time I hear "Advance Australia Fair" I think of dear Mr Lahy. He was our Music teacher and he taught us that song in Form 2, as well as other Australian songs and English songs. I remember thinking why do we sing "God Save the Queen" when "Advance Australia Fair" is so much better? So when Australia finally decided to have its own national anthem I thought surely "Advance Australia Fair" would be selected, and it was, but how embarrassing that some of our Olympics athletes didn't know the words ... but us St Albans kids knew! We even knew the second verse. Dear Mr Lahy, wherever your soul is in the cosmos, thank you. You were a true republican.

In our day when you got to Form 3 you had to decide to take the professional course or the commercial course. I chose the professional stream as did my friends, but so many students chose the commercial course. They did shorthand and typing and whatever, and soon left school to get jobs. That was a pity really, because they were mostly the Australian kids who were so articulate and clever, but obviously their parents didn't think education was that important or couldn't afford to keep them at school. Too many of these clever kids left school at 14 or 15. Only 22 of us stayed on to the end, mainly migrant kids, whose parents saw education as a way of bettering our lives.



The teachers who had been with us from the start treated us like we were special, but some of the new teachers weren't too impressed with us.

I loved Mr Clark who was our English teacher in Form 5. He was so cool, calm and collected with an air of superiority, but I saw through that, and funnily enough I was the same as a teacher, finding the whole experience hilariously funny and entertaining, while maintaining my sophisticated air.

## Sporting Activities



Girls Senior Basketball Team, 1960: Captain S Bohudski (front right) with E Hermann, I Kryzius V Kepalas, V Viti (second from right), K Grabowski, V Sryter, S Antonczyk, and S Wazny.

We were so good at sport, with no facilities. In fifth form I was involved with the high jump and was pretty good at that; I could jump the highest. I was also in the basketball team.

One day I contradicted the sports mistress and she called me "insolent". What a good word! I hadn't heard of that one before. She gave me detention. I thought: '*Excuse-moi*. You're giving detention to *moi* in Form 5? I'm special here. Don't you know that?' Anyway, I didn't turn up at detention because we had the inter-school athletics the following week and we wanted to practise our high jump and relay. So what did she do? She pulled me out of the sports! That year it was me, the previous year it was Switlana. Our friend Silvana was placid and sensible in comparison. She was the Head Prefect and never did silly things like Switlana and me. Silvana was also my neighbour so our families have remained friends to this day.

We went on excursions and outings. Our first sleepover was at Drouin High School. We went there to play netball and stayed overnight, being billeted in local farms. I remember being woken up at 4 in the morning when the family got up to do the milking. To me it was the middle of the night, but there was the mother shoving a cup of tea in your hand and saying, "You can go back to sleep, girls." All you got was a cup of tea and then back to sleep.

Then came the big breakfast when dad and the boys finished all the milking. We're talking big sausages, bacon, and eggs - almost like Christmas dinner at 8 o'clock in the morning.



The city girls (left) meet their country counterparts in Drouin.

## School Changes

From day one to the very last day we all loved the school and we loved each other. Of course we were the big ones all the time, slightly superior. We weren't patronising, but we knew we were special and strutted around. When other teachers arrived they must have thought of us as little pip squeaks: 'Fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds, and they think they're superior. We'll put a spanner in their works.' We had some changes after these new people arrived, whereas all the other ones just loved us.

The school had a very strict uniform code, which prefects and teachers checked regularly. One day Switlana and I were sent on a message down to the shops. We were walking along Main Road East having a wonderful time using our berets as Frisbees. Whoever saw us must have thought it was disgusting behaviour for a couple of Prefects because they dobed us in. So we were de-badged for a month. Dear Mr Barker didn't make it public. In fact no one else even noticed because our blazers were still edged with the Prefect's braid. We loved Mr Barker and he loved us.

## Debutante Ball



St Albans High School Debutante Ball at the Tin Shed, 1960.



The first Deb Ball arranged by the school was held at the Tin Shed, which one of the only local halls available to hold such events. It was all Mrs Barker's idea and was a very formal occasion.

All the young ladies had to wear long gowns and long gloves and all the young men who were the ladies' escorts were in tuxedos; it was all very smart and elegant. We had to do all these dances and dance with our fathers for the very first dance of the evening.

All the parents were very proud of us and loved the pageantry.

After that I grew up and went to Teachers College to start a lifelong career in teaching. It was the end of an era in many ways as the first intake of students were moving out of the school and into

adulthood. There were also changes within the teaching staff, even including our beloved headmaster. Mr Barker and his wife were originally from Corryong. I think they retired not long after we left high school and went back to Corryong, though I'm not entirely sure about the timing. When they came to the school re-union in 1981 they were living at Tallangatta which is not far from Bonegilla on Lake Hume.

## Melbourne Teachers College

I did my teacher training at the Melbourne Teachers College straight after I finished high school.

One of the girls at teachers college actually lived in the Botanic Gardens; her father was the head gardener. I remember asking her where she lived and when she said the Botanic Gardens I laughed and said "I bet you do." One day after college she took me there. There in the Botanic Gardens was the cottage, and there they lived.



After graduating I wanted to go to Manangatang South to teach, because it sounded right, sounded really good. Between friends we had decided we were going to go bush, go to the country and marry rich farmers.

So, where did I get sent? Albion North Primary School.

## Family Life

After that I met Peppi Bognar, and when he shifted to Morwell to work at the power station I moved to Moe, a stimulating place. That's where we married and had our first child.

Then my father died and I decided that I should come back to support Mum because she was on her own. My father died in 1963 from a heart attack a couple of weeks short of his 58th birthday. It was a bit of a shock to my mother. She lived pretty much on her own for about six months and became depressed, which is why we came back to St

Albans to provide some support. So my mother's place became my home again for the next 40 years.



## Retirement

After 40 years of work as a teacher I got a certificate of appreciation from the Education Department. We now live in Rocklyn, where we moved 8 years ago. We bought 12 acres between Daylesford and Creswick with the idea of retiring there. Then we planted a pine plantation of two acres and other varieties of trees, because I wanted to live in a botanic garden. We took Mum with us to Rocklyn where she died four years ago at the age of 93. I've always been grateful to her because I couldn't have had a 40-year career without a mother to help look after the kids. Peppi and I could always go out for an evening knowing the kids

were in good hands.

I have so many happy memories of my old school days at St Albans High School. I have so many stories I would love to share, but I'd better stop before I bore everyone to tears. I loved all my teachers. I loved all my friends. I loved all my classmates. I could have written a lot about them ... Vernes Pleiskna, Vambola Stanislavskis, Jeff Barlow, Bela Ajayoglu, Toni Blahut, Les Thurgood, Terry Smith, Switlana Bohudski, Silvana Crespi, Vejuna Kepalas, Francis Zeglinski ... all the ones I remember so vividly ... so many happy times.

Well, you students at St Albans Secondary College, keep the memories, because in 50 years time there will be another Joe Ribarow who will want you to contribute to the centenary of St Albans High School.

Best wishes for your health and happiness.

**Vanda (Viti) Bognar, 2005.**

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Vanda Viti (third from left) with colleagues and Bernice & James Barker (front), 1981.



Vanda Bogнар and Steve Koslowski at the High School reunion, 1996.

**Postscript:** Vanda Bogнар nee Viti passed away in 2012.

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