

## **Nele Findlay, PhD**

### **Conservationist**

Born 14 May 1933, Germany

Died 9 November, 2013, Adelaide

To walk with Nele Findlay was an education. Eyes on the ground, she would point out a local native plant that others passed by, mentioning its scientific name, the native butterfly that it supported or the place where there was just one other patch remaining. She attributed her botanical interest to seeing, as a small child, mountain wildflowers in Switzerland. The Rathgeber family was en route to Australia from Germany, just prior to the Second World War. They had named their daughter Cornelia (an approved name in Germany) so that they could shorten it to the name they wanted, Nele. She was not precious about the various pronunciations that people used!

Her father was the scientist son of a professor of experimental physics while her architect mother came from a pacifist family and was one of the first female town planners in Australia. Nele would take her weekend homework to her father's lab at Melbourne University in case he had an accident working alone. Inspired by the intellectual atmosphere in which she grew up, Nele became a science student at Melbourne herself, although she did not find it easy to fit in socially. She undertook a PhD in plant physiology, publishing research on the microscopic details of nectar production.

She moved to Adelaide when her husband Geoff Findlay took up an academic post at Flinders University's School of Biological Sciences, where she herself ably tutored students in practical skills including electron microscopy. This was remarkable for a woman at the time, especially as she combined her career with raising a family. Botany did not give way on Tasmanian holidays, she and Geoff making an amazing record over twenty years of the recovery of a patch of land from a bushfire. The only time Nele showed emotion in her final illness was on hearing that this work would be turned into a publication.

With no family living locally, Nele dedicated her retirement years to conservation. In keeping with her modest nature, she made quiet, often anonymous, financial donations to various organisations. Her maiden name of Rathgeber was apt – giver of advice, to groups such as Ilkari, Flinders University's conservation group (about native plantings around the campus lake). Her greatest contribution, however, was the time and expertise she contributed for over twenty years to the Friends of Warriparinga. Under her guidance, these volunteers worked to defend this triangle of open space at Bedford Park, saving the remnant indigenous plants and revegetating alongside the Sturt River to recreate a natural haven in suburbia, with over ninety local species, including eleven of conservation significance. That this is now the only place left on the Adelaide Plains where a river runs through a natural, pre-colonial environment is a testament to Nele's dedication. Her major project in her final year was the provision of suitable plant material for revegetation where the duplication of the Southern Expressway has taken another piece of Warriparinga's open space.

Warriparinga is of deep spiritual and cultural significance to the Kurna people as the start of the Tjilbruke Dreaming Tracks, and Nele took her involvement seriously enough to take up Kurna language classes in her late seventies. Fittingly, her memorial gathering took place at the Living Kurna Cultural Centre, resounding to the music of a didgeridoo. Nele leaves a son and daughter and two granddaughters.

Rosalyn Shute, Secretary, Friends of Warriparinga