

David Banfield and Norrie Blythman's Life Story

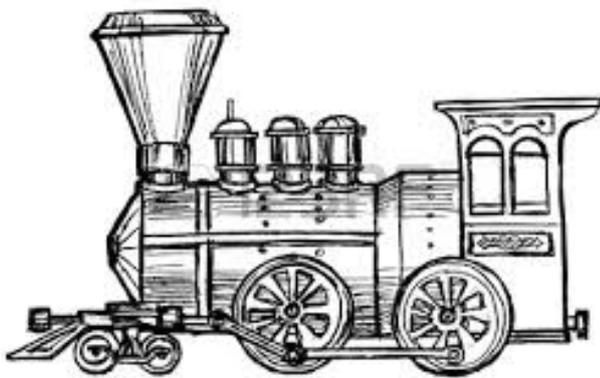
David Banfield, Norrie
Blythman and David
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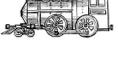


Foreword

This book is one in a series of five life stories of members of Reinforce, the oldest self advocacy group in Victoria. It represents one of the outcomes of a collaborative research project between the Living with Disability Research Centre (Latrobe University) and the Reinforce History Group, which was a collaborative group formed to work on the ARC Linkage project 'Self Advocacy and Inclusion: What can be learned from speaking up over the years'. The group consisted of Amanda Hiscoe, Janice Slattery, Norrie Blythman, Jane Rosengrave (Hauser) and the late David Banfield from Reinforce and Professor Christine Bigby, Dr Patsie Frawley (La Trobe University) and Dr Paul Ramcharan (RMIT). These life stories were produced over two years of collaboration with members of the history group and the historian Dr David Henderson (La Trobe University).



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David's Family

One morning I made my way into town to the offices of Reinforce in order to catch up David Banfield and Norrie Blythman. Norrie never showed up but David explained that he was happy to speak to me alone. I told him about what I was hoping we would do, about how we might work together to get something of his life story down on the page and we started with some questions about his family. 'I was born in Bendigo', said David when I asked him about his childhood. 'Bendigo born and bred. I'll be 60 in January. I was born in 1951. I've got two brothers, one in Melbourne, one Bendigo. Richard's me oldest one, oldest brother, he's living at Chirnside Park and works as a handyman sort of thing at a school up in Balwyn. My younger brother's up in Bendigo'. I asked if his mother was still alive. 'Yes, she was 85 in April', said David, 'she's a widow. Dad died early, I was only about six when he passed on, of lung cancer. I still can't work how he's got lung cancer because he didn't smoke. He was in the Railways, he was a labourer, doing brake shoes on wagons and all that sort of thing, but I think he got it from being a member of the CFA. I'm in that too', David said with a hint of pride, 'as a fireman. I'm in the same brigade. The Golden Square Urban'.

I asked David his father's name. 'Les', he replied, 'it was Wilfred Lesley actually, but we used to call him Les. I've got a reasonable remembrance of him. Dad was in the Air Force when the

War was on. He was in the Air Force during the War, he didn't have to be, because being in the Railways was an essential service, and he didn't have to leave the Railways but he joined the Air Force and he was in the Air Force for about six years. But he never went out of Australia. He was down at Sale. Or down at East Sale Air Force base all the time he was in the Air Force meeting aircraftsmen, ground-crew'. David paused for a moment. 'Me grandfather died three years after my father and he was about 60', said David after a while. 'He was a miner. He worked in the Central Debra Mine and a few other mines up until they closed. Well it's partly a working mine but it's also partly a tourist attraction as well. You can actually go down to a 200 foot level and they do tours, underground tours with a tour guide. And they're still getting quite a bit of gold out of there at the moment, I believe'.



'There's part, one area of the mine sort of blocked off', said David still talking about the Central Debra Gold Mine, 'and you've got people working there, actually digging for gold. Well some of the places they worked in you would be only say the size of that desk, and they were down on their hands and knees digging out coal, just picks and shovels and all that sort of thing. A lot of that was pick and shovel work in those days. And my little brother just recently had a heart operation', said David, who had suddenly returned to the story of his family. 'So it wasn't all that easy for him to sort of go down (the mine) and come back up again because he had to have a heart valve replaced. That was last November that he had that done and he was in hospital for two weeks. He's not working at the moment, he's only doing volunteering work, two days a week in an op shop, yes. He was on the Railways 'til they laid him off and retrenched him, got rid of all the signalmen in the Bendigo area', David explained. 'He was in the signalmen, in communications area, and everything's sort of been op, fibre-optic and that sort of thing and you can control that from virtually one point. Bendigo's lost a lot', he said, the paused for a moment. 'They used to have a large workshop up there, in the Railways, that's all closed, that's all gone. The loco's now privately owned, southern and short-haul railway is operating that. They're basically just getting old locomotives and fixing 'em up, redoing 'em and giving 'em another spray paint'.



