

Speaker Series: Remembering Issy Wyner

Interviewer [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner West Library Speaker series, we would like to start by acknowledging the Gadigal and the Wangal people of the Eora nation on which this podcast is produced. My name is Lisa Mantle. Today, we are joined by James Wyner, grandson of Issy Wyner, to discuss his grandfather's legacy. Issy Wyner was a councillor, a mayor, a unionist an activist and historian. He served as a councillor for Leichhardt Council for much of the period between 1959 to the mid-90s and as mayor in 1989 to 1990. Issy passed away in 2008. James is going to share some stories with us about his grandfather. Welcome, James.

James Wyner [00:35.67] Thank you, Lisa. Glad to be here.

Interviewer [00:37:00] Thank you. Thanks again.

So, your grandfather Issy was a true Inner Westie, born in Marrickville, raised in Rozelle and Balmain and even educated at Fort Street High. He very much lived, worked and was educated in the Inner West, starting work as an ironworker at Mort Bay during World War Two. He moved on to become a Painter and Docker on Cockatoo Island and joined the Ship, Painters and Dockers Union, eventually becoming a union official for 30 years. He was elected to Leichhardt Council in 1959, consequent re-elections to council, and the Painters and Dockers Union gave him the enviable record of being elected into office a total of 44 times. The life he made in community over his lifetime, both privately and publicly in the public office, have resulted in the fact Issy is very much associated with the history and fabric of the Inner West. What are your memories of your grandfather and his connection to the local community?

James Wyner [01:28:00] Yeah, I mean, let me just go back a little step to sort of build on that, Lisa. Issy actually started working during the Depression at the office of Unemployment or the Dole office as it was then, and that's how he came under the notice of the Ships, Painters and Dockers. So, from there, he transitioned to working on the waterfront on the docks around Balmain and Cockatoo Island, and he received a scholarship to attend Fort Street, which was then, as it is now, a selective school. But his earliest education was in political ideology that he received from his father, Samuel, from a very early age. So, the discipline of Fort Street, a mix of peers that he had there, didn't really sit well with him. So, he got out of there as quick as he could and took this

job at the Dole office. And then that led him to work on the dock. As far as my memories of his connection to the local community, I mean, what sticks out in Issy's life is that his life mapped onto the various stages of social development in the area right through the 20th century. So that meant, you know, his connection cut right across the community.

James Wyner [00:02:27] Obviously, he was had deep roots in the traditional older working-class families. You know, these are people that he grew up with, that he worked with. He had deep connections to the immigrant, mostly Italian families who moved into Leichhardt between the wars and post-World War Two is very well connected there. You know, he got a lot of the guys jobs on the wharves and had a strong connection to the immigrant populations in the area. And then from the 1970s onwards, as the area began to change, the new residents moving into the area, academics, media and professional semi-professional people, bohemians of many types who were moving into the area, they gravitated towards Issy because of his his local activist credentials so he could walk down the main street of Balmain and he could be chatting with some old wharfies and then cross the road and have a coffee with some hippie academics. And then he'd get home and find a bottle of homemade wine on his on his front step from one of the Italian guys who used to work with. So right across the community.

Interviewer [00:03:26] So he's very well known in the community. I love that. He does sound like a does sound like a bit of a character.

So Issy is also remembered for his enduring political partnership with Nick Origlass, who joined as an Alderman when he was elected to the former Leichhardt Council in 1959. Issy and Nick were friends and colleagues for over 60 years, with Nick being responsible for introducing Issy to his beloved wife of 58 years, your beloved grandmother Ruby, who herself led a successful strike of 40 fellow laundry workers at the tender age of 16. Issy and Nick worked together to implement change and challenge political convention. Can you speak a little about this partnership and what they achieved?

James Wyner [00:04:05] Sure. I mean, the partnership, you know, in terms of a political, philosophical partnership, they were very much part of a socialist tradition that existed within the ALP in the Inner West, pre-World War Two and post-World War Two the ALP began turning towards the right, politically speaking. And so their partnership

was initially forged, fighting against these rightward turns, firstly within the ALP, and then after they were kicked out of the party in nineteen sixty-seven, they fought it together from the outside. On a functional level, Nick was very much the torch bearer of their ideology. He was a little older. He was the senior partner, if you like, whereas Issy was very much the strategist, the organiser, skills he developed as a union and Labor Party organiser during his working years.

James Wyner [00:04:51] He put them to use in local politics. And so, they really were a good team in that way. Nick could come out and make some broad-brush proclamations. And Issy would scamper around trying to put the pieces together to make things work.

James Wyner [00:05:05] That was a good partnership in that sense. In terms of their achievements I mean, their legacy can be seen everywhere in the Inner West. Whilst they were on Council throughout the 70s and 80s the area was changing and the pressure to sell off large chunks of the Inner West community land to property developers and heavy industry was quite intense and, and Issy and Nick constantly pushed back against that. Their plans were always for more open space and public housing on former industrial sites. So, the legacy can be seen for example, Morts Dock, which was a shipbuilding dock. When shipbuilding went away, it became a container terminal so Issy and Nick fought very hard to have that closed and have the dock rehabilitated into open space and public housing, creation of Bicentennial Park in Glebe, Annandale, preventing the selloff of Callan Park to property developers and just generally the preservation of many historic buildings that give the area its unique character.

Interviewer [00:06:00] Yeah, I think we can be very thankful for the open spaces that we have around the inner west today. We've got some, some great areas. And so, as I mentioned before, Issy proved to be very electable 44 times. Did he ever have any ambition to seek a seat in state or federal office?

James Wyner [00:06:17] Yes, he did often refer to himself as the most elected man in Australia. He used to brag about that.

Interviewer [00:06:23] That's great.

