

OBITUARY: Judith Patricia Mary Sphiris (Nee Farrell): Dedicated teacher, firm but fair, warm and wise

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Judith Sphiris, who taught for 35 years, demanded and received the respect of her pupils.

JUDITH PATRICIA MARY SPHIRIS (Nee Farrell)

1937 - 2015

HER ex-pupils will remember Judith Sphiris as a firm but fair high school teacher – one who expected the very best from her students, who demanded their respect, and got it.

Her former colleagues will remember her as a constant source of wisdom and advice.

But her friends will remember her generosity, her warmth, her knowledge, and her wicked sense of humour.

Judith passed away on October 6, aged 78.

She was remembered with a service at Sacred Heart Cathedral on October 14.

Judith was born in Sydney in 1937 to Mick and Muriel Farrell.

Close friend Wendy Mead met Judith in primary school, where they both began attending Claremont College in Randwick as six-year-olds.

Mrs Mead said Judith had always had a wide range of interests. As a child, she had relished the opportunity to learn ballet. She had also loved horses, and had riding lessons in Centennial Park.

In later years, Judith became fascinated by ancient history, gardening, fashion, religion and Christian theology.

Judith's family moved to Newcastle when she was in primary school, but the friends stayed in touch.

Judith attended Newcastle Girls High, and spent a year nursing at the Calvary Mater Hospital before studying teaching at university.

Her uncle, Tom Farrell, was regarded as one of the “founding fathers” of the University of Newcastle. The Tom Farrell Institute for the Environment was named in his honour.

Judith began teaching in 1962 at Cooks Hill Junior Girls High, and a few years later moved on to Kotara High School, where she taught biology for 26 years until she retired in 1997.

Mrs Mead said Judith was a born teacher.

“She was always known as a very firm but very fair teacher,” she said. “A lot of pupils looked up to her.

“There were so many times that we’d be coming out of a shop, or sitting down having a coffee, be in a gallery, or just wandering along the street or having lunch and all these people would come up and say, ‘Hello Mrs Sphiris!’

“She taught generations. Two or three generations of the one family often passed through her classes.”

Judith had a knack for making strong, lifelong friendships.

She was a wonderful cook, and generous, often sending friends away with containers full of food.

“She married Coz Sphiris in 1962,” Mrs Mead said.

“They didn’t have any children, but they had a long and very happy marriage.

“He came from the island of Ithica in Greece, and she was very happy and thrilled to go to Greece and meet his extended family.

“She was always mad on ancient history too, so she was in her element.”

Judith nursed her husband through illness for about seven years before he died.

She was part of the Women’s Pioneer Society, and the Fellowship of the First Fleeters.

Judith was steadfast in her Catholic faith, and always immaculately dressed and well groomed.

“She enjoyed a very deep interest and knowledge in really serious things, but she also enjoyed reading her copy of American Vogue,” Mrs Mead said. “She always looked well-groomed, always in her favourite shades of browns and rusty reds.”

But she wasn’t a saint.

“She would use a few choice words when she thought it was necessary,” Mrs Mead laughed.

“But she was always there for you. Her only major failing was that she was absolutely useless – I think I could kindly say – at any kind of sport.”

Former teaching colleague and friend Colin Colgan agreed.

“Both Judith and I were not cut out for sport,” he said.

“She admitted to me on many occasions that when she was a student at Newcastle Girls High she would actually get away with absenting herself from PE classes. How she got away with it I don’t know, but she did.”

Her ability to keep a large group of kids under control meant that despite her complete disinterest in sport, she was often given the task of managing the students at inter-school sporting events.

“She would roll up to a school cross country in her pearls and high heels,” Mr Colgan laughed.

“The rest of the teachers would be there in tracksuits.

“I think she did it on purpose to show them up.”

Judith always knew when Colin, a Type 1 diabetic, was likely to have a hypoglycemic episode.

“She was able to detect that coming on in me, even though I didn’t sense it,” he said.

“She said she could see it in my eyes.

“Because of that condition I wasn’t allowed to drive, and we both travelled by bus. That was another thing that brought us together.”

Mr Colgan said while Judith might have been as tough as nails with the kids, it had earned her a lot of respect.

“She could be very nasty if a kid tried to counter her instructions,” he said.

“But kids do value teachers who are doing their job properly, and she most certainly did that.

“She expected the kids to behave properly. When a kid had years of teaching by her, by the time they left school they were well trained for self discipline in their lives.”

In later years, Mr Colgan and Judith remained good friends.

They had a system where Mr Colgan would call Judith every morning, and then she would phone him at 6 o’clock every evening.

“If she couldn’t get in contact with me, she would actually ring an ambulance for me – I had a security lock up for keys,” he said.

“I don’t know how many times that was done, but she was a virtual lifesaver.”

Because of her penchant for fashion and her immaculate appearance, Judith was rumoured among students to be a former model. But they were just rumours.

“The most obvious thing the kids would say about her is that she loved brownish tones in her clothes,” Mr Colgan laughed.

“She had an extensive wardrobe, but it was all in some shade of brown.”

His reliable friend had a knack for sizing up children – and people – within moments.

“She was a great judge of character,” he said.

Former student and friend Susan Roberts can attest to that.

Judith “vetted” Susan’s husband-to-be before they married.

“She came to my wedding,” Susan laughed.

As a teacher, Judith had been a “taskmaster.”

On her desk, Judith would always have a China tea cup and saucer, and a pile of Vogue magazines.

“She would demand our respect, and she really got it,” Susan said.

“There was no stuffing around.

“She had high standards and high expectations she really wanted everyone to strive for.”

There was one particular day Judith was giving Susan’s class a dressing down for misbehaving.

“Everyone’s head was hanging in shame, except for me. I looked her right in the eye, and she looked at me and smiled,” Susan said.

“We discussed this many years later and she said ‘You were the only one who realised justice had been served’.

“We became great friends. I will miss her.”