

A photograph of Val Edwards, an elderly woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark blue blazer over a white top and a pink scarf. She is sitting outdoors in a garden, holding a copy of Vogue magazine. The magazine cover features Billie Eilish and the headline 'BILLIE EILISH RISES ABOVE THE NOISE'. The background shows lush greenery and trees.

For almost 30 years, etiquette expert Val Edwards has helped young people build their self-esteem. Confidence, she says, will take you a long way...

Story by Rosamund Burton

Life Stories

# Role model

Poise, beauty, vitality – Val Edwards has plenty of all three. She looks immaculate, her hair is done, her makeup perfect, emphasising her sparkling blue eyes and high cheek bones, and her smile emits graciousness and joie de vivre.

For 28 years Val Edwards has owned the Sydney Model Agency and the Sydney Etiquette College, and for the first time, in January 2022, the Palm Beach resident will run her etiquette course on the Northern Beaches. The three-day workshop, with an optional fourth day focusing on modeling, as well as covering presentation, grooming, posture and poise and etiquette, will have a strong focus on building self-esteem and confidence.

As an only child growing up in Wollongong Val admits she was always interested in fashion.

30

“My mother always dressed really nicely. She used to go to fashion parades and was a lady who lunched, and I went with her,” she said. As a family they often went to the races. Val’s father was an electrical engineer and he and her grandfather were racehorse owners and breeders. Val recalls picking a Melbourne Cup winner at the age of four.

Since her youth Val has always endeavored to carry herself with style.

“My mother used to say, ‘make sure when you go to the corner shop, darling, that you put your makeup on and are wearing clean underwear, in case you get hit by a bus’. She also emphasised to be kind, caring and true to yourself.”

Aged 17, Val was invited to participate in the Miss Australia Quest, which was a fundraiser for children with cerebral palsy. Part of the training was an etiquette

course. It wasn’t compulsory, and Val already had good manners, but the idea of etiquette fascinated her, so she wanted to do it.

“I didn’t win the Miss Australia Quest, but I raised the most money in my region for the Spastic Centre [renamed the Cerebral Palsy Alliance] that year. My prize was a photograph of rolling waves and a Berlei bra.”

The experience ignited her interest in modelling and soon Val’s looks had her doing photographic work, modelling clothes for organisations and appearing in magazines such as *Australian Women’s Weekly*.

In her late teens she met her husband, George Edwards, who was studying at the University of Wollongong. She was 20 when they were married, and his career as a mining consultant meant he travelled

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a great deal, leaving her with the primary responsibility for bringing up their two sons, Lachlan and Kingsley, and daughter, Raechelle.

When they moved to Killara on Sydney's North Shore, Val enrolled in an etiquette course at Pat Woodley's Presentation Academy and Model Agency.

"I was 10 years older than the other people in the class," she says, "but I liked the idea of perhaps teaching one day." She did just that - lecturing on presentation and manners for the Sydney Model and Department College, before buying the business name.

"I thought this will be a project I can throw myself into, and I've never regretted it," she says. Initially, she received telephone calls from people wanting to know what 'deportment' was, so she

changed the name to Sydney Etiquette College.

From her premises in North Sydney Val also runs the Sydney Model Agency specialising in models for movies such as *'The Great Gatsby'* and *'Unbroken'* as well as charity fundraiser events. Val has been a charity fundraiser throughout her life, and currently supports Lung Foundation Australia.

Since Australian Fashion Week was launched in 1996, every year Val has been invited to this prestigious annual event, which brings together Australia's leading designers. From the beginning her young models have walked the runway, including in the Opening show. Val has successfully launched many models in their careers, some of whom are still working for her including Sophie Coombs and Jessica Terry.

Attendees of her etiquette workshop, which she runs every school and university holidays, can range in age from 13 to 23, and the emphasis first and foremost is on self-confidence, respect, motivation and setting goals.

"Mostly I have girls who are not confident. Similarly, the young men are not self-assured, and especially if they're tall, they stoop. So, they have to learn to believe in themselves. I always say you should feel confident enough to say what you think in a tactful way. Don't be dominating, but give your opinion, that way you'll be included in a group, but not bullied."

