

ANDREW ALLEN CURIOUS CAMPBELLTOWN PODCAST INTERVIEW WITH MANDY PERRIN

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AA The producers of this podcast recognise the traditional owners of the land on which it is recorded. They pay respect to the aboriginal elders past, present and those emerging.

Hello listeners, my name is Andrew Allen and welcome to Curious Campbelltown and it gives me much pleasure today to introduce our special guest. She is probably best known as the editor of the Macarthur Chronicle. I would like to welcome Mandy Perrin to Curious Campbelltown.

MP Thank you very much it is a pleasure to be with you.

AA To come out on such a cold morning like it is I really appreciate it.

MP It's very chilly weather we are having at the moment but it's nice that it is sunny today.

AA So do you look back fondly on those days of being on the Chronicle Mandy?

MP Yes, I do. I have many, many fantastic memories of the people that I worked with and the community we served. It was a great pleasure to be such a part of the fabric of the community and I really do remember those days very fondly. We had a great fun time, the team at the Chronicle and both the editorial and the advertising teams worked really well together over all those years. We were very proud of the paper that we put out. We had three editions towards the end. We had the Wollondilly edition, the Camden edition and the Campbelltown edition. It was a way that we could serve our community with even greater volumes of local news. So, I felt that we really did provide a fabulous public service. As well as reporting the news we campaigned on many, many issues to attract funding to this area and I look around today and I see some of the funding out there that is a result of the campaigns that we ran, and I am really pleased to see the community continue to flourish these days.

AA Was journalism something that you had long thought about? Was it something as a child or a teenager that you aspired to?

MP No not really, I wanted to be a nurse initially when I was about 10, I thought that would be very nice. Then I decided it might be nice to work outside and do something agricultural because I did go to Hurlstone in my high school years then I went off that idea. Then I went to uni when I left school and did speech pathology at Sydney and then I thought I needed a change a bit more dynamic for me and there was an ad in the very newly opened Chronicle at the time and I thought I might just apply and that was it I loved it. So that's why I stayed there for so long. I did not spend the whole time at the Chronicle I did move around Sydney a bit

but then I did come back to the Chronicle in my late twenties I guess I was then and took over the editorship there and remained there until I moved on to my position with the New South Wales Government more recently.

AA It's good when you like the job that you're in isn't it?

MP It's not work then, it really isn't work. Some things are a bit onerous every job has that but at the end of the day I always enjoyed going in to work.

AA I read that you went to Hurlstone Agricultural College is that right?

MP Yes, I was in the very first intake of girls, we had girls in Year 7, girls in Year 11. I started there when I was in Year 8 because they felt there was too much of a gap between Year 7 and Year 11. So, there was just a handful of girls in Year 8 with me. I think there were about ten of us roughly. I think we had 3 or 4 boarders and the rest of us were day students from South Western Sydney predominantly. We went up there and joined the boys. It was a very science/ag focussed high school experience for me. I really enjoyed agriculture and did it all the way through to Year 12. I thought it was a great school and I look back on those years fondly as well. We recently celebrated our 40th reunion, that was last year. That's not bad going is it forty years.

AA Did you get to do a lot of fun agricultural things?

5 mins

MP The very first lesson I attended there was an agricultural double period and there was a whole pile of piglets, and we were having to remove their teeth. They have these big teeth that grow into husks and so we were removing them. I could not believe it, I could not understand what we were doing, and these little piglets were squealing and oh my goodness it was definitely an education. I had not had any experience with any type of farm animals and so here I was confronted with this. But I learnt all sorts of things while I was up there including how to put a chicken to sleep, that was exciting. I practiced that on my grandmother's chooks that she had, that was funny.

AA: I'm impressed by that

MP: It was very interesting because there was a very big cohort of boarder students up there as well, we learnt a lot about their lives in the country and on the land as well. So that was something that was really valuable. To this day quite a number of my classmates are still on the land across New South Wales farming in some capacity.

AA I come from a farming background too and I did agriculture at high school and we did some pretty fun things there like castrating a sheep.

