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Two of us: Stephanie Claire & Les Atallah

Rosamund Burton

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Stephanie: In 1959 Les came to the Metropolitan Coaching College, a private college in Sydney's CBD where I was studying. He was 18 and had just passed the Baccalaureate exams at school in Lebanon. The fact he spoke French and Arabic was a real plus in my eyes. He asked me if I would like to share his locker, as I didn't have one and was lugging around a pile of books.

The Leaving Certificate at this college was a one-year course, rather than the usual two at high schools. As I was only 15 I was going to repeat, but then I decided to complete it in one year and get to university.

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Les sat next to me for English, and I realised he could hardly speak the language, so I helped him learn it. My mother was a great lover of English language, and I instinctively knew how to teach it. We studied at his home in Pagewood most Sundays. I took the ferry from my home in Mosman to the city, where Les's brother, Wally, had a shoe repair shop. From there, Wally or Les would drive us to Pagewood.

Les's parents didn't speak English, but all the family was very friendly and welcoming. His mother was always cooking and would bring us delicious food while we worked. I taught him grammar and we studied Richard II, which was so hard to explain, and Pygmalion, which Les didn't understand because the intricacies of the English class system were lost on him completely.

In the afternoon Les would drive me home and we'd have a cup of tea with my parents. They regarded him as a courteous and steady young fellow and my sisters liked him, too. In that year he was absolutely my best friend.

It was a miracle that we passed the Leaving Certificate: me for cramming two years of high school into one, and Les for going from zero English to Leaving Certificate standard. We both went to University of NSW. I enrolled in Arts and Les entered Engineering. Initially, we saw each other, but as we got absorbed in our new environments we drifted apart.



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He didn't complete uni. I finished, got married at 21 and had three children. Then I left my husband and worked for 30 years as an English teacher. I met my new partner, artist Salvatore Zofrea, when I was 34.

I couldn't easily describe that year studying together, so I never talked about it to anyone, even though my friendship with Les was probably why I had a career teaching English to migrants.

In March 2015 my sister Sandra emailed me saying she'd had a phone call from Les, who was now living in Tamworth [in northern NSW]. We met for coffee and never stopped talking. He was so friendly and lively, the same person I knew at school, except now a grandparent.

I gave Les a copy of the book I'd written about Salvatore. He showed it to his wife, Evonne, and her sister Julie. "Stephanie's my friend," Julie shrieked. Then I discovered that my daughter, Sally, knows



Wally very well because she's been going to his shoe repair shop in the city for 20 years.

It doesn't surprise me that Les is an astute businessman, because he's intelligent and clever at navigating his environment. He's also soft-hearted and kind. Seeing Les again, and getting to know Evonne, has been like catching up with long-lost relatives.

Les: In 1959 my parents, younger brother and I moved to Australia. My parents already had four children living in Sydney, and my mother had four sisters here.

I enrolled at the Metropolitan Coaching College to learn English. Being unable to speak the language, I found most students didn't have time for me, but Stephanie was different and if I didn't understand something she would explain it. She was only 15, but very mature. It was a case of two young people getting on well together.

In January 1960 I enrolled in the college's Leaving Certificate class. My English was still very basic and I had to catch up on 11 years of English in one year. I memorised every book from cover to cover. I was determined to succeed and prove to Stephanie that her hours of tutoring weren't wasted. Stephanie's only weakness was golf vocabulary. I started playing golf, and she told me "putting" was pronounced "pooting". My friends cracked up when I said, "It's my turn to 'poot'."

Stephanie's family was the first Anglo-Australian family I got to know. I always felt welcome in their home. After our exams I would go over there at the weekends. I used to go down to the beach at Clifton Gardens with the whole family.

At university we drifted apart. I didn't have any affinity with engineering, so I left university. Then I went back and did commerce, but I didn't finish that degree, either, because I knew by then I wanted to have my own business. I married Evonne in 1966, and a year later we had a child.

I worked with my brothers in the family footwear business. When Evonne and I moved to Tamworth in 1975, I had a shop selling and repairing shoes before we started doing property development.

I thought of Stephanie often and what a positive role she played in my life. I told my story to many people, my wife included. I've adjusted so well to living in Australia compared to many immigrants. Evonne could see that, and she said she wanted to thank Stephanie personally. So we started trying to find her. I knew that Stephanie's sister, Sandra, was a journalist, so I rang her and she said, "I'll send Stephanie an email." A couple of hours later Stephanie rang.

You wonder after 54 years how the other person is going to be, but our friendship picked up from exactly where we left off. She's still that same intelligent and generous-hearted person. Evonne and I come to Sydney every six weeks, and most times Stephanie and I manage at least a coffee. It's brought our two families together.

Sometimes I regret losing all that time. We could have been enjoying

our friendship for many more years, but it wasn't meant to be.

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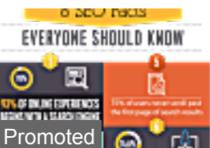
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