

Tense times after murder

AN INTENSE, nervous period is how members of the Italian community remember the time following Donald Mackay's murder in Griffith.

For Griffith mayor Dino Zappacosta, who describes himself "a fairly close friend" of the anti-drugs crusader, it was an anxious period.

Many local Italians were thrust unwittingly into the spotlight. Councillor Zappacosta's close political association with Don made him an easy target for investigators. "When Don disappeared in 1977 it was an intense period, a time when no one felt safe at all because no one really

The Italian community

TANYA PATTISON

knew who was involved or who to trust. Even the police were implicated," Cr Zappacosta said.

He said he became caught up in the case by association. "It was horrible. Because I was well known politically and aligned with Don I was under siege by investigators, even though I knew nothing," he said.

"What I'd like to see is authorities work towards finding an answer to the mystery while there are still people alive who can

help put the pieces together."

John Piazza, who was an accountant at the time, remembers the bad publicity surrounding the case - "depriving some Italian citizens of their dignity".

"There were two different feelings in town at the time. The Northerners felt like they were destroyed, we were trying to do our best as newcomers, we felt like we'd been totally disowned," he said.

"The others just sort of disappeared. They didn't move from their houses.

"All of the bad publicity resulted in humiliation and hurt for years and years. At one stage a group of Northerners pre-

pared something to appear in *The Area News* to try and put their case forward and clear names but decided against it.

"The group decided they had to keep on as before and continue to be part of the community and take the slaps in the face."

Mr Piazza said his close association with Al Grassby made him an unsuspecting target. "I had fingers pointed at me, accusing me of being involved with the mafia," he said.

"It was extremely frustrating. For years Italians in Griffith carried the burden on our backs but we did it without too much discussion. We just tried to get on with life."

Passionate about community

The legacy

AMELIA ELLISTON

DONALD Mackay's memory may have been overshadowed by the circumstances of his disappearance, but his real legacy lies in the community services he worked hard to get for the city.

Don was involved in community group Apex for many years and through that, raised a lot of money for charity before joining Rotary in the months before his disappearance.

Apart from his charity work with the groups, he was also involved in two major projects for the city. One of those projects was to get a nursing home for Griffith. He was the secretary on a committee which lobbied to get Pioneer's Lodge built.

The other was to start an education facility for children with disabilities, so he started and chaired a committee which worked to get the Kalinda School up and running.

Griffith mayor Dino Zappacosta said Donald Mackay was one of his closest friends - the two got to know each other very well after their political alliances saw them campaign together for several years.

"Don was running for the Liberal Party in 1973 and I was running for the Country Party," Councillor Zappacosta said.

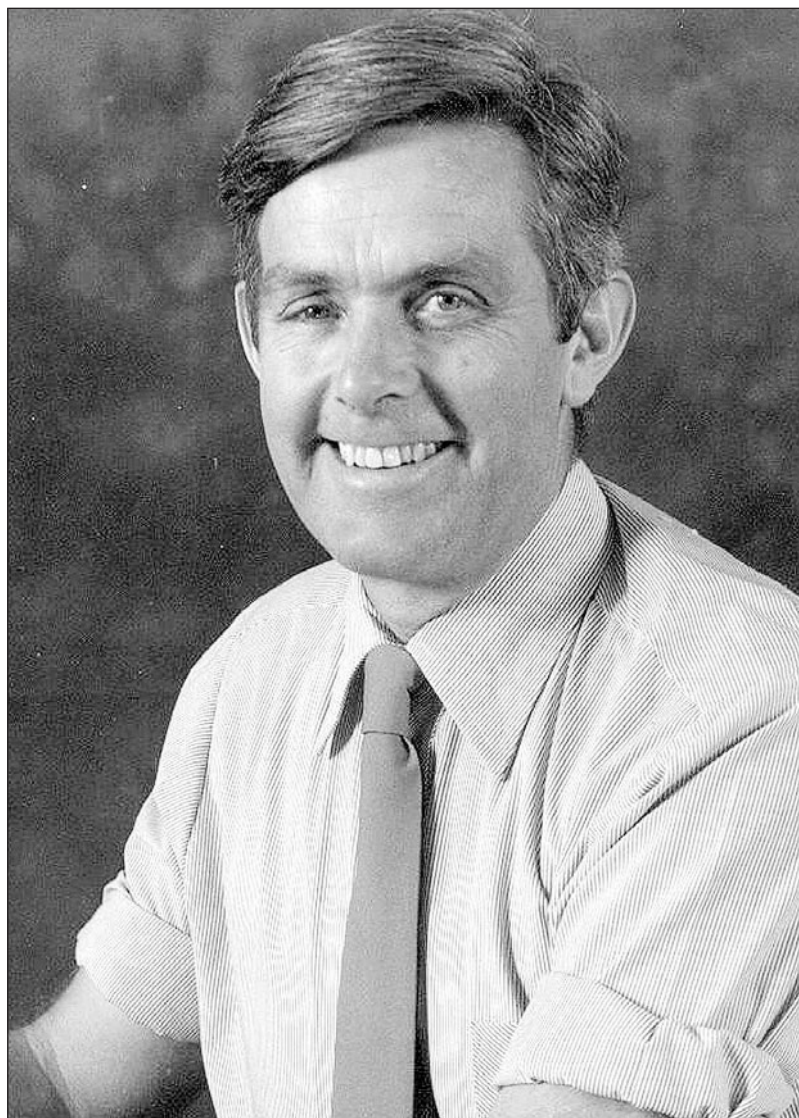
"He was just so passionate about everything he got involved in and he worked very hard for what he believed in."