MP I can imagine that I think it was on the curriculum for some of the classes there.

AA Getting back to your days on the newspaper. What was it like starting as a cadet reporter? How did that go

MP In those days it was just a typewriter and we had a shorthand notebook and that was it. We didn't have phones we didn't even have fax machines when I started. It was really being out and about talking to people that was how you got your story. That was the thing that I loved about the job because you were out and about mixing with the community, talking to the community and the community would tell you things and that was when you saw the stories. Every person has a story really and it is just a matter of sitting down and having a chat and finding out what it is. There is always something interesting about their lives. People have always done cool things even if they don't realise it. I loved that aspect of it, I enjoyed getting out and about talking to people in the community and having the privilege of writing their stories. That was probably the thing that I loved. We did have to do shorthand. I was sent off into the city at news and did my shorthand training in there and that was fun as well. I enjoyed that and that's been a skill that I still think is very valuable for journalists these days.

AA Was it hard to pick up?

MP We did Pitman back in those days and these days they do Tline or they did when I was still there which was a little bit more manageable. I think the real skills practitioners would say that Pitmans is the best one because you can do greater speeds. But for the day-to-day reporting world I think T-line is probably good but whatever it is a good skill to have. With technology now most of them are out and about with their phones and take it down with their phones. It's a different era.

AA What news story or campaign were you most proud of when you look back? Was there something that made you most proud?

MP There's so many, that's a hard one because there's a lot that we've done. Because we always thought that we didn't want to highlight the bad things in the area because the city press had done enough of that we wanted to celebrate the good things about living out here. But there were things that needed doing and there were things where we were falling down, or we needed something more like usually funding from the governments. So, we tried to campaign on our community's behalf. So, something would happen it might be perceived as negative, and we would still report it but with the interest of trying to do something about it. I suppose looking back maybe the widening of the freeway between Campbelltown and Liverpool because it used to be two lanes. It was an absolute headache for our commuters and because we're so far from the city and all the employment that the city has most of the people out here have to commute backwards and forwards. There was a constant problem from that freeway that I also experienced from time to time when I had to go into the city or elsewhere. It used to drive me mad, and I thought gosh imagine what it would be like if you had to do this every day and get stuck in this dreadful traffic. So, we decided to campaign to widen the freeway between Campbelltown and Liverpool. That actually became quite a good election issue and by the time that the federal election came around both parties had committed significant funding packages to widen that, and it did go ahead. That was a real win for our community.

10 mins

That's just one example. I also used to like helping just the small person, the average person because I can remember early in my career getting a call from a lady who was in social housing at Minto and her pipe was flooding in her back yard. She had rung various government authorities even the council trying to get this sorted out because her back yard was really a quagmire. So, we said we will call up on your behalf and see what can happen. We called Sydney Water, called Department of Housing, called the council and that day they were all there fixing the pipe in her back yard. So, the power of the media is amazing to get things done sometimes. That lady was very grateful, and we were always happy to help with things like that. That was equally important and just as important as helping the broader community.

AA How satisfying, you must have had a lot of satisfying moments like that.

MP We did and it was just nice to have somebody ring up and say thanks for the story. We used to say people don't say thank you and I really disagree. We had lots of thank yous over the years. At Christmas time we would have scones brought into us from the CWA and all sorts of cool things would come in from people saying thank you. That's what I really enjoyed about the community, a very giving community. If things aren't going well for someone people will always stand up and help out here. I think that is something unique to Macarthur. I haven't seen that level of community action anywhere else that I've worked.

AA I agree and it's a shame isn't it that we get a bad rap sometimes, it's not fair really unfair.

MP Yes, I totally agree. I think our community has so much to offer and people from the outside don't know that because they just drive past on the freeway, that's probably it and then they see what they see in the media and the broader media has different priorities. So, it's all about covering the news of the day and you know if there has been some sort of crime or whatever unfortunately we always get big coverage for that but we never get the coverage for the good things that happen out here. Because it's just not relevant to New South Wales, the world, the nation. Without the local papers those stories aren't being told any more which is very disappointing I think for our community.