Sandhurst Boys Home

Later our conversation turned to Bendigo and, more specifically, to the Sandhurst Boys Home, to which David had been admitted in 1956. 'I was there from 1968 to 1972, I think', said David. Sandhurst was where David had also first met Norrie Blythman and it is part of the Reinforce story that they have remained firm friends, by their own admission, ever since. 'Anyway Sandhurst's changed a hell of a lot since I've been up there', said David. 'They used to have old-style Nissan huts, we used to sleep in them. They're all gone now. Well all that area where the Nissan huts were it's been sold and they're now putting houses on it. So it's changed a hell of a lot. We had six people to a Nissan hut, and there was a couple of large Nissan huts that were there as well because the gymnasium or concert hall that we used to have, used to be one huge big Nissan hut sort of a complex'. I wanted to know more and asked about the sleeping arrangements and about David's friends at Sandhurst. 'Norrie was in at one stage', David replied, 'there was a guy by the name of Eddie Dickinson, who was one of the oldest residents there at one stage'. David was good with names and it was clear that he remembered quite a bit of his early childhood. 'Jimmy Schultz was a blind guy, or legally blind anyway, he could see a little bit, but he was a great one at playing the piano. He was a guy that, he could hear a tune on the wireless, and 10, 20 seconds later he could play it on the piano, he was that good', said David, who seemed to be

enjoying exploring his memories of his childhood. 'They used to use Jimmy for the concert, whenever they had a speech night, which was usually December every year. They used to use Jimmy to play all the piano and all, all the musical stuff. He was great. He was great' David said again, 'and I don't even know if he's still alive. Last I heard he was living out Malvern way, with I think Vision Australia, but yes playing the piano, he was great'.

David recalled that there had been about seventy residents at Sandhurst during the time that he had lived there. 'It was all boys', he explained. 'Yes now it's just called Sandhurst. Sandhurst because there's boys and girls. Well a lot of the people that came to Sandhurst came to from Stawell, because once they got to 16 they'd just transfer 'em up to Sandhurst, put them into workshops and stuff like that. Probably try and teach 'em a trade or something like that and then get it out in the community', said David. 'That was the idea of it. Like they had one area was an engineer' shop, they had a boot shop, and a carpenter's shop, and there was both a veggie and an ornamental garden. They had a paint shop as well. I worked in the boot shop', David explained. 'Mending government shoes, all that sort of thing, making government slippers, for nearly all the major institutions that they had at the time, like Sunbury, Coolanda and all that. We made all the shoes for 'em. All the slippers and that, and if they wanted 'em they just put an order in and once the order come in we'd just make 'em up, send them out. Lining, all that sort of thing. And put the leather soles on 'em. They used to have regular shoe and boot inspections, for people at Sandhurst, and any

need a repair we used to do all the repairs. If they were too old and needed chucking out well they'd just order new shoes and new boots and all that sort of thing, but they also made all different things, like poufés, all that sort of thing'. David was speaking rapidly. I remember asking if he liked the work? 'Yes, it wasn't bad, the guy that did it, Duncan Knights, he's gone now but he was great. When I met him he was about 54, 55, but he was great. He was really good, he was fair and taught you all the trade and how to do certain things and if you did something wrong he wouldn't go off his rocker at you he'd just explain where you'd gone wrong and get you to do it again and keep doing it until you got it right'.



The next time, I caught up with David, Norrie Blythman had remembered to attend our interview and the three of us spoke for about three quarters of an hour. In these interviews it seemed as if Norrie rarely got a chance to speak. Even so he rarely felt comfortable speaking to me on his own. Occasionally, when Norrie took up the telling of their story it was clear that he had some stories to tell, but he still looked to David for guidance, as if he

could not trust his own memories. Once, when I asked him what he could remember about the early days at Sandhurst, Norrie launched into a story about a night he and David had gone out on the town, only to be caught in the act by a member of the Sandhurst staff. Norrie and David must have been teenagers by this time. 'There was one night we went to the dance. I think it was on Saturday night', said Norrie and he looked to David for confirmation. 'Yes it was a Saturday night, if I remember right'. David nodded before Norrie continued with his story. 'And we went to this dance, on Saturday night, and it was at the Pacific Ballroom, wasn't it?' He looked at David again, who replied, 'that's right, down in McCrae Street. 'We thought: "Oh yes, we'll go and watch this dance" and there was one staff member, who was from Sandhurst, who just happened to be the bouncer. Reg Tander, and we got a hell of a shock that night, didn't we'. Both men broke out laughing. 'Bloody oath' David exclaimed once the laughing had subsided.



