

Phil Waite - Membership of the Order of Australia



Phil Waite is known to many of us in NWR as she joined in the 80's after her arrival in Sydney. She was born in London and came to Australia via New Zealand in 1987. She had graduated in Medicine and spent 11 years in New Zealand working on neural injury before arriving in Sydney.

Phil, a very unassuming person, went on to have a distinguished career as Director of the Neural Injury Research Unit and Head of the Anatomy Department at University of NSW. She supervised a team of researchers searching for a cure for paralysis. They explored the use of stem cells for repairing spinal cord injury. Indeed, it was ground breaking research and Phil gained international renown for her work in this area. Culminating in being made Member of the Order of Australia in this year's Australian Honours list. What an honour bestowed on one of our own members!

But Phil had many interests and talents in other directions besides her teaching and research. I really only got to know her in the latter years of her time with NWR, after her retirement from UNSW. We became good friends probably because we both had medical backgrounds. I was amazed to discover that she was an accomplished crafts person who did various courses in design and made some beautiful pieces of jewellery, mosaics and embroidery. She also loved animals and joined Wires and nursed quite a few tiny animals back to health. Sometimes keeping them warm in a sock and feeding with an eye dropper!

Phil and Colin her husband loved travelling and were often off to exotic faraway places tracking down some endangered animal. Phil loved the outdoors and nature and she and Colin loved living by the water in their beautiful house down at Peakhurst. We had some good times down there. Colin was a wonderful cook as well!

Sadly she lost Colin a couple of years ago and as both her sons had moved away from Sydney to pursue their own careers (Robert in Tasmania and Richard in Geneva) she did not have her immediate family and grandchildren close by. She stayed on for some months in the big house but gradually with some memory problems she started to find it more and more difficult to manage on her own. This culminated in her moving down to Tasmania into a retirement unit just outside of Hobart and about half an hour away from Robert and his family. This has been a mixed blessing for Phil as she now is closer to one branch of her family but far away from her friends and activities in Sydney.

I have kept up contact with her by phone and we talk most days. She is not a complainer at all and tries very hard to make the best of her situation. She has had a big week this week as yesterday she joined the 80's club and was totally thrilled to receive a lovely bouquet of flowers from us all at NWR.

Phil has always struck me as a kind, gentle person with an astute enquiring mind, always interested in people and the natural world, animals and plants. She never blows her own trumpet at all. It has been and continues to be a pleasure to have known her. Even though she now struggles with short term memory she is still the same Phil and for that I am very grateful. She has been and continues to be a wonderful friend to me and many others over the years.

Heartiest congratulations to her for making it to 80 and for her Membership of the Order of Australia. Doesn't happen every day that one of our own is so honoured!

Patricia Walters