AA I wanted to ask you about that. How you feel about I guess you could say the death of the local newspapers.

MP I feel for the community because they're not hearing about anything anymore. There's social media but that's not the same as a genuine news story. A genuine news story has been written by a professional. It's fair and balanced. It should have all the information of who, what, when, where, how, why. It should have some commentary surrounding it and both sides of the story should be presented so the reader can make an informed decision about what they think at the end of it. But we just don't see that anymore and we don't see coverage of what our councils are doing anymore. We don't see...what people in our community are doing wonderful things but we don't see that reported anymore either. People always say to me can't you bring it back. I wish I could in some respects because

I feel the community is really missing out. There's no-one holding our politicians to account. There's no-one saying you're making this decision please explain. There's no scrutiny at all to our elected officials anymore. I'm sure they're very happy about that but really, it's not a great world when our community doesn't know what's going on.

AA It's terrible, as a librarian it really worries me. I totally agree with what you're saying.

MP It's a shame and I really think there is a market for it but it's just going to take someone with a bit of vision to get it up. You know the cost of newsprint is very prohibitive now and I don't think they could ever go back to that model before because people these days advertise online, they advertise on social media it's very cheap. So they can't go back to that existing model but with the digital world that we live in maybe there will be an entrepreneur out there in the future that can work out how to provide good local news. Maybe it will have to be online because I can't see how they can make it work if it's going to be a printed product unless it's sold at a newsagent where there will have to be a cost incurred. I think there is still hunger out there because even when I am out and about people constantly ask me about it. It's quite funny really actually I think gosh it's been a long time since I was there, but people still ask is there any chance of bringing it back or what's happening, can I do something about it. I say no unfortunately I can't do anything about it. It's a shame.

AA It get's brought up at my work too

MP I miss it too as a reader I used to like to know what was happening too. I was a great consumer of all the local newspapers. I always enjoyed seeing if there was somebody in there that I knew or who was doing what. What was happening that I could take my kids to all that stuff that makes us a community. I think the decline of the Fishers Ghost Festival and the parade, and all that sort of thing has been a reflection on the decline of the media really because people weren't going. I don't think they knew about it.

15 mins

AA That's an interesting point actually.

MP You can't go if you don't know about it. If it's not in your face you don't think about it.

AA Because there's new people coming into the area all the time isn't there and they're not always aware of what is happening.

MP Exactly. It's a challenge for our public organisations on how they get their messaging out now because not everybody looks at Facebook. You've got to think about the broader community particularly now that we're more multi-cultural. Communication has to be inclusive and accessible. Not everybody can afford a laptop, not everybody can afford good Wi-Fi. Some people can't speak English and don't know how to navigate that. So we're probably missing out on informing those people through the digital world. Older people also don't have

access to communications and young people are they looking at those communications anyway that are coming out from our public organisations. Probably not I would suggest so it is a challenge.

AA It is definitely. I was going to ask you did you ever cop any abuse or backlash for a story on the negative side, I guess

MP For sure sometimes people didn't appreciate what was printed. They might have a different perspective and we always offered them the opportunity to write a letter to the editor back in those days. If we felt there had been a mistake, we would always correct it, that's fine. I always found people to be quite reasonable really. When you sat down and explained just because they had given us the story that's good, but we still had to get the other side of the story. Sometimes people didn't like that because they had their point of view and somebody else had a different point of view. Why did you go and ask them? We had to explain that is part of producing a fair and balanced news report, we have to get everybody's perspective. You can still have your own perspective, if you want to you can write a letter to the editor or whatever and re-enforce that point of view and of course as I said if there was a mistake we would always fix it up, that's fine. Journalists aren't infallible they do make mistakes sometimes and they do have to be fixed up that was not a problem if there was a genuine mistake we would always fix it up. Sometimes when we were doing a campaign or whatever we wouldn't always agree with that either. We would sometimes cover their stories too because that's fine that's all part of feeding the community a broad picture. Just because we're campaigning for something someone might disagree, so they also need to be included in the debate. I used to write a column in the paper in my later years there and that was when I would give my opinion. I had to explain to people sometimes that's just my opinion that's just me it doesn't reflect the paper that's just my opinion. You're entitled to your opinion, and I am entitled to my opinion. If it was a political matter, I would say well you know you've got your say at the election you can vote at the ballot box and that's your say. I never minded people having a different perspective that's fine that's the community we live in. We're very lucky to have a free press and live in a democracy where you can have different perspectives. I always encouraged a bit of debate because I always found that to be quite good for the community in the long run.

