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Full transcript of
an interview with:

Steven Cheng

Conducted on: 16 September 2019

Interviewer: **Allison Murchie**

Transcribed by: Deborah Gard

For:

The **Don Dunstan Foundation**

20th Anniversary Oral History Project

1999–2019 celebrating 20 years of action for a fairer world



DON DUNSTAN FOUNDATION 20th Anniversary **ORAL HISTORY** PROJECT

NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT

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A series of dots, indicates an untranscribable word or phrase.

A dash, – indicates a pause or a digression as occurs in informal conversation.

Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, - - -

Spelling: Wherever possible the spelling of proper names and unusual terms has been verified. A parenthesised question mark (?) indicates a word that has not been possible to verify to date.

Typeface: The interviewer's questions are shown in **bold print**.

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This is the 20th anniversary oral history project for the Don Dunstan Foundation. It is Allison Murchie interviewing Steven Cheng at the State Library on 16th September 2019. Thanks Steven for coming along – you're an important part of this process.

Thank you for inviting me.

You're most welcome. What is your full name Steven?

My full name is Man Sin Cheng but in Cantonese they start with the surname first so the pronunciation would be Cheng Man Sin.

OK, and what was your date of birth?

15 November 1962.

And where were you born?

I was born in Kennedy Town in Hong Kong.

We'll just talk a little bit about your history first and how you got to Australia and actually met Don. I've done some research – you were out here as a student I believe.

Yes.

Did you come straight to Melbourne?

Yes.

And what were you studying?

When I first arrived in August '88 [correction: 1982, SC] I was required to undertake a three-month English intensive course on that trip.

So you didn't speak English a little bit from school?

It was just that the standard of English skill was very high and it required people from overseas to go into a high school or a university. I achieved much but not good enough, then I needed to take an extra three-month course. They also explained to me that they wanted me to settle down, learn a bit about Australian culture and values and that's why I took the three-month English class.

That's interesting – they don't do that now. That's a very good course.

Yes.

OK, what were you studying a bit later?

I went to Braybrook College in Sunshine, near where my sister lived. I did mainly science subjects. I achieved very good marks and I was admitted to the Faculty of Science at the University of Melbourne.

And you studied biochemistry – is that right?

Yes, I didn't know what to study but eventually you specialised after the second or third year.

And you enjoyed that course?

It was very demanding.

Science is very challenging.

Also I wasn't getting a lot of financial help, though I was working casually in Chinatown to support myself financially.

Let's move on to how you met Don. He was in Melbourne running the Tourist Commission at that time.

Yes, I was working in a Chinese restaurant on Little Bourke Street every weekend. There were two people who came to the restaurant a lot, every weekend, and always with a group of people. Their names were Tak [Hui] and Ross [Wood]. After a couple of months we started talking. I was gay inclined so I tended to give them a bit more attention. They noticed that and they started to talk to me and one thing led to another. They invited me to go to their place for a party. They said that it was a very special one and I should not miss it, so I went.

You can't pass up that sort of invitation.

That's right. It was a beautiful house in Toorak with very beautiful thick luscious carpets and so forth. At the party there were only six of us, and I met Dunstan. He was very down-to-earth – a very charming person and down-to earth. He never really talked about his - - -

Did you know who he was?

Not really, no.

If you were in Victoria you wouldn't necessarily have known about South Australian politics. Were you interested in politics anyway?

Not enough really – not enough to make conversation.

Not enough to know who Don was.

No, no, I did read his history after that but at the time in the initial period it hadn't really come into the equation that I needed to worry about it. It was all in an early stage then.

What happened after that?

After that it was very interesting because Dunstan played a very active role in dating. He told me about all the things he loved to do - - -

And what sort of things were they?

Music, intellectual discussions, food and travelling. He just loved being the centre of attention too.

What sort of places did you go to when you were dating him?

Quite a few – we went boating at Port Phillip Bay.

That's beautiful.

Yes, I knew nothing about boating. We did a lot of touring around the Victorian countryside. We did a lot of dining and went to a few shows.

Would it be fair to say that you were smitten by him quite early?

Oh yes, definitely.

Most of South Australia, male and female, were in love with Don because he was exactly as you said – he was charming and he was down-to-earth and a very, very attractive man. Did you see yourself as having a future with him at that stage?

Yes, I could see that straight away. I think people from an Asian background don't judge people by their age especially.

So the age difference meant nothing.

Just slightly different attitudes.

And obviously it was not an issue for Don either.

He was a very outdoor person and very active.

It was clearly reciprocal.

Yes. He was always planning something to do and looking forward to another day and chatting away.

It sounds like a lovely relationship right from the start.

