

Glenyys and Graham Romanes: trailblazers



By Stephen Howes

From Ethiopian famine and war, to domestic policy and politics, to rethinking gender equity at home, Glenyys and Graham Romanes have had remarkable careers and lives, separately and together.



The Romanes family in *New Idea* magazine, May 1982, where they were featured in a story on 'house husbands'.

Fathers at home

In the heady days of the seventies and eighties, Graham and Glenyys Romanes became minor celebrities. Their decision at the time - radical even by today's standards - to share equal responsibility for the raising of their three children via job sharing attracted the interest of the mainstream media, from *New Idea* to TV and radio talk shows.

Academics were also interested in the Romaneses. In 1980, the couple featured prominently in the book *Fathers at Home*, a collation of reflections from stay-at-

home fathers and their partners, put together by pioneering Melbourne feminist academic Jan Harper.

The couple didn't stop at sharing domestic responsibilities within the nuclear family. Their good friends, the Blencowes, bought the house next door to them in the inner-city Melbourne suburb of Carlton. As explained in *Fathers at Home*, Graham replaced part of the separating wall between the two houses by a doorway, and the two families began living essentially as one, an experiment in communal living that lasted more than six years.

Not content with just shaking things up at home, Glenyys and Graham went on to have remarkable careers spanning international development to local politics. This essay tells their story.

From dodging bullets to digging wells

The shared position the Romaneses took at the beginning of 1980 was that of Victorian State Secretary for the development NGO, Community Aid Abroad, now Oxfam Australia. The couple – both of them high-school teachers – had been Oxfam supporters since their university days in the 1960s.

Graham was the first to move on within Oxfam from their original shared fundraising and community mobilisation role to international programs. The early 1980s was the time of the Ethiopian famine: Band Aid, and “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” It was a pivotal time for Australian development NGOs, which were drawn to the enormity of the unfolding disaster, inundated by funds from a horrified Australian community, but also increasingly engaged with the underlying politics. Graham was once again thrust into the spotlight. In a TV interview at the time, he said:

We’ve got an incredible responsibility to actually do some political analysis of what’s happening. The international community poured masses of aid into the Ethiopian government and it missed the majority of people who were actually starving in the famine, because what we found was the Ethiopian government was actually using the famine as a weapon in its war, particularly against the

rebels in the north.

Oxfam became a supporter of the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), the humanitarian wing of the Tigrayan Liberation People's Front (TPLF), one of the parties locked in armed conflict with the repressive Mengistu regime. Tigray, in the north of Ethiopia, was one of the worst drought-affected areas, precisely because the government prevented relief funds from reaching there. In 1984, Oxfam sent Graham to investigate. It was a life-changing 13-week trip, travelling by vehicle through rough terrain with REST from Khartoum, Sudan, through Eritrea then overland on foot into central Tigray.



Receiving a gift from village home, Tigray 1991.

Graham tells the story:

It was a long walk through Tigray, weeks of in the bush, living on water out of the streams, and wherever we could get water and kitcha [bread]. We literally had a bag of flour. I had six people, six fighters who were walking with me as my protective unit. We carried a bag of flour between us, and each night we'd mix it up, and cook it over a hot griddle. That was food.

He experienced suffering he'd never seen before.

To see someone die was quite an extraordinary experience, and to die for no other reason than the world had turned their back on them.

And extraordinary generosity too:

I remember one man who saw me walk through his village, and two weeks later when I walked back, he gave me fourteen eggs. He kept one egg for each day from his chooks. He'd never seen a white person walk through their village before, and he wanted to say thank you.



Graham with displaced children in Eastern Ethiopia, 1991.

Oxfam's support for the people of Tigray grabbed international headlines when a drilling rig sent to provide water for communities in Tigrayan areas was intercepted and confiscated by the Ethiopian government. Graham had been sent to meet the rig and remembers the incident vividly:

We were literally sitting in Tigray waiting for the drilling rig to arrive when we heard on January 12th 1985 that it had been taken by the Ethiopian government. I must say it was a really sad moment for me.

Despite the disappointment at the time, the interception was actually a blessing in disguise, as it brought international media attention – from the *New York Times* to Four Corners in Australia – to the central issue that Oxfam had been trying to raise: the Ethiopian government was not allowing support to get through to rebel-held areas. The point that the famine was not about the weather but about the politics finally got through, and the Australian government started supporting the provision of relief in rebel-held areas through NGOs rather than the Ethiopian government.

Graham had also come to realise through his travels in Tigray that bringing a drilling rig into a war zone – where it would be a target for aerial attack – wasn't exactly a bright idea. Oxfam was committed to a replacement rig, but this was put to better use – in a camp in Sudan for refugees who had fled Ethiopia. And, in Tigray, Oxfam began its program of support for smaller, hand-dug wells.



From humble beginnings of one well in Dedebit, Tigray Region, Ethiopia in 1995, Community Aid Abroad's partnership with the Relief Society of Tigray spawned village wells in over 4000 communities in northern Ethiopia, providing water for over 1 million people. Wellwishers Australia remains an important funder of this work.