Friendship

David and Norrie seemed comfortable around one another. Often, when you visit the offices of Reinforce you will find them, and only them, sitting in their separate corners of the meeting room, with the radio set to 774 at a low level. I remember remarking at one point during our interview at the fact that each seemed so comfortable with the other. I remember suggesting that perhaps this was because each had known the other for so long.

'Yep', David replied. 'Too bloody long!'

'Mm', Norrie agreed, 'as David put it we're part of the furniture, right Dave. We're part of the furniture, well that's what they always say'.

'We were in those days' said David. 'Weren't we?'

'We were in them days', Norrie agreed, 'yes'.

Then, for a while both men tried to work out how who had been at Sandhurst first. David was convinced it was Norrie. Norrie, for his part, was not so sure.

'He come from Pleasant Creek', David explained. Which Norrie confirmed. 'Well I was at Stawell', Norrie said, 'then I went to Bendigo, he was at Sandhurst before I was there, before I came in'.

Who? David asked.

You were.

No I...

Oh no I – you were.

No you were' David said.

Oh no, said Norrie, I was and then he came later.

Finally, both men seemed to agree that Norrie had been at Sandhurst first. 'Yes', said David authoritatively, 'I come after you lad'.

Norrie acquiesced. 'Yes, you come after me, ah yes'.

We spoke some more about Sandhurst and David led the conversation and soon, inevitably, the conversation turned to Bendigo and its trams. 'The tram service is gone, the only one they've got there now is the tourist tram. It goes from the mine, to oh, to Jock's house. I still can't see why they should have pulled the trams out of Bendigo', David said, and he sounded distressed. 'They were providing a service, which is something the bloody buses don't do. I'm going to really start clamping down on that, because when they signed the original contract, for buses to take over, the buses were supposed to operate with the tram timetable and finish at 11.30 at night, they don't. Every bus service in Bendigo finishes at six o'clock at night. Not good enough!' The conversation went on like this for a while, David and Norrie both talking about the routes the trams had taken and change the subject I remember asking why David was so interested in trams and trains. 'Me old man was in the railways', David replied, as if that explained everything. And perhaps it did.



The Lodge

Soon, Norrie lost interest in the interview and wondered away to his computer. If David noticed he didn't seem too concerned. He kept on talking and I tried to bring in a new subject. It was not subtle. I simply asked him if he was a member of the lodge. 'I am', David replied, 'Norrie's not'. David joined Freemasons in 1986 and it came as no surprise to me that he remembered the exact date that he had been admitted: '20 June 1986', he said, 'and this year, on the 20 June, this year I'll be in 25 years. I'll be eligible for a 25-year service. I was raised to 2nd Degree in 1990, took on District Primo for a year. That was one hell of a time and in some ways I wish I'd never taken it on. I had seven raisings', he said. I was not sure what he was talking about and asked him to explain. 'It's when you, a person who's just a Brother, gets his 2nd Degree, Certified Primo. The first one I did, I didn't do one. I had three of the bastards. Yep! And two of them are now dead. John McDonald and John Hart. It was down at Oakleigh we did that. Yes, well it sits behind the railway station, actually', said David. 'We've got a group that meet at Bayswater, which is like Healesville, and that's every, oh it's every second Sunday of the month. We've got Marshall that meets down at Geelong every third Sunday of the month. I'm the Grand Lodge, so I've got to be at Delegates on the first Monday of the month, every second month we have ROH council'. Again, I could not follow what David was talking about, but he kept on talking.



'Well every Monday night used to be taken up with the Lodge meeting, because we used to have delegates the first Monday, ROH council the second Monday, Knights Chapter the third, and District Primo Lodge on the fourth. But now a District Primo lodge and Knights Chapter have amalgamated, into one lodge, so third Monday now is freer'. I couldn't easily follow what David was talking about. The complexities of the Lodge arrangements seemed to be beyond me but David kept on talking. I asked him how he had become involved in the organisation in the first place. 'Oh, Colin got me into that', David replied. 'He's an ROH, and he's a chain collar holder now. That's a just another level. You get ROH, you do five years at ROH council and as long as you remain financial, you're eligible to get a chain collar', said David, 'and that's presented by the Grand Primo at a meeting at the your Lodge.