It was, and I did a photograph for him in the restaurant while we were having lunch and he obviously liked it so much that he put it on a Christmas card and sent it to his friends, and he had a lot of friends.

Did he have a lot of friends in Melbourne as well?

Yes, I think he would print off something like 500 cards.

That's a lot of friends.

Yes, and he always had a reason for talking. In much later years he would put me in the photograph.

I've seen one of you at Don's Table, with a glass of champagne, I've seen that card. Now, there was a bit of an issue because you were only on a student visa I'm guessing at that stage, so you weren't a citizen.

That's right.

Did you have to go back to Hong Kong?

Yes. I have a sister but they said that I could not apply for family reunion because I've got five sisters and I only had one here so they said they could not grant me a family reunion visa. They said that the best way was to go back home and apply from Hong Kong's office.

What sort of visa were you applying for to come back?

A skilled migrant. Because I had already achieved by that time a university degree I got a job in Hong Kong.

So you would have easily qualified for it.

Yes.

How did you catch up with Don then to move to Adelaide?

Don was just lovely. He sent me numerous love letters, saying how much he needed my presence. He came to Hong Kong to visit me for a couple of weeks. From there, he told me that he had planned to build an upstairs room for me - - -

At Clara Street.

Yes.

So he added on to the house just for you.

Yes.

That's incredible.

Yes. I did tell him I would like to make a contribution for the construction of the room but he said, 'I'm doing this part; you pay for the curtains and furnishings.'

The inside stuff.

Yes. I was surprised because it was something like \$3500 just for the curtains, but Don had a very high ego and he only used very high quality materials. That explains why when we had the restaurant he spent all this money buying curtains and chairs and tables and stained glass, because he made sure that it was a showcase of Australian art and craft.

Did you both come back or did he come home and then you came back later?

I didn't get my visa through until August '88.

Then you came straight to Adelaide?

Yes, I came straight to Adelaide. I didn't come on my own – I came with my father and my auntie and we went to Victoria first because they wanted to go and visit my sister first.

That makes sense.

Don arrived in Victoria to welcome them as well and from there we came to Adelaide, and we also went to Queensland because there was an Expo on.

What did your family think of Don?

They loved him.

They were charmed right from the beginning.

Yes, they absolutely loved him. There were never really any arguments of any sort.

So it was a really lovely start for you.

Yes.

And you've got a large family – you said you have five sisters.

Yes, five sisters and four brothers. Sorry, not five, four sisters and four brothers.

That's a big family.

Yes, I had to think for a second! Many years later – we were talking about Don being a charmer, and I remember many years later he introduced himself to my family members as Professor Don Dunstan AC, QC. I thought that was very funny. When he met people that did not know about his background a large ego did come out sometimes.

I guess he's earned the right, hasn't he?

Of course, yes, he worked very hard to get that title.

What was life like when you settled in Clara Street at Norwood? Did you settle easily? You were coming from Hong Kong and, really, it was a big move in your life.

It was. It was a terrible time for him as well. I did not know at the time – Don was a prolific writer but sometimes he didn't want to bother me with his own problems.

He kept it to himself.

Yes, he kept it to himself. That was almost the same time – there was a crack that had developed between him and the Victorian Government. There was a *60 Minutes* program criticising him about misuse, or some kind of liability that he created for the Victorian taxpayers when he set up the Chinese Museum, but it was all quite apparently unfounded and sensationalised.

That's what TV does.

It did damage Don quite a lot, about his reputation.

And he would have been shattered.

Yes, he was shattered about the way he was treated and very soon after that he resigned. He resigned I think when he was only three years into a five-year contract. I'm not sure exactly.

That we can check.¹ So he was struggling a bit and keeping it to himself.

Yes. I think that moving back home was a big event for him as well because he had dragged all his paintings and all his books with him to Victoria and he dragged them all back in a semi-trailer.

I didn't realise he had taken everything with him.

¹ Don Dunstan resigned from the Victorian Tourism Commission 17 months before the end of his contract (source: Angela Woollacott biography, *Don Dunstan*, p. 249).

Yes, and he had rented his place [in Norwood] and according to him the garden was trashed and he was very heartbroken when he saw that his beloved garden had to be built again.

That's the last thing he would have wanted – looking forward to coming home and he was very proud of his garden too because he put so much work into it.

And of course the financial part was sinking in as well because now he didn't have that extra income. He sold his property at Cardwell in Queensland for a very small sum.

Was he going to build up there?

Yes, he'd had it for over 10 years. He planted a lot of exotic trees like mangos and bananas and he was living in a very tiny cabin. I went there with him.

That would have been sad, selling that too.

Yes.

It was perhaps a mixed blessing coming back to Adelaide. He was back home with family and friends but there was a lot of damage, I guess, to the house, and he had to start again. It would have been a godsend having you there because if he'd been on his own he might not have coped.