Ever since, Graham's life and work has revolved around Ethiopia. In 1991, with the seismic shock of the end of the Cold War, the Ethiopian government fell. Menes Zenawi, the TPLF leader, became Ethiopia's leader and ruled the country to his death in 2012. While his human rights legacy is controversial, and the long-term prospects for Ethiopia - a complex multi-ethnic nation - are unclear, Zenawi and his team turned the country around. Ethiopia became one of the fastest growing countries in the world. Gordon Brown, former UK Prime Minister, said at the time of Zenawi's death that "Ethiopia ... [had] made more progress in education, health and economic development under his leadership than at any time in its history."

Graham, who by now was a good friend of some of Ethiopia's most powerful political leaders, stayed on with Oxfam, managing its Africa program, including

the wells program in Tigray. In 1997, he became Honorary Consul for Ethiopia, a voluntary, but often full-time position that he occupied until 2014. He set up shop (literally) in Fitzroy, opening a consulate that was a combined office and retail outlet in which passports could be renewed, visas obtained, and Ethiopian jewellery, clothing and coffee bought.

After leaving Oxfam in 2001, Graham helped found Wellwishers Australia, an organisation that to this day carries on Oxfam's earlier support for wells in the province of Tigray. \$6,800 buys a well, says the Wellwishers website, and the organisation has funded more than 700 of them. It continues to work through the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), today an Ethiopian NGO. Virtually nobody living in the Tigrayan countryside had access to groundwater when REST's well-building program began; now more than half of the 4 million rural population of Tigray is in walking distance of a well. Graham now manages Wellwishers in a honorary capacity, continuing to organise fundraisers and make Ethiopian jewellery - made from antique Venetian trade beads - to fund new wells.

Watch Graham talk about his experiences in Ethiopia. You can hear more from Graham in this video and this ABC interview.



Graham and Glenyys at a land rights demonstration with CAA.

From global to local

While Graham's life trajectory led him to Africa, Glenyys increasingly built her career around domestic concerns. She, like Graham, also moved within Oxfam to a programming job, taking over responsibility in 1986 for Oxfam's work in a number of overseas countries, as well as with Indigenous Australians. The last of these was her passion. As she explains:

It was always a controversial area with Community Aid Abroad (CAA) in the 70s when we started to get involved, but it came out of questions from our partners overseas. If we in CAA were so concerned about poverty and justice and human rights in other countries, in developing countries, what about our own?

In fact, CAA was one of the organisations that gave seed funding to the Aboriginal legal service and to the health service in Fitzroy, Melbourne, and early funding to the Aboriginal-initiated schools in Alice Springs and Brisbane. Out of that grew modest funding for an Aboriginal support program as well some support for advocacy for Aboriginal rights in the areas of self-determination and sovereignty and justice for Aboriginal people.

The Aboriginal program changed over the years and it grew into a program where we gave a lot of emphasis to partnerships, and trying to support capacity building and leadership in Aboriginal communities. We moved on to appointing an Aboriginal projects officer ... and eventually I worked myself out of job as Aboriginal projects coordinator, because we firmly believed as an organisation those sorts of decisions should be in the hands of Indigenous Australians.

Other achievements that Glenyys remembers from her time with Oxfam include the first funding for Wan Smol Bag (One Small Bag), the ni-Vanuatu and now regional social theatre group that has gone on to have such an impact in the Pacific, and support for independence movements from Timor-Leste to New Caledonia to South Africa.

By the early nineties, however, Glenyys was thinking beyond international development. When working in Zambia in the early seventies (where the couple taught for two years), she had been struck by her lack of citizenship in that country, and the resulting absence of agency. She wanted to exercise her voice where she could.

Glenyys's father was a staunch union man, and both she and Graham have been life-long Labor supporters. While still in his twenties, and when the couple were teaching in country Victoria, Graham contested in the 1970 Victorian state election in Shepparton, taking on, and inevitably losing to, the conservative National Party state leader Peter Ross-Edwards.



Glenyys Romanes as Brunswick Mayor in 1994.

In 1991, Glenyys decided to enter the world of local politics, and, to her surprise, was elected to her local Brunswick Council. She became mayor of Brunswick in 1993. The Brunswick Council was abolished through a state government council amalgamation. In opposition to this, Glenyys helped found the Victorian Local Governance Association, which remains active to this day. She also became an inaugural member of the new, bigger Moreland Council, on which she served as an councillor from 1996 to 1999.

