

## OBITUARY • Noni Holmes • Health and safety researcher

**She was a pioneer in Australian occupational health and safety research. She also had a rare ability to touch the people she encountered, to inspire them and to provide them with support that did not diminish them.**

**Born: 17.7.1954**

**Died: 14.5.1998**

By **STAN ROSENTHAL**



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that. When her ground-breaking chemical safety handbooks were recognised with a national Worksafe award, she asked a colleague to accept it.

Though widely published in prestigious journals, Noni’s commitment to thoroughness and academic excellence was fuelled by understanding that things could be better and by her refusal to settle for less. She was well researched and authoritative and when she put forward a proposition, she could support it with compelling evidence. So effective was she at this that she was known by her colleagues in the union movement as the “argument stopper”. When she spoke, both they and the employers listened.

Noni came to this position by a combination of academic and practical work. She completed her Bachelor of Science (Honors) at Monash University in 1980. Upon graduation, she worked as a medical research technologist at the Cancer Institute in Melbourne,

where she coordinated its first DNA sequencing laboratory.

In 1984 she started with the ACTU Victorian Trades Hall Council Occupational Health and Safety Unit, where she worked with John Mathews. She contributed several chapters to the second edition of his landmark text, *Health and Safety at Work*, and upon his departure, replaced him as head of the unit. During this period, she completed a Masters of Environmental Science, writing her thesis on the relationship between occupational cancer research and its benefit to workers.

Completion of her masters coincided with her commencement at the Operative Painters and Decorators Union (now part of the CFMEU), where for two years she undertook the research and publication of material about Painters Syndrome and other industry symptoms and hazards.

Noni was extraordinarily disciplined and thorough, completing her doctoral thesis in

1996 without resubmission, in less than two years. Its subject was workplace perceptions of occupational hazard and risk.

In 1995 she became a lecturer in occupational health and safety at RMIT and in 1997 she was awarded a prestigious national Health and Medical Research Council fellowship grant for four years, that she was to take up in July.

She participated in many committees, ranging beyond occupational health and safety to take in the environment, AIDS and the board of the faculty of medicine at Monash University.

In her professional activities and in her personal interests, Noni had a rare ability to touch the people she encountered, to inspire them and to provide them with support that did not diminish them. She built a diverse network of friends from her professional life and went yachting, bushwalking and cross-country skiing, cooked and dined, read crime and other novels, or caught up on the latest *Star Trek* film.

Above all, Noni was courageous. When her estranged partner, Rod Dyke, contracted leukaemia in 1986, she nursed him through that frightening year until his death.

When her breast cancer was diagnosed late in 1995, she dealt with it with thoroughness, courage and grace, gathering around her friends, who visited, cooked and provided her with transport. When her final course of chemotherapy was conducted in 1997, she held a celebration in the Peter MacCallum Hospital. Her support network was there to dine, play music and meet each other.

Her relapse in April this year was unexpected and its course was rapid. Within three weeks of the diagnosis, Noni was dead.

Despite her thwarted ambitions, she did not express bitterness. Rather, she contacted her family and friends to let them know. In an E-mail she circulated, she said: “I feel at present that I have only just started the emotional journey to my death and recognise that it will take all of us some time to accept both intellectually and emotionally. So I don’t expect I’ll be hearing well-considered words of wisdom and condolence! This is one of those occasions when there aren’t any ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ words — just the human stumbling attempts to communicate love and friendship however we can.”

This was ultimately Noni’s greatest cause — which she pursued through so many avenues: “to communicate love and friendship however we can”.