AA You can't please everyone. Were you accused of being either left or right sometimes?

MP Yes, I remember there was one election, and I got a letter from someone in the community saying you're just a liberal blah, blah, blah having a big say. Next week I got one saying you're just a labor paper having a big say as well. So, I thought excellent we're annoying both sides we must be doing something right. Every now and then you did get accused of that, but we were really straight down the line.

AA Can I ask you was there ever a kind of rivalry with the other paper say the Advertiser.

MP Yes of course there was because we always wanted to be first with the news. We were lucky because we were out the day before they were. But yes, sometimes they would get a good story in their paper and I would be like damn we missed that one. It was good, I felt that community really did benefit because sometimes we also couldn't fit it in our paper and so sometimes I used to say look we've missed our deadline you still might be able to get in the Advertiser.

20 mins

So we used to send people down there too. I always thought it was quite a good healthy rivalry and it certainly keeps your journos on their toes when they know there is somebody else sniffing around and chasing a story too. So I think it produces better journalism actually at the end of the day knowing that you've got a good competitor and I think the community was the winner because we had two good papers serving this area. Most communities do not have that level of coverage. I think that is one of the reasons why everybody has missed them so much because they did have two good papers really. There was good local news in both papers now there is nothing. The Chronicle is still online but it's certainly not the same as what it was previously. I think they've got one journalist as far as I know covering the patch. Back in the day of course we had a big news team so it's not the same.

AA As a librarian as a Local Studies Librarian I worry in the future when we are trying to find information about this time there is no place to go back on. Like we have now we can go back to what was happening in the 1980s huge stories from that time.

MP Exactly and I do think it's a real problem for the community. I really do I think it's a shame that this history is not being recorded any more and what I liked about the media all local media it was a record of their communities. So that record is gone now really there is nothing. If you are trying to record it digitally even that is a challenge, it's not the same. I mean it's good to do but it's so good having that hard copy or at least having it in a format that people can store. It's a real issue and that's a shame a real shame.

AA So you worked on various Sydney papers before coming back to Campbelltown as editor of the Chronicle. What papers were they?

MP I worked around about Sydney let me think. I was the editor at Fairfield before I came out to Campbelltown and that was great fun. It was the first time I had worked in a really multi-cultural community, but I thoroughly enjoyed that, and I really loved the food and in fact I missed the food when I came out to Macarthur because they had all those beautiful Vietnamese bakeries and Spanish cake shops and Italian coffee shops, I was so spoilt over there. So I missed that, and it was a really great community over there too. I worked up at The Hills for a while at the Hill Shire Times that was fun as well, I worked at Parramatta Advertiser. They were all really good patches to work in. I enjoyed all that, everywhere you go you learn something, so I found that very beneficial as well. But at the end of

the day, I felt Campbelltown was a lot more passionate, the community was more passionate. It was more connected.

AA That's interesting.

MP It isn't it. When we started our social media page at the Chronicle there was a couple of pages within the news corps group that were very successful. There was Macarthur Chronicle, the Manly Daily page and the Central Coast Express page and I thought that reflected those regions. There's still that country town mentality a little bit with those patches so there's still a lot of connection and I felt that's why our pages did so well on social media because our community was so interested in news and interested in people, so they were always on there. We found that to be a really great way of getting our news out even further. We had the printed product, we had social media and then we had our website so then people could click onto our website from our socials and get a big story if they wanted to read the whole thing. So it was a really great way of increasing our penetration which it did. So that was really, really good but at the end of the day the digital world it probably in some respects wiped out local papers, I think. I think it was a problem for the proprietors in finding a way to monetise the news and I still don't think they have come to grips with it really. Even when we look at our traditional media today, our usual metro papers they're all struggling too in different ways. They're not the papers they were either and I think that's a tough gig for them too.