In 1999, Glenyys transitioned from local to state politics, and was elected to the Victorian upper house, in which she served till 2006, where electoral reforms and a low placement in Labor's voting list meant that she lost her seat. Her post-Oxfam career (she left the organisation in 1995) also included stints in the public service with the Commonwealth Ombudsman in the late 1990s, and with the Victorian Transport Department a decade later. Now retired from full-time work, she, like Graham, remains active in her areas of interest, serving as Deputy Chair of the Victorian Government's Metropolitan Development Advisory Panel, on the Board of the Victorian Public Transport Ombudsman, on the Management

Committee of the Merri Creek Environment Fund, and a member of the local *Friends of Aileu* (a district in Timor-Leste) support group

One of Glenyys's political successes was helping to save the Upfield railway line, that serves Melbourne's northern suburbs. Today the line is struggling to cope with passenger demand, but back in the 1990s it was threatened with closure. Another highlight she mentions is the rejuvenation of Sydney Road, which once connected Australia's two major cities, and which is still the major commercial artery for Brunswick and its northern neighbour, Coburg:

The first Brunswick Council community committee I got onto was the Sydney Road revitalisation committee in 1991. What's there now is the result of what we did 28 years ago. Because it was dead, dingy, dark, empty shops everywhere. It took ages to turn it around.

Merri Creek, another cause Glenyys has been supporting since the 1980s, is another success that speaks to the value of local action. The creek, which flows from the Great Dividing Range to the Yarra River, and which traverses Melbourne's northern suburbs has been transformed largely as a result of community effort "from a weed-smothered drain to, according to Melbourne Water's annual survey, Melbourne's most-loved waterway."

Glenyys draws my attention to the "parallels with the community development work that Community Aid Abroad was supporting in other countries." It is all about "looking strategically at where you want your own community to be, to go, to grow, and your state likewise." The move from international development to local politics "was a natural movement for me, really, and it was consistent with our interests in politics and aid and development and citizenship that had driven us in other parts of our lives."

Another parallel is the time-span needed to assess success. "These things take time. You have to see it in the longer-term when you are in politics. Too many people do try to take a short-term approach."

Watch Glenyys talk about her and Oxfam's work in support of Indigenous Australians in the video above.

An enduring partnership

The Romaneses are a couple with a lot in common. They both grew up in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, attended state schools, and were brought up by parents who instilled in them a strong sense of social justice and public duty. Neither grew up in religious families but, reflecting the religious revival of their time, both started attending Methodist churches – in adjoining suburbs – while at school. Their faith, while foundational, didn't survive their transition to adulthood, but their commitment to the Australian Labor Party and Oxfam has been lifelong.

Graham and Glenyys met on the first day of university, where they both went to become teachers. They started dating in their final year, and got married a year after graduating. Before their joint Oxfam appointment a decade later, the couple worked in teaching and teaching-related jobs, including the two-year stint in Zambia. The rest of their story, joint and separate, is told in summary form above.



As State Secretaries in June 1980.

Reflecting on their myriad contributions, I asked them towards the end of our interview what advice the two of them, now in their seventies, would have for someone starting out in adulthood with an interest in social justice. Graham responded first:

Focus on something that grabs your attention. Now, for most of us, it's going to be almost random where you end up. It's someone you meet, it's where you went to school, it could be anything. But it's important to grab that context and work within it.

Glenyys developed this line of thinking:

And that means finding something that you're passionate about. Different people have different interests and passions, and as Graham said, I think you do have to get involved, join up. Get into things and get involved.

And don't just focus on the longer-term, "I want to end up in the UN," or "I want to end up somewhere else." You've got to start somewhere, and you're going to be a better decision-maker in a position in the world that you want to be, or in your own country, or in your community, where you want to be, if you've had experience doing different things and working with people on causes, or working with people on projects.

In *Fathers at Home*, Graham describes his decision to shift to part-time work as "one of the best decisions we ever made." Looking back on that period with the hindsight of forty years, there are no regrets. Glenyys commented to me:

One wonderful personal outcome is that our three sons, who are now husbands and fathers, are really fantastic at taking responsibility and sharing in the upbringing of their children and sharing the working load across the family at home. [T]hey have embraced that equality within their own families.

In closing, I asked them to reflect on their relationship, and their 50-plus year partnership. Glenyys said this:

Well, I think it's been a very equal relationship, and whereas we have obviously

had shared interest in a lot of things together, we've both also, at different times, gone our separate ways. And been very relaxed in allowing the other person to do their own thing, to develop their own interests, to actually apportion a lot of their time outside of the family.

I should pay tribute to Graham for 20 years when I was in public office at the local council and in state Parliament, when he virtually ran the whole household. I would just come home in between meetings, as you do if you go into public office. I knew everything was cared for, the children were cared for, the home was cared for, and I could come back to that. And that's a really, really secure situation from which to work in often very difficult and pressured situations.

So, I suppose, in terms of relationship advice, it is one about sharing and respecting both work and the ideals of the other person, while still finding time to be together for significant periods and for significant occasions in the life of the family.

I give the last word to Graham:

You have to be prepared to grow together. We're in a different place now than we were 50-odd years ago when we got married, but we've allowed ourselves to grow together and had a mutual respect about where we wanted to be together in the future.

The other thing I would totally acknowledge is that Glenyys has pushed me in many respects to do things that I probably would be a little too lazy to pick up.

From the personal to the political, from the local to the global, from the 70s and still counting, Glenyys and Graham Romanes have been trailblazers. May their inspirational story be much better known.

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