Cr Zappacosta said Don achieved so much for Griffith, but in the long-term, he really did change the attitude people held towards drugs.

"He did a lot for this community and the effects of his work can still be seen today," he said. "But when he began to campaign against drugs he really changed the attitude that a lot of people had in the 70s.

"He began the anti-drugs campaigns and those anti-drugs campaigns are still going today with governments and police.

"He began all that and helped change the way people thought about drugs."



DONALD Mackay's legacy lives on in the community projects he helped establish in Griffith.

The investigation

1973: Donald Mackay stands as a Liberal Party candidate for the state seat of Murrumbidgee. While campaigning, Mackay becomes increasingly alarmed at the level of drug cultivation and trafficking in Griffith.

1974: Runs for the federal seat of Riverina. Mackay's preferences lead to Al Grassby's defeat by National Party candidate John Sullivan.

November 10, 1975: Unable to trust local police, Mackay informs the NSW Drug Squad of a large cannabis plantation on a property at Coleambally. The police raid nets a plantation valued at around \$80 million. Four men of Italian descent are jailed.

May 1977: A petition instigated by Mackay and other concerned Griffith residents is presented to NSW premier Neville Wran calling for action on the illicit drug trade.

June 12, 1977: An unidentified man tries to lure Mackay to a property at Jerilderie in what was later determined as an assassination attempt. Mackay is unable to attend the meeting, instead sending an employee.

July 15, 1977: Mackay is last seen drinking with friends at the Griffith Hotel. Three spent .22 cartridges are found in the hotel's car park near Mackay's bloodstained van.

August 5, 1977: The Honourable Philip Morgan Woodward appointed to head the Royal Commission into Drug Trafficking.

November 1979: Justice Woodward's report tabled in NSW parliament. The report concludes a secret Calabrian criminal society known as the N'Dranghita or The Honoured Society was "responsible for the disappearance and murder of Donald Mackay".

1980: Al Grassby is charged with criminal defamation after asking NSW politician Michael Maher to read a document imputing Mackay's wife Barbara and her family solicitor were behind Mackay's disappearance.

1983: Gianfranco Tizzoni tells police the hit on Mackay was ordered by alleged organised crime boss Robert Trimboli.

April 16, 1986: Known Melbourne underworld figure James Frederick Bazley is convicted in the Victorian Supreme Court of conspiracy to murder Mackay. Co-conspirator George Joseph is also convicted.

1987: The J. F. Nagle report into the police investigation of the death of Mackay is handed down.

August 1992: After a 12-year battle, Al Grassby has his conviction of criminal defamation acquitted on appeal.

January 31, 2001: James Frederick Bazley, 75, is released from a medium-security prison in Victoria.

February 24, 2001: Barbara Mackay dies in hospital aged 65. Her book *Before I Forget* on events surrounding her husband's murder remains unpublished.

March 2007: A human thigh bone is dug up on a Griffith farm raising speculation it belonged to Mackay. The bone is sent to the US for DNA testing.

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