AA I know you received some national awards, that must have been rewarding.

MP Yes it was nice for my team because they were all hard workers. They were all really great reporters; they were very committed to the community, so all those awards were team awards really and it was a pleasure to be part of those dynamic vibrant teams that were so passionate about serving the community. I look back and I think I was very lucky to work with so many really cool people.

25 mins

AA You must have been so busy, I'm not sure if you have a family.

MP Yes, I do, it was very busy. I think whatever I do in life I always seem to be busy. I don't know I must have "kicked a Chinaman" or something as the saying goes. It all worked well, my parents are local, so they were a great support, my husband was a great support, my kids were fabulous. They knew mum worked crazy hours, but I was always a little bit flexible I could pop down to the schools if I needed to or whatever. That was really good working locally I had that flexibility. So, it all sort of worked out in the end really and because you've got kids and they're growing up in the community once again you're out there in the community mixing with those groups of people and it's good for the paper too. It's really good having been able to leave work and play locally as the saying goes too. Most of our staff over the years have genuinely been local people so they have also been able to contribute to the paper because they are out there in the community as well. Seeing what's happening. They know about that roundabout that needs fixing in whatever street because they go past it every

day and they think oh goodness the council, it's been like this for three months and the council hasn't fixed it let's give them a call. So that's how we got a lot of our good stories because we were local people living in the local community.

AA Was there a high profile person that you ever met that you got on really well with? Was there someone who impressed you, it doesn't have to be high profile, maybe a local councillor that you had a bit of a connection with?

MP There's been so many over the years it's hard to single out one person. The only one that's coming to mind just now is because we're here in the Greg Percival Centre. It just made me think about him. He was just an example of someone that I was lucky enough to come across first of all as a very young journo and then later on he was always around whether he was on the council or not on the council he was always a strong advocate for the paper and he was someone who would always give a very balanced view and perspective on what was going on here. So, he is an example of someone that I was very privileged to know. There's been so many of them over the years, local politics, broader politics. It's really hard to pinpoint one particular person.

AA Again I'm putting you on the spot. I should have sent you the questions.

MP That's all right. You know come to think of it as a very, very young journalist I remember Liz Kernohan the former Mayor of Camden really helping me along and helping me to understand the workings of council because Camden Council was the first council that I actually covered as a cadet reporter. I had no idea about what I was doing, I had no idea how council worked, and she was kind enough to explain how it all worked and the purpose of the council and how they had their meetings and what they were doing at the meetings and what the committees were doing at those meetings and how action was taken. People voted on things and then it was resolved, and council went ahead and did the action. That was really good, so I always appreciated her support back in those early days.

AA: I've heard lots of wonderful things about Liz Kernohan

MP: She was terrific. There have been many, many people like that over the years that have all been wonderful mentors who contributed in some way to my development and have been inspirational. Quite often just mixing with people in the community I would meet inspirational people all the time and learn from them. Within news there were a number of very important people that were wonderful to work for as well. I was very lucky to have excellent editors in chief and other people guiding me throughout my career and I look back and I am very fond of those people to this day and appreciate everything they did for me to bring on my development so then that I could also use that knowledge to support my teams. I was very lucky to have such great people to work for over the years.

AA Can I get onto Campbelltown where do you think it is headed?

MP I think Campbelltown is a great place to live and work and raise a family. I do think that we need to have more employment opportunities out here in Macarthur

because yes, we are working from home a little bit more. Some people are able to do that but on the whole we don't have big employers out here in Macarthur apart from the hospital.