David and Reinforce

When David turned to reminiscing about Reinforce, it was not always in positive terms. He told me that there had been times when he had considered giving Reinforce away. When I asked him why, he said 'oh when you have pawns like Tony Maxwell and David Foster to bring a few. Pains in the rear ends, they were', said David, and Norrie agreed. 'Especially bloody Tony. He used to think he could get away with doing his own thing all the time. He'd never go by a committee. We kicked him out, in '85. We used to be around the corner in Nicholas Avenue', said David, 'up on the fifth floor. When we went to America, he and David Foster and two of his mates instead of going home at night from work, they'd sleep in the office, which was against the rules for a start. And instead of going to the loo they used the rubbish bin! Of course Des McIntosh found that out the day we got back from America and went to chuck something out and something fell out of his pocket or something and he went to get it, and it was full blown, with bits of shit. Anyway, Des called the meeting for next morning, and notified 'em, notified us. So we called a special committee meeting and decided if that's the way he's gonna be, we don't want him and we give him the arse. There's no way I'd have him back', said David. 'No way at all. In fact I don't think anyone'd have him back.'



It seemed a natural enough shift from speaking of the early days at Reinforce to speaking about Des McIntosh and Doug Pentland, two important early members of Reinforce. 'Well he's had a lot of problems, Des', said David. 'I think a lot of the problems have come because of Doug's death. Because Doug and Des were really great mates and worked together at Gorth Villa. I think Des really misses him. We were lucky to have Doug as long as we did, because when we were in America in '84, he got accidentally pushed into the deep end of a pool, in Sunnyvale when we were staying there and he almost drowned'. When I asked David when he had first met Doug, he was quiet for a moment. 'At Middle Park, I think', he said after a while. Then he looked to Norrie, who was sitting in his usual spot at his computer, for confirmation. 'I think he came to one of our discos one night and brought his then girlfriend with him. Because Doug came down to the' said David, who didn't finish the sentence. 'No' he said, 'he didn't come down to the Inverloch conference, he went to the Lancefield one. That was it. There was him and Mandy I think that represented Reinforce. Well at the time Mandy was the representative of Middle Park, but he was involved in

a lot of the setting up committees, or subcommittees of the Inverloch conference. We had a lot of the meetings out at Middle Park. It's a pity that isn't still there,' said David, more to Norrie than me.

Yes, its' a pity, Norrie replied.

He was pretty good, said David, still talking about Doug. He was a great believer in people's rights, which was one good thing. Around, '85, Doug and I went up to Sydney, to do a conference at Sydney University. He was one of the speakers there. I was think it was in front of about 800 or 900 people and he got up and told them what he thought of institutions and all that sort of thing. He made a lot of people cry. I can tell you that', said David, 'he didn't beat around the bush'.

But it wasn't just his capacity for seriousness that won Doug friends. There was a softer side to Doug as well: 'Oh, he could be really jovial', David explained, 'especially when he was doing the footy tips on a Friday. Oh, it's no sooner you come to the door and he wants your footy tips! And nearly all the time Doug was the one that won the points for that week! He got the most out of everybody. If anyone ever ribbed him about Essendon he'd rib us about our own team. He'd tell 'em what he thought of 'em. Doug was 'one-eyed' said David, 'you couldn't get a more one-eyed supporter than Doug. He used to stir Des up like crazy, because Des barracked for the Sydney Swans and whenever Essendon and Sydney met, and Essendon won, poor old Dezzie copped it the

Monday morning when he come in. Doug used to give him absolute hell. Didn't he, Norrie?', said David, who was smiling.

He certainly did, Norrie replied without looking up from his computer.



USA

Once, in another interview, David told me how he had often thought about writing a book about his life. I told him that this was what I was doing with him and that I was here to facilitate the telling of his story. I remember asking him if he knew what he would like to talk about. 'Oh, I've got a fair idea', he replied. Then he was silent. I waited, hoping David would elaborate but he said nothing and we sat for a moment in silence. I prodded again, asking if there was anything he would like to share with me and he gave some dates. 'Well 19 July 1984 to the 2 August 1984', David said, 'that was the time we went to Yankee-land, the first time. I can remember that real well'. David was quiet again and I asked if he would tell me about this trip. 'Well we all met at Spencer Street Station, see, so you used to have the SkyBus. It went from Spencer Street to Tullamarine, they still do, but it goes from a different part now. And we had a bit of a farewell party up on the first floor at Tullamarine, before we left'. David started reeling off names of those who had attended the party, some of which I recognised and others of which I did not. 'Frank de Vere, Wendy Orvendi, Emilio from DRC, I think Leslie was there. Yes Leslie was there, she went with us. Jacquie, Frank de Veer', David said again, 'and Tibor. Anne Brown, and Bernie Ross as a fill in. I still think that Tony Maxwell should have been made to go and not pull out right at the last minute.'



