

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6392

Gelman, Sylvia

(1919 - 2018)

Born 17 April, 1919, Melbourne Victoria Australia

Died 19 September, 2018

Occupation Equestrian, Gymnast, Public speaker, Teacher, Women's rights activist

Summary

Sylvia Gelman was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1981 'in recognition of service to education, youth and the Jewish community'. She was also appointed Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2003 'in recognition of service to the community, particularly through a range of organisations concerned with issues affecting women'. These organisations included The National Council of Jewish Women of Victoria and Australia, the Young Women's Christian Association of Victoria, and both the national and Victorian branches of the National Council of Women.

Details

Sylvia Gelman (nee Benn) was born on the 17th April 1919 in Fitzroy, Melbourne, the daughter of Maurice Benn and Elizabeth Jacobs, who had arrived in Australia from the UK in 1910. They had travelled to Australia for their honeymoon, and Maurice was so seasick on the way out he swore he would never travel anywhere again by sea. Their honeymoon lasted the fifty years that they were together in Australia. Sylvia was educated at University High School and the Melbourne Teachers' College, University of Melbourne. She was a dynamic and memorable teacher of a wide range of subjects. After graduation she taught in several rural schools. Eventually Sylvia was appointed Senior Mistress at Mount Scopus College in 1953 and she was constantly greeted in such places as Hospital Emergency rooms by doctors and former pupils at social Maccabi Sports functions with enormous affection, saying 'Mrs Gelman, you taught me and I wouldn't be where I am today without you.'

Her passion was always education and she said, 'There is a saying that if you educate a man, you are educating an individual, but if you educate a woman, you are educating a family. Women's roles have changed a lot over the years.'

In 1938 Sylvia met her match in more ways than one. They met through their mutual interest in sport when Manuel Gelman, as the President of Associated Judean Athletics Clubs (AJAX), asked her to become Secretary of what is now known as Victoria Maccabi. They married in 1950. In those days female teachers had to resign from the Education Department schools on marriage. Sylvia did so but immediately started teaching at Mount Scopus. Sylvia and Mannie were a perfect team. Of equal intellect, they also shared a love of travel. They were partners both at work and play.

In an anniversary tribute to Mannie in January 1993 Sylvia wrote 'It was with you that I thrilled to the exciting sounds of Antonio and his dancers at the Zarzuela in Madrid, and, it was with you that I stood in awe before the paintings in the Caves of Lascaux touched by the spirit of their Cro-Magnon creators. They were married for forty-three eventful years until sadly, Mannie died later that year on 25 August 1993.

In his memory, Sylvia established an Award for Teaching Excellence in the Faculty of Education at Melbourne University. His nephew Graham Solomon said 'he had an insatiable appetite for the arts. If it had not been for him I would never have been able to envelope myself in the delights of the English language. I must give special thanks to Auntie Sylvia, for without her, the world would have seen only half the man that is Mannie Gelman.'

In 1992, in Melbourne, the French Ambassador Philippe Baud presented Mannie with the Order of the Legion d'Honneur for his contribution to his 60 years of promoting France's language, civilisation and culture. Fluent in French, he inspired his students by his love of all language, so much so that the students at Coburg High School demanded that he teach them both French and Latin, when their choice was limited to just one language – and they won.

In the 1970s, on retiring from teaching, Sylvia became a member of the National Council of Jewish Women in Victoria

(NCJW) and editor of their newsletter. After three years in that role, the retiring President Mina Fink asked her to take on the presidency. As a relative newcomer to the organisation, Sylvia refused. She pointed out that Mina had two Vice Presidents who should be considered. For several months, Mina kept insisting she accept the role, even pursuing her target at their vacation retreat at Ocean Grove until she persuaded her. 'What Mina wants, Mina gets', was a catch phrase in the Fink and NCJW families at the time and proved to be correct once again. Fink, before she retired, had invited the global organisation of the International Council of Jewish Women to hold their next convention in Australia in 1975, the UN International Women's Year, and Sylvia accepted the presidency with the proviso that it came attached with a suitable committee of skilled organisers elected to stage this conference. It did and they did stage a memorable and successful global conference. This would be the first International Council of Jewish Women Convention to be held in the Southern Hemisphere, and was also the first International Jewish Conference to be held in Australia. Sylvia persuaded the current Governor General, Sir John Kerr, to open the conference and when he arrived his aide explained sternly that he would have to leave as soon as he had finished speaking. He stayed and didn't leave until the end. When the next national conference was held in Perth, Sylvia secured Governor-General Sir Zelman Cowan as that keynote speaker.

Sylvia was appointed a Life Governor and Trustee of the National Council of Jewish Women of Australia in 1988. In 2018 they formed a Sylvia Gelman Foundation in her honour to fundraise for educational bursaries for disadvantaged students, to support the smaller sections of the organisation and also to foster overseas speakers as scholars in residence. She did much to enhance and enrich the understanding of non-Jews in multi-cultural Australia, in the uniqueness of Jewish history and made a significant improvement in the understanding and tolerance between peoples of diverse religions and ethnic backgrounds.

Through NCJW, Sylvia became their delegate on the Victorian National Council of Women (NCWV), eventually serving as Honorary Advisor to the Executive and was honoured to be named one of their Honorary Life Members, to be listed on the Victorian Honour Roll of Women (2012) and be a recipient of the Sir John Monash Award from the Jewish Community Council of Victoria in 2011 for her outstanding contribution to the state. Gracia Baylor, a former President of NCW, once said of Sylvia, 'She is a woman for all times, all seasons – ageless, blessed with a wonderful sense of humour, her intellect and her humanitarian view of life and an influence to all who come in contact with her.'

From 1987 to 1990 Sylvia was the President of the National Council of Women of Victoria and her stewardship marked a great period of productivity for the organisation. At the end of her term she became the Convenor of the Arts & Letters & Music Committee and organised the publication of a book of poetry by women *The Whirling Spindle*, which was a great success both as a record of the writing of women poets, and for the National Council of Women as an auspicing body. Other publications followed: *From a Camel to the Moon: An Anthology for the International Year of Older Persons*, 1999; *Valuing the Volunteers: An Anthology for the International Year of Volunteers*, 2001; *Forever Eve: An Anthology Celebrating NCJWV 75th Anniversary*, 2002. These books delighted many of the writers, many of whom had never been published before. An impressive public speaker, she said, 'I urge people to undertake public speaking courses and get access to education in order for them to advance in all directions.' Sylvia herself has initiated public speaking workshops to achieve this end.

The Liberal Party of Australia Victoria Division invited her to speak at a one-day seminar. Sylvia explained that both the National Council of Women of Victoria and the National Council of Jewish Women of Victoria were strictly non-party political organisations, so any discussion of politics was not permitted. 'No' was the reply 'We want you to speak on the role of your organisation to explain the work that you do.' At one stage during her address she stated 'that men, have always considered women as a side issue.' One of the Melbourne dailies printed it as 'Quote of the week' and at the end of that year it was voted 'Quote of the Year.'

Author Details

Leonie Christopherson with Sylvia Gelman

Created 2 April 2025

Last modified 2 April 2025

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Type: Image
Date: 22 May, 2023



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Title: Gelman_img103.jpg
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