

Talk by founding member, Phil Stabback, in memory of Phil Alexander at Northern Suburbs Crematorium, Monday 10 October 2016.

I feel honoured to have been invited by Helen and the Alexander family to speak today. I am especially honoured because I do so also on behalf of Phil's extended 'family' of long-time neighbours in Artarmon and that odd but lovable group of golfers known as SMERGS. More of them later.

In late 1979, Steph and I decided that it was time to buy a real house. The hunt for our first freestanding home led us to a run-down, almost derelict house at number 12 Carlos Road, Artarmon.

If life is just a series of accidents, we remain forever grateful that this one happened to us.

We met and became lifelong friends with lots of neighbours in Carlos Road and surrounding streets, many of whom are here today. But the first people we met and became friends with were the Alexanders who lived directly opposite, and I immediately formed a firm friendship with Phil.

Philip and Helen already had Katherine and David, and little Phil (who for the last 20 years or so has obviously been Big Phil), and Steph was pregnant with our first daughter, Joanna. And so Phil and Helen, Steph and I immediately formed a friendship that seemed natural, effortless and special, a friendship that was soon to be replicated around the neighbourhood, with the Chadwicks, the Lowndeses, the Burnses and many, many others.

It was at this time that I became preoccupied with renovating the house at number 12. Phil would often drop over to pass the time, although as I recall he never seemed all that enthusiastic about getting on the tools. But his company was always enjoyable and welcome, and we had many rambling conversations about our kids, about my cricket, about his sailing and about how the world generally could be improved.

Also during this time, a group of us, of which Phil was a keen member, decided to hold a street Christmas Party on our very exposed front lawn. This turned into a great institution and Phil was always on the organising committee. You may not be surprised to learn that he was also among the first to emerge from his house and the last to stumble back in.

As we all know from both those parties and every other function Phil attended, he was always armed with the very best of red wines. This was the only thing I ever found to be in any way intimidating about Phil, and I now admit publicly for the first time that, whenever Phil was going to be at any dinner or party, I would limit my contribution to white wine and beer.

In 1984, a local group of 4 or 5 of us decided for some reason to have a game of golf. Being committed and loving fathers of young children and devoted husbands, we decided that 6 o'clock on Sunday morning was really the only time we could fit in nine holes plus coffee, be not at all missed by our wives and still be home to have Sundays with our families.

That tradition, although perhaps for slightly different reasons, continues to this day and our membership has grown exponentially (well, to about 15 or so).

Phil was enthusiastic about this from the get-go, and he will now be forever remembered as a founding member of SMERGS (which, for the uninitiated, is the Sunday Morning Early Risers Golf Society – and, if any of you need a more interesting home page, the website is www.smergs.org).

I think I speak for all its members when I say that SMERGS has become more than a group of blokes having 9 holes of golf on Sunday mornings. It has become, for me at least, a solid core of friends on whom I rely, mostly in vain, for intelligent and witty conversation, but without fail for a kind of brotherly camaraderie and support. In some ways it's like a men's shed with some golf on the side (although there are apparently still some of us who think the golf is actually important!).

Phil was at the heart of SMERGS and, I have to say, represented all that was good and bad about the group. He was deliberate in his pace of play, he was good company when he happened to have a good score, and, he wasn't when he didn't.

He was also the most prolific finder of lost balls I have ever known, and also the occasional pocketeer of not so lost balls. But, as was typical of Phil, he was committed to the cause and, like all of us, enjoyed it immensely.

For several years Phil generously co-organised and hosted the SMERGS Annual Dinner at his sailing club, the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron. On the program every year is a scorer's report provided by our Acting / Honorary / Temporary Scorer, Peter Thornton, and I thought it only fitting that we should have a report today on Phil's career in SMERGS (with thanks to Peter).

Now a word of warning. Some people, particularly the wives of SMERGS, seem to need to leave the room during the scorer's report, I presume due to the high level of excitement that it generates. But I know Helen always loves the scorer's report, so strap yourselves in – this bit is riveting!

Over the last 19 years or so of the more reliable SMERGS record-keeping, Phil:

- Played on 429 Sunday mornings or an average of 25 times per year. Like most wives, Helen may have wished that he played more, but that's every two weeks so she really can't complain;
- Had a best gross score of 37 (or 4 over par) in 1998, and regrettably a worst gross score of 72 in 2012 – which history may show as worthy of the Grand Gross Deviant Award;
- Had 60 wins over the 17 years, or 1 win per 7 appearances, or 3.5 wins per year; so he definitely got his share of balls – I don't suppose we can have some back, can we?
- Scored a total of 6,237 stableford points at an average of 14.5 points per round; given that we once made him play of a handicap of 8, I reckon that's very respectable;
- Paid for coffee 88 times or 6.7 times per year, which is perhaps not so respectable; many thanks for all those coffees, Phil; and, finally,
- Is the only player to have won our annual matchplay championship (or the Triple D) three times!

Phil was also able to somehow play in the heaviest winter clothing I think I have ever seen on a golfer! Perhaps that had something to do with him being a member of Wentworth Falls Golf Club, and we all remember the wonderful lunches that Phil and Helen would host for us in their beautiful cottage adjoining the course following our annual Blue Mountains Classic.

Phil has been sadly missed by all SMERGS over the last few years, and will be remembered fondly by us all. He will no doubt have an event named after him or some other commemoration (but don't worry Helen – we will consult you first as some of our memorials have been seen, unfairly I think, to be in not very good taste).

In more recent times, Phil developed a diverse range of interests. He very astutely bought and sold antiques and collectibles, mostly at garage sales. I must say that I, for one, would not like to be caught standing between Phil and a bargain. He also worked at Bunnings where he demonstrated his great sense of fairness by representing some workers whom he felt were being unfairly treated. And his advocacy on behalf of the Willoughby Pre-School in its difficult times should also not be forgotten.

In 1988, Steph and I left Carlos Road for the country life. I remember how delighted we were to see Phil and the family when they visited us in Tenterfield. We were looking yesterday at the photos of that visit and I realised what it was about Phil that I liked so much. We might not have seen each other often, but when we did, it was as though this continuing friendship had not been interrupted at all. Like we had seen each other just yesterday.

I regret now not having seen Phil more during these last years. But whenever we did catch up, it was just like that – we took up the conversation from when and where we had left it. The thread was never broken.

I hope I'm not alone in thinking, at times like this, about what makes this life of ours worthwhile. I often find myself wondering, regardless of what we believe happens to us after death, about what can we leave behind on earth that will be our 'mark'.

That we leave behind our DNA in our children is great and remarkable. That we leave behind the means for our families to prosper is a wonderful thing. But it seems to me that if we leave behind in the minds of those who really knew us the impression of a decent and caring person, that is a real and lasting achievement.

Phil has left with me the impression of a highly principled man, a hard worker, a devoted and loving husband and father, and a true and loyal friend.

As that prolific author, anonymous, once wrote - 'Good friends are hard to find, harder to leave and impossible to forget'.

So 'Vale' Phil Alexander – never to be forgotten.

