

## Nick Xynias AO BEM



Who would have thought that a young Greek man hailing from Ismailia in Egypt, would, in May 2004, be honoured as a ‘Queensland Great’? But this ‘Great’ was no stranger to some of the most prestigious awards given to eminent Australians. In 1982, he had received from Elizabeth II, Queen of England a British Empire Medal; in 1994, the Order of Australia Medal (OAM), in 2000, the Millenium Award for Excellence, in 2001, Officer of the Order of Australia and in 2002, the Centenary Award.

It is thus extremely fitting that “Multicultural Trailblazers” begins with Nick Xynias, who in 1956, found himself on a cargo boat heading towards the west coast of Australia. He had paid 160 pounds for his passage and had a landing permit for ten years. He had decided that if things did not work out by then, he

would go home! The only things he was quite apprehensive about were the snakes and kangaroos, but he had brought a first aid kit with him and was determined to give Australia a ‘go’.

Then, as the ship docked at Fremantle, he caught sight of a pretty blonde girl on the wharf selling casket tickets. Blondes were few and far between back home. On the spot Nick knew that he already liked this new country!

After two days, the boat went on to Melbourne and Nick found out for himself that the city did have four seasons in a day! Three days later, he found himself in Sydney. Finding it too ‘busy’, he caught the train to Brisbane. Arriving at the South Brisbane station, he headed for the Greek Club in 46 Charlotte Street - an address for Mum to mail her letters to. Not knowing anyone in Brisbane, he was recommended lodgings in Annerley, costing him 3 pounds a week.

A few days later, Nick found a job as a fitter and turner, his career for the next seventeen years. Getting that job was not a problem, since Nick had worked as a mechanical engineer with the British Army in Egypt. But Nick had not joined a union and was soon threatened with the sack. He made up his mind to fight them at their own game, and was soon representing other workers as a union delegate! This was indeed an auspicious start to a non-partisan political career championing the rights of the oppressed and disadvantaged.

After two years, and feeling quite homesick, Nick started attending the Greek Orthodox Church, where he met his future wife, Cleopatra (Pat), a McCabe Academy lecturer in dress-making. It was at this church that Nick resumed his volunteering activities as a Scout leader. He had always been inspired by the Scout’s oath to serve God, your country and fellow man. As Nick says: “How can you go wrong with such a principle?” So it was with great enthusiasm that he began the Hellenic Scout Group with 60 Cubs, Scouts and Rovers. His scouting work based at the church would continue for the next 14 years.

All this while, Nick worked hard to bring his parents over to Australia but, sadly, in 1958 his mother passed away. So it was only his father and two brothers who came to join him. His father became a migrant yet again, having migrated to Egypt from Greece in 1910. Soon after, Nick married Pat. This union has, over the years, produced two boys and two girls (Rick, Kerry, Angela and Dimitri), who with their partners (Maria, Mark and Julie), have blessed them with five grandchildren, Nicholas, John, Alexander, Zacharia and Isabella.

It took Nick a while to fully launch his volunteering career in the Greek community, as it was some time before he was accepted by them. Apparently, he had not come from the 'right' Greek islands of Rhodes and Kythira! But in 1960 Nick became the Secretary of the Greek Ethnic Schools Association and a member of the Society of Greeks from Egypt and the Middle East. In 1964, Nick joined the Australian Hellenic Education Progressive Association (AHEPA) which outlined the promotion and development of a moral code among its members, befitting the society. In this capacity, he began to meet key politicians, like John Herbert, the Minister for Families.



**Nick promoting multiculturalism.**

By the early 1970s Nick was ready to start fighting for the rights of all ethnic communities; the focus for many was mainly on recreational activities. Nick felt it was time for ethnic communities to get more pro-active. For example, the needs of people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds were almost totally ignored by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), while the Department of Immigration hardly acknowledged the re-settlement needs of newly-arrived migrants. He began lobbying the major ethnic communities in Brisbane and in September 1976, 17 representatives met to discuss the formation of the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland (ECCQ) and, later, ethnic radio.

In 1977, Nick became the Chairman of ECCQ. After obtaining its first grant this peak organization was able to hire its first arts officer, Joan Einikis, and ECCQ became actively involved in the hugely popular Warana festivals. Initially, ECCQ meetings were held in people's homes or in ethnic clubs such as the Russian and German Clubs. Nick recalls taking the minutes for many meetings and having them typed by his wife. ECCQ then moved to a West End School and, in 1979, to its first official

office at 109 Edward Street, the site which later housed the Metro Theatre. This was made possible by a \$2000 grant from the Immigration Department after two years of lobbying. In 1983 this funding increased to \$10,000 to help pay for administrative expenses. By 1982, ECCQ had its office at Yungaba in Kangaroo Point.