Val teaches these young people how to hold their knives and forks correctly, what to do with their napkins and the socially acceptable way to eat a bread roll. They

Continued on page 32



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Val with a student group from her College; stepping out at Randwick Races aged 20; stealing the show as a young flower girl at a family wedding; making a fashionable impression in the 1970s; three generations at Fashion Week 2019 (Raechelle, Val and Amelia); with husband George and family including seven grandchildren; happy on their wedding day; Val's own Olympic stamp; and as attache for the Republic of Tajikistan at Sydney 2000.



Continued from page 31

learn how to navigate the complexities of social media and how to conduct themselves in an interview.

Her course includes the how tos of hair and makeup and a photo shoot.

“It doesn’t matter if they never want to be a model, they’re entitled to have that opportunity to look the best they can,” she says. Although definitely not an advocate of ‘skinny’ models, she emphasises the importance of a healthy diet, which includes plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.

It’s Val Edwards’ passion for training young men and women to be the best they can be in their careers and daily lives, which endear her students to her. At the end of the short course they often show their appreciation by lavishing her with flowers and chocolates.

“I get cards from mothers and grandmothers telling me I have helped so much, which is very rewarding. I love the teaching and knowing I’ve made a difference.”

Attendees of her private course have included actress and model Phoebe Tonkin, actor Damon Herriman (who played Charles Manson in the movie ‘Once Upon A Time In Hollywood’ and Netflix series ‘Mindhunter’), Nine Network reporter Laura Tunstall, and model Lara Worthington (nee Bingle). Val has the latest copy of

Vogue Australia, which to her delight features Lara Worthington, looking sultry and stunning, modelling Louis Vuitton’s Capucines range of handbags.

“Lara has the most beautiful eyes and a lovely way about her. Her father died shortly after she had been to me for the etiquette training. I was going to send flowers, but she asked me to the funeral. She gave an amazing eulogy. She was so composed, and everyone else was crying.”

Val also conducts one-on-one etiquette classes, and courses for school and corporate groups. She was meant to be running a course for one of Sydney’s top jewellers, but due to the lockdown that has been postponed.

For the Sydney 2000 Olympics, Val trained 150 medal-presenting staff in etiquette, diction and introduction protocol, as well as posture, walking and standing. She also equipped all the staff with a small comb, and the female ones with a compact and lipstick. She provided models for the French and Italian delegations to welcome dignitaries to cocktail parties held at the University of Sydney for their medal winners. And she was also asked to be an attaché for the Republic of Tajikistan. Her task was to look after 17 people, including the four athletes and the small nation’s president and his wife, none of whom spoke English.

Not only did Val march the opening

and closing ceremonies, but she was also invited as an attaché, along with athletes and IOC officials, to have her photograph taken for an Olympic postage stamp.

More recently, she wrote 90 *Ask Val* columns from 2017 to 2020 for the *Mosman Daily* giving advice on topics ranging from ‘helicopter parenting’ of adult children to binge drinking.

George and Val now have seven grandchildren, ranging in age from seven to 22. They have owned their house at Palm Beach for 32 years, initially going there for weekends and holidays, until a decade ago when it became their primary residence.

“We love Palm Beach and I have lovely friends up here.”

Val is a member of the Palm Beach Whale Beach Association, and after a lifetime of playing tennis, she has recently started learning golf at the Palm Beach Golf Club. When the water is warmer she is to be found swimming at Palm Beach and she usually walks 8,000 steps a day.

Like June Dally-Watkins, the doyenne of deportment and etiquette, Val Edwards speaks with perfect diction, strikes a flawless pose, and sits with her shoulders pulled back and her back ruler straight.

“First impressions are often lasting impressions,” she says with a radiant smile.

**For more information visit [sydneyetiquettecollege.com.au](http://sydneyetiquettecollege.com.au) or [sydneymodelagency.com](http://sydneymodelagency.com)**

# Australia Day Awards 2022

Shine a spotlight on a person or project that makes the Northern Beaches a better place

This is your chance to recognise someone who inspires and serves our local community:

- Citizen of the Year
- Young Citizen of the Year (under 25 years)
- Senior Citizen of the Year (65 years and above)
- Community Event of the Year
- Sportsperson of the Year
- Outstanding Community Service

Nominations close midnight  
Monday 1 November 2021  
Enquiries: Volunteer Coordinator  
on 02 8495 6602  
[northernbeaches.nsw.gov.au](http://northernbeaches.nsw.gov.au)

