



TWO

OF US

STORY BY Rosamund Burton PHOTOGRAPH BY Joshua Morris

Actor Shane Withington, 60, is best known for his roles as John Palmer in *Home and Away* and Brendan Jones in *A Country Practice*. He and mother of three Suzette Meade, 43, are fighting to save a heritage site from overdevelopment.

SHANE: Suzette and I believe passionately in conserving historic buildings, which is how we met in 2015. I was MC at a meeting at NSW Parliament House, which had been called in response to threats to Crown land. This red-head explained that the 30-hectare Cumberland Hospital site in western Sydney's Parramatta had been rezoned by the NSW Government for residential and commercial development.

Stretching from old Parramatta Gaol to the Roman Catholic Orphanage – later the Parramatta Girls Industrial Home – and including the Parramatta Female Factory [the country's first institution for convict women], it's one of Australia's most significant heritage sites. I wanted to help save it, so I gave Suzette my number. She rang me several times, but I was always busy. Then last year, I had a break in my schedule. That's when my involvement began in the campaign to protect this precinct, which also has 77 heritage-listed buildings and significant sites of the Indigenous Darug people.

Suzette is half-mum, half-supercomputer. She has an encyclopaedic memory and is incredibly intelligent. With her background in construction

as a project manager, she knows how to read site maps and development applications which, being in the arts, I could never do. Suzette calls me “an old-fashioned activist” but she's very political.

I had 15 years of activism from the 1990s to 2006, to conserve the heritage-listed holiday retreat, Currawong, at Pittwater in Sydney's north. If I knew that a politician was touring the site, I'd fire off distress flares, clouding the place with smoke. The old theatrics – that's how you get media.

Before we went to lobby at NSW Parliament House last year, I brought her into the *Home and Away* studio. Most people are vaguely interested, but not Suzette. She's not a *Home and Away* viewer, and didn't know who anyone was. But she did watch *A Country Practice*, so she knew Anne [Tenney, Shane's actor wife] and me from that.

Despite the red hair, Suzette isn't fiery. I've never seen her lose her cool. She's an extraordinary woman. She had her third child 10 months ago and was active the next day. She can breast-feed, send messages to the residents' action group, check her Twitter feed and issue orders to me simultaneously.

66
We started knocking on ministers' doors and doing the double act: Shane being the famous person, and me a mum.

99

I was a neurotic mess by the time the Currawong campaign was won, which makes me wary for Suzette. I always end our calls saying, “Look after yourself and don't burn out.” But she seems to be able to handle the pressure.

We get on really well, except she doesn't answer the phone when I want her to, and when I suggest letting off flares, she doesn't reply, so it doesn't happen. But I'll mention it again, and if it still doesn't happen, I'll let flares off without her knowing.

SUZETTE: I was on maternity leave with my second child in 2015 when the NSW government development proposal for 6500 apartments and a retail complex in the Cumberland Hospital precinct reared its head. I went to the North Parramatta Residents Action Group's first meeting, and was nominated to head the action against the development.

Shane was the MC for a Crown land summit at NSW Parliament House. I knew of Shane from when he played nurse Brendan Jones on *A Country Practice*. Summing up, he said, “We all need to get involved with the Female Factory, because that is too precious to lose.” Afterwards, I thanked him for highlighting our plight in Parramatta. He gave me his number, and said to ring if he could help.

I contacted Shane several times, but he was always filming. In 2017, after an Aboriginal land claim had removed a third of the land, a development application was lodged for subdivision of the site for 2900 units and a retail complex, with 1100 units deferred. I asked Shane if he'd appear in front of the crowd for us, and he agreed. Then we started knocking on ministers' doors and doing the double act: he being the famous person, and me a mum.

He suggested we make a “call for action” video, so I went to his home on the northern beaches. He goes, “Here comes Annie,” and in walks Molly from *A Country Practice*. I'm thinking, “I'm here with these famous people and there are Logies on the wall.” But he's always saying, “Darling, I'm not important. I'm a soapie star. What you're doing is important.”

We differ in our way of campaigning. He tells me, “You need to let off some flares.” I reply, “I'm happy to be arrested, but I don't know if that's going to serve the cause. I'm going to visit the minister.” He's like, “Let off flares.”

He calls me in-between filming *Home and Away*, then suddenly says, “Make-up. I have to go.” He's not big on texting and digital media. I'm usually feeding, or potty training, so I'm a one-handed bandit on the phone. If I've got a bit of time to gasbag, I'll ring him.

I have a very supportive husband and now Shane also believes in me so much. He's almost like my second husband. In July, I stepped down from being president of the action group, a position I held for three years, and took the role of secretary, but I can't walk away, and he gets why I'm so passionate. I believe this site should be a community hub that celebrates Parramatta's rich cultural history.

Shane is empathetic and witty, and we share the same sense of justice. I used to watch him on TV when I was 10 years old, and never imagined that together we'd be fighting the state government to save this heritage precinct. ■