30 mins

We really need to have more industry out here that can provide more jobs locally, so we don't have our people stuck in horrendous traffic trying to get around Sydney. Public transport, you know we've got the train into the city but to get to Parramatta you've got to change twice. To get to Liverpool you've still got to change once now. Just in terms of public transport we don't have any transport in Camden really beyond buses things like that. We have all that development west towards Penrith, we've got the second airport coming in. I'm still not quite sure what they're doing about the public transport out there. I think the airport will bring opportunities and hopefully will bring decent employment opportunities for our area, but what I would like to see is more government potentially coming out here with their departments. It's always a great pity to me that they're all centralised in the city or North Sydney or lately now Parramatta which is good for the west but what about the south-west. So, I think that's a problem, but I always think too Campbelltown and Macarthur is blessed because we're a mix of city and country. We're so lucky to have the koalas still here which absolutely need to be protected. That's very doubtful that that's happening in a substantive way. We're lucky that we have this natural bushland around us, but I see all the new estates going in and I despair when I see all those trees being pulled down. Can't they leave at least one or two up.

AA In a conversation I had yesterday people are concerned about that.

MP Absolutely, Tim Pickles for example at Tim's Garden Centre in Campbelltown is a fabulous advocate for our environment in planting trees. I saw on his Facebook page all those trees that were pulled down along the Appin corridor there and that's such a pity. It's been the same thing across Edmondson Park as well. Every time they do a new development, they pull down all the trees and I just think can't they keep some of them. So, I think that's a problem. I just think we've got all these people moving out here, what sort of amenity are we providing. The apartments are going up, I appreciate that people need to live somewhere and quite often apartments are a great start for people getting into the housing market. Some people also don't want to have a big block to look after and maintain, they're more affordable. That's great but where's all the parkland, where's all the walking trails for those people that live in the apartments to go out and enjoy the amenity around the apartment. On that point I am looking at the council, what are they doing to provide some space for those apartment dwellers in the Queen Street precinct for example. We've got the showground there, will that be a park or something in the future, I'm not sure. So far Campbelltown's got Koshigaya Park and Mawson Park and now the new Billabong which is all down that end well away from all the apartments that I see in Campbelltown. So what are we doing to increase the amenity of those people living in the apartments that the state government is wanting everybody to have along train lines and

corridors, what are we doing about that? There are a few things that I think could be improved but I still think that this area offers tremendous opportunity.

AA It does, doesn't it.

MP It does, it's true. We aren't too far from the city.

AA We're close to Wollongong and the country but the city as well.

MP We are blessed to have that city/rural lifestyle.

AA We still have some heritage, like the heritage buildings. We are lucky we've got some.

MP And they are to be treasured. I agree it's been a pity over the years since I was a kid growing up here from the 1960s on and a lot of the buildings that I remember aren't here today, that's a shame, I think the ones that we do have they are precious and we have to do everything that we can as a community to keep them and maintain them so they don't run into wrack and ruin. I know that's an expensive thing, but we have to look at our council and government to assist if the community can't do it.

AA Hopefully we can get the Queen Street fixed up. I know they are doing a lot towards that.

MP Agree, that is the heart of Campbelltown whether the people like it or not and it is below par. So I am so pleased that the council is looking at that and that was a big campaign of the Chronicle back in the day. We had community forums as well that weren't very well attended then. So, I know that the community would love to see Queen Street revitalised. How and when they do it I don't know but I do think that it's high time that something was done to lift it. With all these apartments going in it's imperative that something is done down there. Hopefully all those people coming in might revitalise and bring business in there, but I think council still has a role to make sure the amenity of the street is appropriate for everyone.

AA I'm looking forward to where we're moving the library.

MP Yes, that's exciting, it's going to the old Spotlight?

AA That's right.

MP Is that a permanent thing or is it temporary?

AA Temporary, I'm not quite sure when but it's temporary.

MP Times change.

AA Okay Mandy we have covered a fair range of topics. It's been great talking to you. It's been very interesting. I thank you for coming along and talking to me and being part of Curious Campbelltown.

MP It was a great pleasure, thank you very much for having me. Thank you.