'Hang on a minute', Norrie interjected. He had been listening to David tell the story. Norrie had not made the trip to the USA, but he wanted to know which office Reinforce had been in at that time.

'Nicholas Arcade', David explained, before continuing with his story. 'The group was already picked to go, all right. Except for David Foster. He was picked to go but ...

No, Norrie said, interjecting again. 'His missus was', but that was all Norrie could get out before David was talking again. For a while both men were speaking at the same time and I struggled to follow what they were saying. What emerged however was that there had been some controversy about who would actually attend the conference in America. In the end, as David explained, there were 14 people chosen. 'There were six support', he said, 'and eight people who were being supported.

'After the big uproar', Norrie said again and I wondered if Norrie, who is quieter than some of the other Reinforce might have been shunted aside at this meeting.



'Well the first two days after we got to America we were staying at a place called Sunnyvale, which was about 50 kilometres south of San Francisco. We were staying in a Holiday Inn. And Doug and a few others had gone for a swim, and of course Doug can't swim very well. Normally stays in the shallow end and he was up talking to someone in the deep end when a bloke tripped and accidentally pushed him in.

'That would be dangerous, yes', said Norrie, quite seriously.

'And ever since that day', said David, 'Dougie never went near a swimming pool again, his entire life'.

'That sort of scared him', Norrie added.

Soon, David was telling another story which, it seems, has become part of Reinforce folklore. The going away party was over by about one o'clock, by which time the group was ready to leave. They made their way over to customs, but, as David explained, 'Colin kept on triggering the electronic device that they put there, put over you, the scanner thing. He used to smoke', said David by way of explanation, 'and he had a little bit of silver paper that had caught in his pocket, and it was that that had triggered the alarm'. Norrie and David burst out laughing and I remember laughing along, though I had heard this story before. Then, David and Norrie launched into a quick discussion about the sensitivity of airport alarms and soon David was reminded of another story, involving airport security. It was a story that Norrie knew as well and for a while each tried to tell the same story at the same time.

'Well I had to laugh when I was on the executive of Grand Lodge', said David. 'I had to go up to Sydney with Terry and the Deputy Grand Primo'.

'Yes', said Norrie.'

'And of course Terry, some months before, had had a real serious accident up at the corner of Latrobe and Swanston Street.

'Corner, yes,' said Norrie who, was seemed to be preparing to take up the story. But before he could get going David was speaking again. 'He'd fallen arse over tit, and broken his collarbone'.

Norrie tried again. 'And he had a metal, had metal screws.'

'And he had all metal bolts and stuff', said David. He was speaking loudly. 'And that gave us a good scare', said Norrie. He laughed out loud, which gave David an opportunity to continue with the story.

'He had to go up to Sydney for a conference, for Grand Lodge and every time he went through the scanner...

But Norrie was quickest to the punchline. 'It'd set it off'.

'Oh he did', David agreed, 'because he had that much metal on him, it was unbelievable. One bloke called him a bloody electronic terrorist!' he said laughing.

'Call him the Bionic Man', echoed Norrie, 'and that would have been right! That was hilarious'.

After both men had finished laughing, David returned to the story of Reinforce's trip to America. 'Well, we had a lot of problems, we really did', he said, and he sighed. 'We flew from Melbourne to Sydney. And Sydney to Honolulu, then Honolulu to San Francisco.

Yet we were told by the agent we went through, we would be flying direct from Melbourne to San Francisco, no stop'. Norrie laughed out loud, then he said 'they really stuff that one really up'. David nodded in agreement before continuing with his story. 'They, Continental, the company we were flying with, normally you refuel in Sydney so we had to get off the plane in Sydney for about an hour, or an hour and a bit, while they refuelled and cleaned.

'Get off, stretch your legs, before you get back on the plane', said Norrie.

