

Perfect focus



The remarkable life of inspirational community contributor Sally Mayman, Pittwater Woman of the Year 2023.

Story by Rosamund Burton

Life Stories

In March, then Member for Pittwater Rob Stokes named Sally Mayman Pittwater Woman of the Year 2023 in recognition of her outstanding achievements and valuable contribution to the Pittwater community. Sally combines her photographic and artistic talent with her passion for collaboration and community and inspiring young people to be their best selves. For the past six years she has been Artist in Residence at Barrenjoey High School and in recent years has worked on creative projects with students at the Beach School and Avalon Youth Hub.

The dynamic 55-year-old photographer, who has lived in Avalon for 27 years with her family, admits to being both overwhelmed and honoured to receive the award.

In November 2022, as part of the Avalon Centenary celebrations, the exhibition *Barley Ki Giballee: You and Me Come Together, Collaborating Connecting and Caring for Country* opened at the Avalon Surf Club. It was the culmination of a year-long project initiated by Sally and partially funded by the Northern Beaches Council, working with Sandy Chockman, the visual arts teacher at Barrenjoey High School and local Indigenous artists Corey Kirk and Aleta Wassell. A feature of the exhibition involved 40 large cyanotype banners, which were the result of a collaboration with a group of Year 5 students from Avalon Primary School and Year 8

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students at Barrenjoey High School. Over six months, the students spent time with Corey walking on Country and learning about the uses and properties of plants native to the area.

Students also learnt about the importance of totems for First Nations People and were guided in creating their own on a paver. These will be embedded into a healing / yarning circle at Barrenjoey High School.

"It bought together for me many years of community work, encouraging young people to express themselves, learning about a deeper history and feeling a greater connection to Country," says Sally.

During COVID Sally started photographing the Avalon rock pool every morning, capturing the community at a time when people were unable to be together. Her book, *Beyond*, is a collection of those photographs and \$10 from each book sale supports Avalon One Eighty, the Northern Beaches organisation with the vision of a future free of youth suicide.

Growing up in bushland on the Lane Cove River, and years spent camping in remote areas of Australia with her family, have given her a lifelong appreciation of the natural world. This appreciation led to exhibitions highlighting the delicate balance of all living things and the need to care for the environment. Aged seven she began taking photographs.

"I had a tiny Instamatic camera. We

were in Tassie. I remember really thinking about the best angle to capture this waterfall. I had to climb up what felt like incredibly steep rocks to take it!"

During her high school years she joined a photography club and was extremely fortunate to be taught by Lisa Torma, a passionate and inspiring teacher. By the time she left school in 1985 she knew she wanted to be a photographer, so enrolled in a four-year part-time course at Sydney Technical College in Ultimo. The photographic world was very male dominated at that time, but photographer Tim Hixson, a Pittwater local, took her on as his assistant.

She describes Tim (who like Sally is a patrolling member of the Avalon Surf Lifesaving Club) as "the most wonderful mentor". He shared a studio in North Sydney with three other photographers: Gary Grealy, Robert Morehead and Scott Cameron and their assistants.

"The studio was the most amazing creative environment. The photographers all supported me and stressed the importance of always shooting your own personal work alongside commercial work. It's something I am deeply thankful for."

Sally put together her first exhibition with artist boyfriend Mark Hayes, *Beach Faces and Wilderness Places* - a combination of landscapes from Tasmania and portraits from Manly - at the North Steyne Surf Lifesaving Club.

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After completing her course she worked in London, assisting big-name commercial photographers, before travelling in Africa with her sister for 11 months. She crossed the Sahara, lived with the Pygmy peoples in Central African Republic and spent time with mountain gorillas. It was challenging at times, she admits, particularly when she was arrested in Zaire. The country was in civil war and the military saw her camera and determined she was a spy.

Returning to Britain she was struck by the contrast between the simplicity of people's lives in Africa and the advertising world in London where she worked.

"I was so disillusioned. I wanted to train as a nurse and go back to Africa and do something useful." It was her brother who told her she should use her photography gift to tell people's stories. So she applied to work on a Raleigh International Youth expedition for three months in Guyana, South America. Not only did she realise the power of visual storytelling, but also experienced the power of changing young people's lives. A percentage of the young people on the expedition were disadvantaged inner city London kids.

