



Charity crusaders

Life Stories

Having lost their daughter to Multiple Sclerosis, Carol Langsford and her husband Roy devoted more than 23 years to raising funds to fight the disease; now, following Roy's sudden death, Carol has pledged to continue this important work.

Story by Rosamund Burton

I am sitting with Carol Langsford in her apartment in Collaroy, which also serves as the office of the Trish Multiple Sclerosis Research Foundation. Carol and her husband Roy started the foundation in 2000, holding board meetings at their dining room table, and to date it has raised more than \$6.5 million for research to find a cure or preventative strategy for Multiple Sclerosis (MS).

They founded the charity two years before their daughter Trish died from this debilitating disease. At the age of 23 she was one of Australia's most talented young female cricketers. She spent the last four and a half years of her life in a nursing home paralysed, unable to talk and being fed through a tube and administered morphine every four hours. But not once during her seven-year descent into immobility did this elite athlete complain.

Carol spent every morning with Trish at the nursing home, before she went to coach the Tildesley Shield tennis team

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at Roseville College. It was one of Trish's part-time jobs, before she was struck down by MS.

"I had said to the head of sport 'I'll help out if you want me to until Trish gets better', thinking she would. I did that for about seven years, and gave up just before we lost her. I'd get a little grin or something when I told Trish I was off to do her job, and I'd tell her all about the girls. She couldn't communicate, but she understood." Roy started work at 5.30am every day so he could leave early and take over from Carol, and then he retired to spend more time with his beloved daughter.

Roy and Carol met at Kooroora Tennis Club on Sydney's North Shore. She was 14, and he was 17, a farmer's son fresh from Singleton, who had just joined the Commonwealth Bank where he remained for 41 years. They were picked for the same tennis team and kept playing together.

"We wanted to go out, but Mum and Dad wouldn't let us go out alone together

until I turned 16." They married when Carol was 19, and in the words of their youngest daughter Sharon, "lived happily ever after". A year later Carol was competing in the Australian Open, and in 1967, when Carol was 21, Roy and she travelled to Europe. She played doubles at Wimbledon and they both competed in the French Open. She played in the Australian Open again in 1970, the year after her son Paul was born. She is reticent to talk about her tennis career, but was playing against the likes of Margaret Court and Evonne Goolagong. She has gone on to serve the sport for many decades, serving on Tennis NSW's Board of Directors as well as many of its committees for strategic planning, women's selection and tournament sanctioning, and she has been a passionate advocate for junior player development. In 2014 she was honoured for her tireless contribution to the sport at the Newcombe Medal Australian Tennis Awards and presented with the President's Spirit of Tennis Award.

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Roy and she were at the United Cup tournament at the Sydney Olympic Park Tennis Centre with Sharon and their son-in-law and two granddaughters in early January this year. Roy lurched forward in his seat, and Sharon heard him say that he couldn't breathe. Within seconds the paramedics were there to assist. They stretched Roy out and Carol has his head in her lap, but he couldn't be revived.

"I realise now we probably lost him instantly, but I didn't know at the time," she says, tears welling up in her eyes. There is a large framed photograph of him on a low table near where we're sitting, and on the floor are the flowers from his coffin, the arrangement now brown and brittle.

"I can't bring myself to get rid of them yet," she says. I marvel at her ability to continue working tirelessly for the foundation despite the waves of grief at suddenly losing her soulmate of more than 60 years.

"He would want me to keep going," she says, explaining she is so fortunate to have incredible support: Paul has taken

over Roy's role as treasurer and Sharon has joined the foundation's board.

Trish Langsford represented Ravenswood School in softball, hockey and javelin. She was also an A1 tennis player and won the Tildesley Shield Tournament playing both singles and doubles, but her great love was cricket. She played for the school and also represented NSW from when she was 14. Aged 20, she made her debut in the NSW Open Team at the 1991 Australian Championships and was named Player of the Series. Having completed a degree in Human Movement she was appointed the NSW Women's Cricket part-time development officer in 1993. In 1994, she captained the Australian Under 23 Team against New Zealand in the Dive-Lamason Challenge Cup. The team won the one-day series and due to rain the Test finished in a draw.

It was that same year that she got double vision. She began seeing two balls coming at her on the field on a Saturday.

"I had to go and pick her up because she was worried about driving," Carol recalls. Trish's first MS attack lasted six

months. She was unable to play sport and had to give up her job. She had a four-week remission and went back to cricket and played a match, which included a day's fielding in 100-degree heat.

"After that she went numb from the waist down and never got better again." Carol shows me heart-breaking footage from a 2011 ABC 7.30 Report of Trish struggling to walk and then sitting paralysed in a chair.

"She suffered so much. No-one should have to go through that," says Carol.

Thirty years ago when Trish was diagnosed with MS there were no medications. Carol and Roy imported a drug from the US, which cost them \$13,000 for six months, but it didn't help her. Now for relapsing-remitting MS there are a range of medications which help control the disease, Carol tells me. "But researchers haven't nailed progressive MS, which is what Trish had."

So recently the foundation has narrowed its goal to finding a cure or preventive strategy for progressive MS.

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Proud Trish named Captain of the Australian Youth Cricket Team; Roy and Carol in Malaysia; "He would want me to keep going," says Carol; Trish shows her batting form; the Langsfords were inseparable; on their wedding day, Carol aged 19; Receiving their OAMs in 2009; Trish as bridesmaid before she fell ill.





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“The progress that is being made with research into this is absolutely brilliant. We’ve been honoured to fund some world-first ground-breaking discoveries.” A \$200,000 donation to immunologist Professor Graeme Stewart at the Westmead Institute for Medical Research supported an international consortium of 250 researchers in 15 countries. Blood samples from 27,000 people with MS confirmed the 57 genes associated with the disease, providing a roadmap for scientists around the world to follow.

Brendan Nelson, former Liberal federal opposition leader and a medical doctor by profession, has been the patron of the foundation since the early days, and before he became Australia’s High Commissioner to India in 2020 Barry O’Farrell, former premier of NSW, was joint patron. There is also a scientific research committee, which decides which scientific projects should receive funding.

Much of the research is into stem cell therapy, and the foundation has just called for expressions of interest for a five-year fellowship commencing January 2024.

Carol’s passion for this cause is palpable; so too is her gratitude for everyone who has played a part in supporting the foundation.

Carol’s niece’s husband Mark Croker has just completed a 5,500km cycle ride from Fremantle to the Sydney Opera House. He set out with the goal of raising \$1 for every kilometre he rode (the tally at the time of going to print was \$6,871). The foundation’s biggest fundraiser is its annual ball. The Golden Butterfly Ball is being held at the Hilton Sydney on Saturday 9 September. Channel 7 presenter Johanna Griggs is the MC and soprano Toni Powell is performing. There is also an auction and people unable to attend the ball can bid remotely in the online auction.

Every single dollar donated to the Trish Foundation goes to MS research. Since

its inception, Carol and Roy devoted themselves to the charity, never took a salary and personally covered all the administration expenses. In 2009 they were both awarded OAMs for their work, but Carol is quick to point out that so many people have contributed.

“We’re a team and we can’t do it without the team, without our honorary board, our wonderful volunteers, our honorary scientific research committee, all of our generous supporters and our sponsors.”

What the Trish Multiple Sclerosis Research Foundation has achieved in 23 years is phenomenal and Carol Langsford is an inspiration. She is passionate about making a difference, and driven by this greater purpose has dedicated her life to find a way to prevent others suffering as her daughter Trish did.

***More info and to book tickets for the Golden Butterfly Ball on Saturday 9 September visit trishmsresearch.org.au**


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