'You've got to change your crew', said David after a pause. 'Because the crew that brought it down, they get relieved in Sydney and another crew take over. And they go from Sydney, to Honolulu, then another crew come on. I had to laugh at Des, he was funny, he was up talking to the hostesses all through the night and all that, having cups of coffee and he was going to settle down and go to sleep. Then three o'clock in the morning, two hours out of Honolulu and they turn the lights on and serve breakfast and Des couldn't get to sleep'. Both men laughed. Once they were quiet again David said, 'oh that was funny, that was'. After a moment, David picked up the story again. 'So we get into Honolulu, we had to get all our gear off the plane, because you go through Customs, they weren't going to let us through, because our visas had been marked as direct to San Francisco. The support workers got through all right, no probs', said David. 'But all the people with disabilities, they weren't going to let us through. It was only because Frank de Veer and Tibor really

started harassing 'em that they let us through. But they weren't going to. They wanted us to wait on the plane for two hours'.

For a moment Norrie took up the story. 'See that's a mad stuff-up, that', he explained. 'If your passports get stuffed up like that, they don't allow you anywhere else but the way you're going'. Then David took up the story again. 'Well when we got off the plane, the minute we got off the plane, because you walked down a ramp thing and across the tarmac, they don't have the gates that come out, like they do at Tullamarine. I don't know if they do now, but they didn't in those days. And just as you walked out of the door, you could feel the heat coming up from the ground'.

'And the humidity', said Norrie. 'From the ground the humidity would come up, and whipped you straight off, like if you're walking in an oven'.

'Well we were there from five past five 'til quarter to eight' David said. 'We were back on the plane at half past seven, because they've had to taxi out to it's departure point, now one thing with the airport at Honolulu, it actually has a canal running right up the guts of it. So if you're got to go to say Runway A, and take off, you've actually got to go through a bridge, which if there's a boat coming up, the bridge sort of lifts up like that'. He held his hands in the air and pulled them apart to show me what he was talking about. 'We've departed from 8A', said David, 'and straight after we departed, we got breakfast again. So that was two breakfasts, on the one flight'. Norrie and David both laughed again. They were enjoying telling the story. 'Des', said David, 'Des was amazed. He

said: "I could live this down!" That was about, 3.30. Took us from about a quarter to eight to 3.30 to get from Honolulu to San Francisco'. We spoke for a while about crossing the international date line and how it was very easy to get confused, then David said, 'I told them that we left Melbourne at 1.15 in the afternoon in pouring rain, and we got to San Francisco on the same day, at 3.30, and one bloke turned around and said: "That's a bloody quick flight! What did you do, get a Concord?"

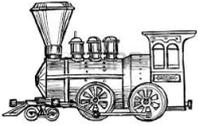


I asked David and Norrie to tell me more about the conference in San Francisco. 'We were actually asked in October 1983 if we'd want to be co-sponsors', said David. 'We immediately said "yes, bloody oath, we'd be in it", so we contacted Bonnie, and told her we'd go for it, it's just a matter of getting the money to get across there and going through all the rigmarole of passports and all that sort of thing. I'm still thinking that if I didn't put that I had a

disability on me form, would I have got through as an ordinary person. It might have been a lot quicker', David explained. 'I wouldn't have had so much hassles when we got to Honolulu and all that sort of thing. But that's just part of the thing, because I never had any problem when I went to the conference in Alaska, and that was in 1998. We flew Melbourne, Auckland, LA, then we had to change flights in LA because the aircraft that we were on, was going to Denver', said David, who was now talking about the trip he made to Alaska. 'Then to New York, then I think it was going to London, I'm not sure. So we changed flights in LA and were there for about four and a half hours. Then we got an Alaskan Airlines MBA, up to Seattle and because he was going to Montreal we had to change in Seattle. We got another MBA to go to the Seattle, Anchorage and it was three hours from Seattle to Anchorage'.

Soon, I made another attempt to get David to tell me about the conference they had attended in the USA. I remember asking him if he had presented anything at the conference. 'Yes Doug and I did the first session in the afternoon', he replied. 'We should have a book somewhere on it', said David. 'A real good book and it named everyone that was at the conference, where they were from and all that sort of thing. I must try and find it. The History Group should have a copy. There's a photo of the main hall or the outside part of the hall, where we held the conference', said David. 'And there was Dougie and Judith Buchanan. There was a woman from Nevada I think it was, that was in a wheelchair. Mandy's even got her face in

some part of the Report', David recalled, 'and Colin's got his face in with his arm in a plaster cast'.