"It was working with those kids that I found most rewarding, helping them to break the cycles they were in, and seeing the change in them over three months."

Returning to Australia in 1992, she worked as a volunteer at the Manly Youth Centre, taking young people kayaking and rock climbing. In 1995 she married Gerry Colley, a photographer who had known her since the North Sydney studio days. They bought a Swanson 42 with a plan to sail and work around the world. Having little sailing experience, Sally did a course, trained every weekend and enrolled in meteorology and navigation courses at TAFE, even learning to use a sextant. They ended up sailing up the coast to the north of Queensland. When they returned to Pittwater nine months later Sally was pregnant with their first child, Jim who, she says, was connected to the ocean from utero. (Now he is a member of the Australian Sailing Team, sailing 49ers.)

Their second son Tom was born three years later, and in 2007 Gerry and Sally took them both out of Avalon Primary School for eight months, and travelled around Australia.

"I wanted the boys to get that sense of Australia that I had. And I wanted them to see Aboriginal culture - the spirituality and deep connection to Country. It was hard at first as a white family travelling, but when we reached the Kimberleys in WA we found families running ecotourism experiences. We fished with them and sat around a fire at night, listening and learning about their Country and culture."

The experience ignited Sally's longing to tell the story of this spirituality and connection to Country which was not being shown by the media at the time. She explained her desire to artist Dale Kentwell, whose sons were also at Avalon Primary School. By chance there was a Wilderness Society 'Save the Kimberleys Campaign' meeting at the Avalon community centre. Dale and Sally went along and met Albert Wiggan, a Bardi Nyul Nyul leader, who invited them to come onto their country.

So they travelled to the Dampier Peninsula in 2008 and 2009, and listened to people's stories, hearing about a range of issues from loss of culture to

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: In the 'darkroom' in Guyana; Sally's mum and dad at Barley Ki Giballee; climbing with sister Nicky; Sally with her first Instamatic camera in Tasmania aged 7; the family at Ningaloo Reef in 2007; at the BKG opening; husband Gerry and Sally sailing (Sally eight-and-a-half months' pregnant with son Jim).





PHOTO: Dale Kentwell

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The cover of *Beyond*; Barrenjoey High School students lend a hand on Barley Ki Giballee; on Saltwater Country.

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racism, as well as concerns about the government’s plans to build an enormous gas export terminal in a local marine sanctuary. Sally took photos and Dale painted artwork. They showed the body of work initially at Manly Art Gallery, before the Wilderness Society used their material, in conjunction with their Save the Kimberleys campaign, to stop the gas terminal, and exhibited it in more places. In 2015, the State Library of Western Australia bought the entire collection for its timeliness and cultural significance, and their book of this work, *Seeing Saltwater Country*, was published by Fremantle Press.

When asked about her sporting ventures, Sally casually mentions that she started

competing in triathlons around 2016, after swimming for a while to rehabilitate her back following a hockey injury. Her son Tom and she both qualified for the Australian team to compete at the triathlon world championship, held in Queensland in 2018. Sally came 5th in her age group.

Keen to combine her athletic and creative skills she approached Youth Off the Streets with the idea of mentoring the young people in film making and photography for the 20th year of the annual Cycle of Courage, a seven-day 1000-kilometre cycle ride from Sydney to the Gold Coast. Sally cycled alongside the kids doing the ride and filmed and interviewed them. Every evening the young documentary makers and she downloaded all the footage of the kids cycling, and

made a film, which they posted on social media the following morning.

A memorable moment for her during the ride was helping a boy called Jeremy who was struggling up a very long hill. She put her hand on his back, partly for moral support and partly to help push him up the ascent. Seeing her ambitious move, she was soon joined by three other cyclists keen to support him in reaching the top. That year, for the first time, every youth who undertook the Cycle of Courage rode every kilometre of the route.

Sally Mayman truly is an unstoppable creative force, and she has been a catalyst for so many young people to realise their potential.

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