

A world of difference

Bilgola Plateau's Dr Sandra Meihubers has spent decades helping improve health and conditions in remote communities both at home and abroad.

Story by *Rosamund Burton*

Climbing the 80 wooden steps to Dr Sandra Meihubers' home on Bilgola Plateau feels like climbing up a mountain in Nepal to visit a Buddhist monastery. The house stands on steel stilts above grass trees and ferns and is surrounded by tall eucalypts; it was designed by her husband, architect Paul Pholeros.

"We designed it just for the two of us, because we were in our 30s and knew we weren't planning to have kids. And," she adds, "we weren't afraid of steep!"

Sandra, now in her 60s, shows me inside the house, with its curved steel beams and corrugated iron roof. Its innovative design, openness and simplicity make the place feel like an intimate part of the surrounding bushland, and its uniqueness reminds me of Sandra herself. Over 40 years she has taken her dentistry skills

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to troubled East Timor, poor hill villages in Nepal and the slums of Bangladesh, as well as to remote Indigenous communities around Australia. In a shelter at the base of the steps leading up to the house I spied her rolled-up swag, and wondered how many nights over the years she had slept on the ground under the stars.

Having fled from Latvia when the Soviet Union occupied it in 1944, Sandra's parents married in a displaced persons camp in East Germany, where her older sister was born, before coming to Australia.

"My heart bleeds for refugees," she says, as she recalls the hardship and trauma her own family experienced.

Both Sandra and her sister won scholarships to Meriden, an Anglican girls school in Strathfield. Her grandmother made her a blazer, given the family

couldn't afford the uniforms. She was 16, when the family moved to Epping and she met Paul Pholeros - then a Trinity Grammar School boy - travelling on the train to school. Four years later, when they were both at the University of Sydney, their relationship became more serious.

Sandra had the grades to do medicine, but was inspired to do dentistry due to the enthusiasm of a family friend, who not only loved the profession, but also the independence which came with private practice. Ironically, Sandra's extraordinary career path has given her great independence, but the only time she's worked in private practice was for 15 months when Paul and she lived in England.

It was a three-week placement in Darwin as a final-year student that set her on her career path.

'I've seen people blossom due to their involvement in the programs – they become managers, or go on to further education, because they have developed self-confidence and someone believes in them.'

"Within a couple of days, I was on a small plane heading to a remote community on the border of the Northern Territory and Western Australia with a senior dentist, the pilot, and a couple of boxes of basic dental supplies and equipment," she said. "We worked on the verandah of the community hospital and mainly did extractions for pain.

"I was fascinated by the life and culture that I saw there, and also that our dentistry provided a service that was appreciated and valued. I thought if you can do this with dentistry now it's more interesting."

After graduating she accepted a job with the same dental clinic in Darwin, spending a year travelling to remote communities in the Top End.

Paul and Sandra married in Sydney and went overseas for 24 months. On returning to Sydney, Sandra worked for the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern. She worked from the Aboriginal Medical

Service's dental van in Tamworth, Moree and down the NSW South Coast. In the mid-1980s she established the dental program for Nganampa Health Council in South Australia's APY Lands, which once again took her out to remote communities. "Dentistry has been an incredible working visa," she reflects.

In 1999 Sandra was asked by dentist colleague and friend, Dr David Sheen, to accompany him to do dental emergency relief work in East Timor. It was a couple of months after the East Timorese had voted for independence from Indonesia and the Indonesian-backed militia had ravaged the country. Her father was panic-stricken at the thought of his daughter, now in her early 40s, going to this war-torn country.

"Were you scared?" I ask.

"I always think things will work out," she replies.

The two dentists flew to Dili on a World
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CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Sandra at home at Bilgola Plateau; in the NT during her placement as a final year student; with husband Paul in Nepal overseeing a local village sanitation project; with NSW Governor David Hurley having received her AM; a sanitation block inauguration, remembering Paul; on their wedding day; dental work in Nepal; with local kids in South Australia's APY Lands; happy in the home the couple designed together; dangerous times in East Timor in 1999.



Life Stories

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Food Program plane, as there were no commercial flights. An Australian aid worker drove them through the deserted decimated city to a medical clinic run by an American doctor, and they set to work doing tooth extractions.

Sandra went back to East Timor a year later to help re-establish a dental service there, and in 2003 with the Carmelite nuns David Sheen and she established the Timor Leste Dental Program – a team of local people with Australian voluntary dental teams supporting them.

In 2000 Sandra also joined a Rotary-run volunteer dental program going to Nepal. “We went to different villages in remote areas. The work was very similar to what I had been doing in the APY Lands, taking portable equipment and going into communities.”

Sandra quickly realised that to make a difference she needed to come back to Nepal every year, because the locals had no formal dentistry qualifications, and needed ongoing training to enhance their skills. However, this was during the Nepalese civil war (1996-2006) and at times she had to be smuggled in ambulances to get past checkpoints.

“Police, teachers, admin workers and their families were being cold-bloodedly killed in small mountain villages because

it was believed they were instruments of the government. It was a terrible time.”

In 2007, when it was pointed out to her that the village where she was working had no toilets, Paul started working on the village sanitation program, installing a toilet at every house. He hadn’t taken a mainstream path with architecture either and had been working in Australian Indigenous communities to improve housing and sanitation.

His sanitation project in Nepal expanded to nearby villages, and Sandra decided to run dental program alongside it, calling their work ‘Teeth and Toilets’.

“People didn’t realize that we were actually married, but because we were both really tall, they figured out there was something connecting us both.”

Paul died unexpectedly in 2016, aged 62, of an autoimmune blood clotting disorder.

“He went from seemingly incredibly health to gone in three weeks.”

A year later she was in Kathmandu having been travelling in the Nepalese hills with the dentistry program. She opened an email from the Governor-General’s office saying it has been trying to contact her as she had been made a Member of the Order Of Australia (AM).

“It was a bitter-sweet moment,” she says. “Instantly, I thought I’ll tell Paul, but he wasn’t there. My head was swirling with

excitement, and I’m thinking my world has changed, and what it would have meant to him. He received an AM in 2007.”

Keen to ensure the valuable work her husband was doing in Nepal continued, in 2018, with the assistance of Grant Stewart, who worked with Paul, she founded the Paul Pholeros Foundation (PPF), a non-profit group which focuses on improving sanitation facilities in poor villages in rural Nepal and increasing skills of local people.

Dr Sandra Meihubers is currently running dental programs in Walgett, Broken Hill and Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic has supported the overseas programs from here. Despite her phenomenal achievements she is not someone to blow her own trumpet. But what gives her the greatest delight is seeing the value of the dental programs she has established, and the opportunities they’ve provided.

“I’ve seen people blossom due to their involvement in the programs – they become managers, or go on to further education, because they have developed self-confidence and someone believes in them.

“I couldn’t have worked in private practice,” she says with a smile. “I had to take dentistry out into the world.”



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