Yes, I think he needed support. His children were all grown up and had their own lives - - -

Did you meet the family early on?

Yes, very early on. When I came back from Victoria to Adelaide I was by myself and Don sent his younger son, Paul, to pick me up at the airport, so I met them almost straight away.

How did you get on with them?

I didn't know at the time, but Gretel was invited for a get-together and she told her children she would never want to see me again.

You didn't know that at the time.

No, I didn't know that at the time. Don put his foot down. He said, 'If Steven is not invited I won't come to family parties,' and that sorted it out so there wasn't any issue there.

And she was OK after that?

Yes.

It's understandable, someone new in his life and they'd had a long marriage but I have seen photos of all of you together.

You can tell, I wasn't really good at making first impressions!

Well, it's hard on any family when a new partner becomes part of their family but you settled in and that was all OK.

Yes.

What did you think life was going to be like for you in South Australia?

Well, I wanted to pursue my career so on Dunstan's advice I went to do another post-graduate degree at Flinders University. I think at that time I knew that my English skills weren't good enough. Getting that level requires that you have a lot of good communication skills and, obviously, I lacked the communication skills. I was more able to write or read but was unable to communicate with people successfully. I didn't like it that much; it was very mentally stressful for me. Dunstan obviously realised that and he was trying to help me in many ways.

Then your life took a different direction – you moved away from science into cooking.

Yes.

Was that with Don's help?

Yes, Don was always talking about good food.

Was that a passion of yours as well?

Yes, when I say passion, it was about tourism and good restaurants being able to feature local produce. He was always complaining bitterly about how people boiled their vegetables and they were so bland. They didn't enhance their vegetables with a bit of flavouring, like carrots can be served with some orange zest or honey or something like that, or peas with fresh mint leaves. He championed all the time about better eating. He believed that Australia would be able to attract more tourists if we had better wine production and restaurants.

And he's been proven right, hasn't he?

Yes. Don was a wonderful person – when he thought about it he always wanted to do it as an example.

Did he talk early about wanting a restaurant or did that come later?

Much later. I was working and earning income and I think he was very pleased about that.

What were you working at?

Let me check.

Check your notes, because it's a long time ago.

I worked in many different restaurants. I think my first job was at the Hyatt.

In the city?

Yes, in the city. I was working at the Shiki Restaurant, a teppanyaki restaurant. I worked there and a year later, Don had a very good friend – at that time South Australian culinary was in chaos. A lot of businesses were failing. There was a tiny Lebanese cafe that was for sale but the one that Don wanted to have was the one across the road, Erica's Restaurant, which was for sale. He told me to go and have a look so I went. It was a beautiful restaurant – beautiful gardens and beautiful location, except the rent was very high. I think it was something like \$3000 or \$3500.

Way back then.

Yes, way back then. I didn't really start off running a restaurant to make money. I just wanted to make Dunstan happy! He wanted to have one, so eventually I persuaded him to take up the smaller one across the road. It only seated about 20 people and changing it into a restaurant cost a lot of money and financially I paid all of that because I didn't want to ask Don for that.

Because you had been working.

Yes, I had been working and I'd saved some money.

What was Don's financial situation like, because he'd lost all of that money in Victoria so was he just on his government pension?

Yes, he was very honest with his financial dealings. He never owned any shares; he never accepted money for his services. Most of the time he would do it for free, such as legal advice to people.

Yes, he had a reputation of doing that for a long time. I've also heard he liked to spend money a lot.

Yes, he did. He loved buying books and novelties. He loved novelties. He would proudly show people the under-bench [Nutone Scovill] meat grinder he'd bought.

So his kitchen had everything?

Yes, he would make his own mincemeat. Everything you could think of he would have. The house was completely full of all these gadgets.

What was your life like at home? He would have done a lot of cooking and entertaining at home.

Yes, Don was one of those people, he would literally take the phone off the hook when he was cooking because he didn't like people interfering with his cooking.

Were you allowed to help, or not even you?

Sometimes he let me but other people, he just wouldn't want them to be anywhere near him. He set up the kitchen in a way that his friends would sit on the other side of the bench.

OK, so you could sit and talk.

Yes, you could sit and talk but he didn't want people to come into the kitchen. Don was very funny when he was cooking. He would read the recipe and then he would start cooking and he would measure things.

It sounds very precise.

Yes, and he was just full of himself sometimes. It made me laugh, in his cookbook he had this recipe about zucchini soup and he put in brackets, 'his own invention'. I looked at all the ingredients and there was nothing really so special about it!

But it was his.

He believed that he had invented it. It was unbelievable.

Again, that's the big ego.

Yes, I think one of the things about his cooking, when he cooked food he would have hated it that people may think he had learned from someone else!