Norrie and Reinforce

Once, when David, Norrie and I were just sitting around and chatting in the Reinforce meeting room, Norrie turned to me and told me quietly that he had been born in Hopetoun. I was satisfied by this small exchange because it takes a bit of work to get Norrie talking. He is a private and quiet man. That isn't to say that he will not talk to you, only that it requires a certain amount of patience and subtle prodding to get him to speak about himself. I remember that once, when I caught up with Norrie on his own, I asked him about self advocacy and what it meant to him. 'It means supporting others', Norrie replied after a long pause, 'well supporting others, helping others to achieve and not just myself but for other people as well'. I asked him what he could remember of the early years of Reinforce and what he had done at Reinforce over the years and he told me that both he and David Banfield were founding members. 'Well back to the days of Frank de Veer and Roy Bellin', said Norrie, 'and all those others and Leslie Hall, and back to those days, yes. Yes I was involved with Reinforce then, yes, and it's good'. And what sort of stuff were you doing back then, I asked. 'Basically what I'm doing, what we're doing now' Norrie replied. 'Closing institutions. Yes. And I was a bit involved with the Drummond Street squat. I had a megaphone, and was part of that. I didn't use the megaphone but they used it. They used it in the protest.' Norrie said. 'They won. So yes'.





I kept on asking questions and parts of Norrie's story began to emerge in his replies. I asked him to think back to the early days at Reinforce. 'Oh, to tell you', he said. 'The places we were then. We started wherever and then we had a place, shop front I think it was, up in High Street Northcote. The shop, well we had that for a while, and then we moved just around the corner here. Then from there to here'. I asked what his feelings were about Reinforce now and whether it was working as well as it had in the past. 'I think it is'. Norrie replied. 'I think it is, yes. But we've still got a long way to go. I still think we've got a long way to go on the things we've got to do, plus training, and so forth'. Norrie told me how it used to worry him 'when we were still aiming for new members. As Colin would say, we are getting old in the tooth. We do need new blood, so to speak, but we're going to be around for a long time'.



When I asked about Middle Park, Norrie started speaking quickly. 'Oh, the things that we used to do. We had discos, Dave and I used to sit at the door, taking, doing the tickets. We were very popular for that', said Norrie and we both laughed out loud. 'We were, Dave and I were very popular for that', Norrie said again, 'tickets, drinks, couldn't get in anywhere else but the front door. It was basically where you'd go and hang out', Norrie said of Middle Park. 'It was basically like a recreation sort of thing, you'd go there, you'd play snooker. Or they may have cooking classes and you might be interested in that. We did cooking classes. Or there might be a weekend you might go away. Other times just play games. Sometimes you might have movies there'. When I asked him if he could imagine Reinforce running something like that now, Norrie didn't really answer the question though he continued to reminisce

about the times he had spent there in the past. 'If it was still going, it'd be more or less recreation, listening to tapes and whatever. Or snooker. Big thing was for Tuesday night table tennis, Dave and I used to go down there, Tuesday nights. He used to umpire table tennis. Some nights we might have bingo nights, Dave and I were very good at doing that. There might be one night you have discos, another night maybe another week after that there might be a movie. We'd supply that night with whatever, drinks. The only thing that was at the door, Dave and I were on the door.

Soon, the conversation began to falter and for a moment I thought that I would be turning off the recorder. But after a long silence, Norrie started talking again. 'Them are the days that I, they're the sort of things I can remember', he said. 'I can remember some nights we used to' he said, then he started the sentence again. 'There was a milk bar on the corner near Middle Park', explained Norrie. So we used to go around there. Dave'll tell you this himself, when he comes back. He used to get drinks. The guy that ran it made pizzas. So yes, that was all right. So we'll nick around and get a pizza. That was the nearest milk bar. And when you'd walk down a block, in Beaconsfield, you'd only walk down a block and there was a pub on the corner. There was one pub on the corner, walked another block and there'd be another one! Pubs everywhere. Been often a couple of nights we've been going there for teas and stuff like that. Mostly of a Saturday night. They're some of the things I can remember'.



Norrie's Family

Soon the conversation turned to Norrie's family. 'Oh, my sister lives in Kilsyth', he said, when I asked him about his sister, 'there's six in our family. There's myself, my brother, and he lives in Bayswater. His career started out and he wanted to be in the police, which he did. He started out as a cadet, at the police academy out here at Glen Waverley. Did his training there', said Norrie, 'graduated. He was stationed in Prahran for a while. Then he was stationed at Richmond, then he was at Russell Street for quite a while, and now he's retired'. Norrie's sister meanwhile worked in a bank. 'Oh Deb she started out and worked as a bank teller', said Norrie. 'Worked at the Commonwealth Bank for a while. And left there and worked at Westpac, up until now, she's retired. I have another sister who's over in Perth and she's teaching', Norrie said, continuing with his story about his family. 'So the family's all spread out, yes. I've got one living in Mildura. My sister Lynne. She lives in Mildura. My eldest sister out of all is Sharon. She's living in Geelong at the moment, at my niece's. Well it's her house, but she's living there. She's now a cruising director. Started out as a beauty consultant and goes overseas and that. Started out as that then ended up being a cruise director'.

