Take the lead

Two women, each lending a hand on conservation projects close to their homes, found themselves embroiled in local politics and soon became mayors. Six-time Mayor of Ryde City Council **Edna Wilde OAM** and former Mayor and current Woollahra **Councillor Susan Wynne** spoke to **Jessica Goulburn** about holding the title.



Edna Wilde OAM was thrust into the political arena after taking on council to protect a local park.

In 1970, my husband and I moved to Marsfield and built our own home to accommodate our growing family. After about 18 months, we received a letter from Ryde Council informing us that the beautiful Dunbar Park behind our house was to be turned into a tip for two years, for later development as a playing field.

We appealed to the council, unsuccessfully. So every morning at 7:30 we would stand in front of the bulldozers to prevent the workmen from entering the park. We turned to Jack Mundey of the Builder's Labourers Union, who immediately put a 'green ban' on the site, preventing all union workers from working on the park.

Ryde Council went ballistic and tried everything to overturn the decision. But after months of meetings and many threats, it was the council that changed its mind. Dunbar Park became the official sporting field for the district.

By this time it was 1973 and council elections were being held the following year. The Councillors who had supported the residents in the battle asked me to stand as number four on their election ticket. The plan wasn't for me to get into council; they needed, and I quote, 'a woman, someone well known in the area, and a person who attended church'.

As I fitted the criteria, I was the chosen person. Being number four on the ticket, I thought I had no chance of being elected. Well, I was wrong as all four candidates were elected. Here I was, a simple primary school teacher, with no interest in politics or being in council, thrust into the mix.

My family and friends thought it was great having a female voice on council as it really was a 'man's world'.

In January 1977, my world fell apart when my husband had a fatal heart attack. He had shown no signs of ill health. I considered getting out of politics but I realised that my husband was the one who had pushed me into it.

In 1980, I became Ryde Council's first female mayor. To this day, I'm still the only female mayor that Ryde Council has had. Although I suffered no discrimination, I think a female mayor was hard for some to accept. It had never happened before; it was something new.

I've had opportunities to meet some very famous people – Mother Teresa for instance. She came to Ryde and we gave her a civic reception. I can say I met a saint in my lifetime. It was a very humbling experience.

Other highlights have been the many awards and medals I have received over the years as recognition of my service, including the Order of Australia Medal in 2000.

Having had the honour of holding the mayoral role on six separate occasions, in 2008 I decided to retire from council after 34 years of service.

When Gladesville Rotary Club was setting up a Probus Club, I was invited to be an inaugural member. I had never been involved in something that was purely social. It was a different approach to life. But little did I know! Straight away I was looking for the guest speakers and the next time I was doing the outings. Nothing stays still. At the moment, I'm just enjoying it.

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↑ Edna Wilde OAM still enjoys the local park she helped save from becoming a rubbish dump.

→ Councillor Susan Wynne believes women in politics are judged on their appearance more often than men.

"I think women in politics have to work harder to get taken seriously.



Councillor Susan Wynne worked in marketing, advertising and fashion before becoming Mayor of Woollahra Council.

I got involved with the Watson's Bay Tea Gardens when it looked like they were going to lose their lease. We were working with the local Councillors and I was really interested in the process. In 2008 I was elected as a Vaucluse Ward Councillor. Then in 2011 my peers elected me as mayor. That was probably my biggest achievement.

What I love most is that I get to see all the amazing community-minded people. I've always had the belief that one of council's biggest roles is to create a sense of community. We should put money into parks, playgrounds, libraries and social events to foster that spirit.

A lot has happened during my time on council. We've received more funding for suicide prevention, we've upgraded parks and sportsgrounds, and I'm able to raise awareness for charities like White Ribbon Day and The Black Dog Institute.

I think women in politics have to work harder to get taken seriously, and get comments about their clothing and the way they look. [Having women on council] has its benefits, because we take a different approach.

It's tough juggling my career with my family. I have two daughters and they love it, they come to a lot of the activities. I think it's a great way to teach my daughters about working and giving back to the community. That's such an important message for me. It's really hard, it's relentless, but you are giving something back.

It is a real honour to be in council. We're here for the good of the community. Leaving the agendas, egos and politics at the door and working together, we'll get a good result. ••

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