James Wyner [00:06:24] In terms of seeking higher office, not that I'm aware of. I mean, if I had to guess, by the time he began holding senior elected political positions in the mid-1960s, the Inner West had become a real battleground for opposing social and economic forces in Australia.

James Wyner [00:06:37] You had waterfront industries and the people who worked in them that were moving out. And there was, as I mentioned, huge pressure to give over large parts of our community. So, the fight to retain local control of the community was really where the political action was. And so, I think Issy very much chose to stay and fight and fight the local fight rather than pursue higher office just for career purposes.

Interviewer [00:06:59] So Issy was renowned for his willingness to enter the fray for a good cause. I've come across several brilliant stories and examples of his activism over the years, including facing off a bulldozer during the Battle of Balmain, a party expulsion or two, and the mysterious disappearance of a demountable site office during the proposed development of Clontarf College in the early 80s, only for it to reappear on Monday morning on Macquarie Street squarely in front of Parliament House. Can you elaborate on this event and do you have any other stories you would like to share?

James Wyner [00:07:32] The battle to save Clontarf, which is a beautiful, historic building in Balmain, and I encourage everyone to check it out. That was highly memorable. I only have vague recollections of the container incident Lisa, and all I remember is that nobody was prepared to accept full blame for it.

James Wyner [00:07:47] So everyone was like “not me, not me”.

Interviewer [00:07:50] Not me.

James Wyner [00:07:51] That was the whole plan. Yeah. I mean, it was an important fight.

James Wyner [00:07:53] So resources were called upon. Let's just say that. Look, the battle to prevent White Bay being turned into a massive petroleum storage

facility was also a very fiery moment. Issy and Nick defying support of that project which led them to being expelled from the ALP. Look, one anecdote I do remember during the battle for Balmain protests, Issy was arrested and Ruby, his wife, my grandmother, she got rather used to Issy being locked up at one protester or another. So, during this battle for Balmain protest particular time, he was he was arrested. And I do remember Ruby calling Balmain police station, asking if he was being held there.

James Wyner [00:08:30] And the officer answered saying, yes, ma'am, your husband is being detained, but I can't give you any other information right now. And she replied, Well, that's fine can you just ask him if he'll be home for dinner. So,

Interviewer [00:08:39] Oh, I love that.

Interviewer [00:08:42] So Issy was known to be an avid and highly skilled amateur activist, collecting and cataloguing council business papers, which is now held in the Inner West Library and History Issy Wyner Collection. He was also known as a local historian, publishing several works on the history of the Paintings and Dockers Union titled *With Banner Unfurled* and *the Union Right or Wrong*, and an account of the former Leichhardt Council's experience of open council called *Open Council*, a new era in local council. This last work was published just two weeks before he passed away. As library workers this is a trait that really stood out to us. What are your memories of Issy the historian, librarian and activist?

James Wyner [00:09:19] Yeah, I mean Issy was very much, I guess he was an autodidact. He was self-educated so, he was very thorough in terms of creating and curating his library. It generally took out most of two rooms of the house. And, you know, this was something that he saw as an extension of his work in public life. So, it wasn't for him a matter of coming home and take the boots off and drawing a line under the public sphere. For him, it was all connected. And so, maintaining his archive was part of his overall efforts. Look, you know, his archive covered the philosophical and political and also the very specific parts of his life. There'd be the works of Karl Marx and Engels and Trotsky. There would be Shakespeare and Victor Hugo and Upton Sinclair, but they would also be sections for minutes of union meetings and council papers. I guess what sticks in my memory is him as a writer transitioning through the various technologies of the 20th century. I remember hand cranked ink printers, ribbon

typewriters, electric typewriters, computers, faxes. There always seemed to be a new writing or printing device being trialled or being learned or being yelled at. So that was that's one of the memories that sticks out for me.

Interviewer [00:10:27] So our collection from Issy and your family is quite amazing. So, we thank your family for that as well. So, I've got one more question for you, James. So, these questions have largely focused on Issy's public role in the Inner West community. What are your memories of Issy as a grandad?

James Wyner [00:10:44] Yeah, I mean, he was always very invested in his public life and his writing and his archive, but he was also a very playful guy. He loved to wisecrack and make jokes. He came from a Jewish household with several brothers and a sister. So wise cracking and making fun was part of the DNA, he was a master at it. But he was also a great mentor for my sister and I. And I think even as kids, we were somehow aware that he was a serious person who thought a lot about how society works. But at the same time, he was a very loving and warm person. So, he balanced those two things really elegantly.

Interviewer [00:11:16] Yes. And did you ever think of getting into politics yourself?

James Wyner [00:11:18] No. As a short answer, I look, I took a different path. I mean, I'm still involved in lots of activist activism in various issues in the Inner West and more broadly, I look I mean, if I say something about open counsel, open counsel that Issy and Nick, when I finally had the majority in 1987 to implement their idea of open counsel, that type of democracy makes you want to get involved be it as a politician or even, you know, someone speaking to elected bodies. I'm always involved in environmental campaigns or various activist activities going on.

James Wyner [00:12:00] It's, it's you got to hit the streets and try, and you know put some skin in the game, I think. That's one thing that I learnt from Issy.

Interviewer [00:12:06] From Issy. Yeah, I think he had a tough skin. What do you think?

James Wyner [00:12:10] Oh, no doubt. I mean, look, I think that generation generally, if you grew up in the inner Sydney during the Depression and the Second World War, it was you didn't really get beyond that without a tough skin.

Interviewer [00:12:21] Without a tough skin. Exactly. Well, James, thank you so much for sharing stories of Issy with us today. If you would like more information about Issy, you can access the Issy Wyner collection via our online catalogue or contact the library. And don't forget to check out our many other resources and upcoming digital programs on the Inner West Library website.