Norrie, who is a keen traveller, told me how he was looking forward to taking a cruise the following year. 'I'm hoping I'll do another cruise', he said. 'I'm leaving in January. This time to New

Zealand. My girlfriend's going with me too', he said, when I asked him who he would be travelling with. 'My sister and her sister is doing it. So this time we're doing it, more appropriate to that sort of family sort of thing. So I thought we'll get more enjoyment out of it, doing it that way. We're booked on the Dawn Princess. Leaving not Sydney, Melbourne'. It sounded pretty nice and I said as much. 'Yes', Norrie replied. 'Do a cruise around New Zealand, look at some of the interesting places. I mean one of the places we're going to look at is the Milford Sounds place. I'm going to look, to have a look at there. I hear that's very good, the boiling mud. We're going to see that as well, as part the tour, so yes.

Norrie, lives in Kew and when the conversation about his upcoming cruise drew to a close, I asked him if he was happy at Kew. 'Oh still happy where I am', he said. He told me that he lives with about '40 or 50 other guys. It's good', he said, and 'it's close to public transport, and handy for me. I'm close to the bus, close to trams, which is quite accessible for me'. Norrie paused for a moment. 'The only place you know', he said, 'if you're close to these things, you know, it's easier to get around. Well that's how I find it anyway'.



Norrie cannot remember when it was exactly that he left Bendigo to take on a job as a cleaner at Kew Cottages. But, by his own account, taking the job at Kew was, in many ways one of the steps that led to his involvement at Reinforce. 'From the time I was working at Kew', said Norrie, 'I started out, there was another person before me. I was at Bendigo, at the time, and then I heard on the grapevine that there was a job going. And apparently it come to my attention that I'd got the job. So then I found out then that I was coming to Melbourne. So that's how I got the job at Kew. I was at Bendigo at the time. I was at Sandhurst. I was there at the time. But at that time they were starting to build the new centre and by the time I ended up here and getting the job, I left'. I asked him if he was glad to leave. 'I was glad to go', he replied, 'and then they had this meeting. Apparently it was on a Friday night and I can recall, they said: "Oh, we'll get somebody to leave". Oh yes and I just had to make a speech. I just said: "Yes I am leaving, I'm taking up a new job. As a cleaner"! Yes it was known as the Mental Health thingo then, before it come to what it is known as now', said Norrie. 'And that's how it all started'.

'I went cleaning, cleaning, cleaning. In the cleaning way it was a better life. Not long after that David left. We still caught up with him. We caught up with each other then and then we heard about Reinforce and we joined up. Through that, so yes. And we've been members ever since. Even though I was still working at the time, I was hardly ever here. I was there on certain days that I were here

and I was working other days. They've been certain days. The only days I could get here were a Fridays or days I'd have off. But up until the time I'd left, I thought: "Oh this's going to be good". After I left I thought: Ah. Now here's a chance I'm going to spend more time here with Reinforce than working'. Norrie paused for a moment. 'So it worked', he said after a while. 'It worked, it worked. More chance to catch up with Dave. He was a good friend, yes'.

I remember at this point the conversation was becoming quite stilted. I was trying to come up with topics that Norrie might like to discuss. I had hoped that as we talked, Norrie might begin to take control of the conversation and set some parameters for the way his story should be told. Occasionally I asked him if there was anything he would like to discuss and once, I said to him if you were going to tell me your life story what would you say are the important parts of your life? 'Oh', Norrie said, and he looked a little startled. I conceded that it was a very hard question and Norrie agreed. 'A very hard question, it's very hard. A very hard one to try and answer. A bit difficult', said Norrie after some thought, 'but I'm just happy with the way that I'm doing things now, basically. I'm just happy with the things, you know, what I'm doing at the moment. I'm always happy at Reinforce. I come in four days a week, if I want to have a rest I might have a rest'. He laughed. 'Just come and go, rest up, come in the next day', said Norrie. 'A couple of days after that I might come in again, if there's something else to do I'll come in'.