

# **Aileen's Story**

**By Jeanette Sims**

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Although Aileen had been a resident of Pearl Beach for many years, in recent years ill health had kept her somewhat isolated from village affairs. As advancing years further curtailed Aileen's mobility, it was only through visits to her house at on Tourmaline Avenue to meet with her adopted daughter, Madeline Anderson, that I came in contact with this remarkable woman. I was enthralled by her story.

Aileen Lethe was born on the 4<sup>th</sup> January 1925, the daughter of French parents who settled in Waverley in the Eastern suburbs of Sydney. Always a bright and fun-loving child, Aileen attended the selective Sydney Girls High School where her excellent academic results enabled her to envisage a career in Medicine. Unfortunately, her parents could not afford to support her in such a long University course and so Aileen opted for a career in pharmacy. For Aileen, pharmacy was to prove a highly successful and fulfilling career.

After a number of year practising pharmacy, the opportunity arose for Aileen to purchase her own premises in Coogee. Beginning as quite a small pharmacy on the corner of Coogee Bay Rd and Arden Street, the pharmacy grew until it extended along Arden Street, becoming one of the largest pharmacies in the Eastern suburbs.

With her business successfully established, Aileen was able to enjoy an affluent and sophisticated lifestyle, enjoying skiing holidays and travels abroad.

As a practising Catholic, resident in the Eastern suburbs, Aileen was closely connected to the Catholic parish of Kensington and particularly the Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, head-quartered in Kensington. It was this religious order of nuns who had been involved in the establishment of the Garden Point Catholic Mission for Aboriginal girls on Melville Island, Northern Territory, during the "protection" era.

In 1965, Aileen was approached by her close friend, Sister de Chantal, one of the mission sisters at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Mission. She was asked, as a prosperous, mature and responsible member of the parish, whether she would be willing to foster a young Aboriginal girl from the mission who had turned 17 years of age and therefore could no longer stay at the Mission.

Aileen certainly thought long and hard about the commitment she would be undertaking before agreeing to the proposal. And so, in 1965, full of determination, confident of her own ability to cope with such a change in her life, and yet also full of trepidation, Aileen embarked on what became a life-time commitment. It was a life-changing decision, not only for Aileen, but also for Madeline Anderson, her adopted daughter.

Madeline, educated by the Sisters at the Garden Point Mission for most of her young life, was well able to adapt to the change in her life-style. She loved living in the Eastern suburbs, loved travelling in the trams, loved going to the beach and loved living in a secure family

environment. Before long, Madeline was enrolled in a Secretarial course, and when completed, this enabled her to find employment at the nearby University of New South Wales. Soon after, another teenaged girl from the Garden Point mission, Sheila, joined the growing family.

Aileen, an independent working woman, not only brought a degree of affluence and sophistication to Madeline's life but also provided the encouragement for Madeline to further her career and complete a tertiary degree in Fine Arts.

With the adoption of Madeline, Aileen became "Mum", and when Madeline married Peter Hooker, from the Brothers' Melville Island Mission, Madeline's growing family also became part of Aileen's family. She was "Grandma" to Madeline's children and their children, and "Aunty" to a wide extended family, many connected through the Melville Island mission family. And when Aileen's busy pharmacy finally closed in 1991, the holiday house at Pearl Beach became the family's permanent home.

Throughout her life, Aileen was able to pass on her values to her ever-growing family. She was industrious, resourceful, brave and very protective of her growing brood. She encouraged achievement but forgave mistakes. And above all, she was funny! And all the while, she instilled in her family, pride in their heritage and the importance of their always having a dream. The large gathering at her funeral reflected the love and high esteem in which she was held by her family and friends.

Aileen Lethe was a woman well ahead of her time.