

# 40 STORIES IN 40 YEARS

## Lu Butler



As the former manager of the Warrnambool & District Community Hospice, Lu Butler has played an immensely prominent role in supporting in-home palliative care over the past five years, a passion that was ignited after her husband passed away from a brain tumour, 31 years ago.

“My husband was 30 when he was diagnosed with the brain tumour. We cared for him at home up until the last ten days of his life. When it got all a bit too hard, we reached out to the Warrnambool Palliative Care Unit, and they cared for him in his final days. The Palliative Care Unit had been operating for about three years at that time, and Eric Fairbank was actually his doctor, we were so fortunate.”

“Before Greg was diagnosed, I was volunteering at the hospital, so after he died, I kept volunteering while I was

studying to become a teacher. Eventually life got in the way and I stopped volunteering to focus on work, but I knew that I had a passion for palliative care.”

Lu went on to work at the local TAFE and stayed there teaching and coordinating different programs for 22 years, before a conversation with a neighbour changed her career path.

“Tam Vistarini, who I used to work with at TAFE and who also happened to be a neighbour, was managing the Warrnambool hospice program at the time, but was about to move. She knew my background and how passionate I was about palliative care, so she said to me ‘I think you should come and join us, I think you would be a good candidate to take my job’”

***“It is such a privilege to be able to help people at what can be the most vulnerable time of their life...”***

“Eric Fairbank was the president of the hospice at the time and was supportive of me taking on the role, so I applied for the job.”

Lu officially took over as Manager of Warrnambool & District Community Hospice at the end of June 2016, and dedicated herself to the position for the five years, only recently stepping down from the management role to focus solely on volunteering.

“Volunteers have such an impact on palliative care patients. We can do the simple things such as sitting with someone while carers have some time out. We read to them, watch TV with them or take them out for coffee or lunch. We can also provide overnight care, where we send in volunteers to stay and provide additional care so carers can just have a break.”

Looking back to when her husband was receiving palliative care, Lu recognises a significant transformation that has occurred within the sector, particularly when it comes to accessing in-home palliative care.

“When my husband was dying, there was limited support, particularly around in-home care. While I was keen to be able to keep him at home, it became too hard for me to do during the last ten days of his life. I needed the additional support that hospice is able to offer.”

***“Palliative care is all about looking after the whole person and giving them the best quality of life.”***

“We were very fortunate in Warrnambool to even have the assistance we did at the time, in terms of beds in the hospital in the palliative care unit, but still this wasn’t the same as being at home and having the kids being around.

“Now, there is much more access to in-home care. People are well supported and well set up at home which means that they can die at home, surrounded by their loved ones without it becoming a big medical episode.”

“I’ve also noticed our ability to talk about death and dying has changed, and we’re more open in having those conversations with other people. When Greg died, death was still a taboo subject but I think we have become a lot better to be able to have those conversations.”

One of Lu’s greatest joys has been when the hospice invites the carers to come and meet with the volunteers, out at hospice house.

“Just sitting in that space and watching people share their stories is so wonderful. Seeing how much it means to the carers, you really know you’ve supported something so worthwhile.”

“It is really special for the family to play a part in the palliative care journey.”