Intensive lobbying also led to the establishment of the Ethnic Affairs Department by Minister Terry White, with Bob Downey as its director. He was followed by Arthur Marshman who is now deputy general manager of ECCQ's home care division, Diversicare. An Advisory Council was set up with Keith Hamburger as Chairperson, and Nick became a member along with 14 others from all parts of Queensland, including the indigenous community. In 1979 Nick was a founder member of the Federation of Ethnic Community Councils of Australia (FECCA) and, in 2000, its Chairperson. FECCA became a very active national lobbying force and celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2004.

Today, Nick rues the fact that FECCA's operations have often been marked by politically-motivated, conflicting agendas.

The Blainey debate on Asian immigration in 1983 marked a new era with new challenges for the country and for ECCQ. By 1995, ECCQ was fighting social justice issues on several fronts, and against influences that were disturbing the harmony of the nation. A few years later, the rise of One Nation Party was evidence to Nick that multiculturalism had not been fully understood and accepted by all Australians. Nick is very disappointed that many still believe that it is a concept pertaining only to the ethnic communities.

“Multiculturalism is not about race and colour; it is not tangible! But Hansonism laid open many hearts and showed the true colours of people. I like to know who I am talking to and that we can deal with issues that have emerged.”

Today Nick is still very actively associated with ECCQ and is passionate about Berlasco Court, the Caring Centre that was set up for CALD senior citizens. Soon after its inception, ECCQ researched the Aged Care issue, looking at many institutions like the Blue Nurses and St. Vincent de Paul. Their attempts to integrate with the existing system and their lobbying for relevant authorities to show or even acknowledge a concern for CALD aged, were rebuffed. The only ethnic care existing at the time was the special section for Italian aged in the Catholic-run Canossian Home.

ECCQ lobbied hard for funding to establish a multicultural nursing home for financially disadvantaged people. In April 1988, the green light was finally given, and in August that year, an existing privately-run nursing home, Berlasco Court was purchased for \$2 million provided by the Federal government. Even then, ECCQ had to overcome several obstacles before the deal was signed, sealed and delivered.

This 60-bed facility is located in Indooroopilly, a 'blue-ribbon' suburb. Several politicians actively opposed ECCQ's plans, wanting the aged care facility re-located in Inala. It did not help that some ethnic communities were also critical of its efforts. Then to its horror, ECCQ found that it was responsible for the \$72,000 stamp duty. This problem was finally solved after discussions with the Commissioner of Stamp Duties and after Consumer Affairs had precipitated an urgent change of ECCQ's constitution involving its 120 members.

Today, ECCQ owns the site in Thomas Street where it established Diversicare, its 'Home and Community Care' (HACC) Program. Berlasco Court, now includes residents from 27 nationalities and boasts an Egyptian chef, and has just been extended, with renovations costing over \$600,000.

This is a legacy that will last, and a project that he is very proud of. Nick chuckles as he remembers his frantic efforts to make Berlasco Court a reality and says roguishly "I never take 'no' for an answer!" Nick is also quick to point out that all these achievements have been due to the large number of committed people involved with ECCQ since its inception, and Nick thanks them wholeheartedly for their support.

Nick is quick to praise his wife Pat: "my partner, lawyer, chef, technician, psychologist, treasurer etc." Pat has always been very supportive, doing all the duties that he could not perform because of his involvement in community affairs. Volunteering did take its toll on his family but Nick was determined that he was always at home at six every evening to share dinner with the family. Come seven o'clock though, he would be out attending all the meetings and functions that could not be avoided. He tried to be there for the children wherever possible, taking them fishing or camping on free weekends; often, though, Pat was the one who held the fort.

Today, Nick, aged seventy one, continues with his community work without any let-up. He sits on the Telstra Consumer Advisory Council, the Jupiters Community Benefit Fund, the Queensland Police Academy Education Council, Ministerial Advisory Board for Senior Citizens, and in August, served as a volunteer at the Olympic Games in Athens. He says he has gained much from his volunteer work. And a wonderful bonus has been meeting many interesting people, including the Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, the President of Greece and visiting places like the United Nations.

Nick continues to promote multiculturalism actively as he believes: "We have no choice but to get on with one another. Multiculturalism persuades us to accept each other and to respect one another; but it does NOT mean that I have to agree with you!"

It is no wonder that the Premier of Queensland awarded Nick with a Multicultural Service Award in 1990, and a Senior Citizens' Award the very next year and, in 2004, one of only five Queensland 'greats' for the year.

He is grateful that he enjoys very good health and now plans to renovate his house in West End – catching up on all the maintenance he just hasn't had time to do over the years thanks to his volunteering activities.

"When St Peter comes knocking on my door, I'll tell him to go somewhere else – I still have to fix up my house!" he says.