So it was all his creation.

He didn't want people to put in their advice on how to change his recipe.

That's wonderful.

People complained, why did he do all the cooking? – because that's just how he was. If you knew Don well enough you would know that. He did not want people to come and cook for him because he needed to be able to justify that it was healthy.

It was his passion and he probably didn't get enough time when he was a politician to do that so at least in retirement - - -

I don't know much about before - - -

Did he talk to you about his politics?

Before I move on, in his conversation he did mention that he did a lot of cooking at home. He said he started off at school when he was working as a scout leader and he was asked to cook for the others.

So it had been with him his whole life.

I think most of the time when he got home, apparently sometimes he did cook for Gretel and his children.

Did he talk to you about growing up in Fiji or his early life?

He talked a lot about that. Basically, he would talk at Norwood at dinner parties.

Was that a regular event?

Yes, it was at least once a week.

How many people would come to that?

No more than eight.

And he cooked for all eight of you?

Yes, and he would put on a table mat and sometimes a very beautiful lace tablecloth and crystal glasses and silver cutlery.

What sort of people did he invite? A lot of those people you wouldn't have known initially.

People very close to him, usually his friends, his children, other political figures, but not necessarily for dinner, but sometimes it was so good that he would invite them back for dinner.

What sort of food would he cook for them?²

He would always have three courses: for an entree in winter he would prepare soup, he always had meat dishes served like in a restaurant. He did it just like in a restaurant.

That's what it's sounding like. Did he have a favourite style of cooking, like Asian or French or did he just cook everything?

² Examples supplied post-interview by SC: tomato consommé with goat milk bavarois and basil; Japanese-style fish custard with prawns and mushrooms; Fijian goat curry with rice.

I think he went through different periods. I think he started off with French and European cooking, then he tried Malay and Nyonya cooking and at one stage he tried Japanese cooking, and of course he always loved curry.

Yes, he was known for his curries, wasn't he?

Yes, he was very big on curry. Especially, he would invite friends who were very good cooks and he would learn from them.

Maggie Beer and Michael Angelakis, they were well-known cooks who were friends, weren't they?

Yes. I found a file full of about 50 recipes he wrote down. Every time his friends came over and gave him a tip he wrote it down. Don was one of those people who wouldn't serve a dish unless he tried it out himself first.

Can you tell me a bit about his garden? I know a lot of that was used in his cooking. It would have taken quite a while to resurrect the garden from when it had been trashed. What sort of things did he grow?³

He grew really unusual things like artichokes, asparagus, and all sorts of beans. He would cook with chilli – of course he loved chillis; zucchini and a lot of the Italian vegetables like eggplant and tomatoes, but he was into exotic vegetables. Other ordinary stuff he would get from the supermarket.

He would grow the special stuff.

Yes.

Did he teach you how to cook some of his recipes or was he the chief cook?

He would normally talk about it when he was pleased with it, like camphor smoked duck. He hated plucking the feathers – sometimes when you bought a duck from a supermarket it still had feathers on it, so I was the one with the ritual of having to clean. He would tell me how to rub all the spices on and leave it overnight.

I know you had lots of famous people visiting the house – from ordinary friends who were constituents to lots of famous people. The one I do want to talk about is the photo of the two of you with Rudolf Nureyev. I think the photo was in the recent book that we talked about. What was it like meeting some of those people that were just so famous? He seemed to know everybody. Did that make you a bit in awe of him?

³ Post-interview information supplied by SC: Don grew fruit trees such as pomegranate, mulberry, loquat, macadamia, Tahitian lime, avocado, fig, apricot, apple and vines. A productive herb garden was also planted.

Yes, certainly Rudolf had a huge ego. Apparently he was a really big spender. He would just talk about the things he wanted to buy and build.

Did he come for lunch or - - -?

Yes, but he took us to Bridgewater Mill for lunch.

What was his English like? Did he have good English?

Yes, his English was very good.

What did he say about himself – as you said, he had a big ego?

Yes.

Did he talk about his career in dancing?

He talked about the fights he had with different people because he had developed his own dancing style which was very unconventional. I think, like Don, they both kind of wanted to reform and diversify the Arts so that it would survive.

I saw a documentary on Nureyev recently when he'd left Russia and he was in Paris, and that was the beginning of that change of dance. He didn't have that freedom in Russia.

He always said that you've got to dance with the music – it is almost inseparable. For them to have silence when dancing is almost impossible.

Did you like him when you met him?

I didn't really do much of the talking. His concentration was really on Don.

How did they become friends? Where did they meet?

I wasn't there. I was told that Don invited him for dinner when he was touring in Adelaide and they clicked. They really enjoyed each other's company.

He didn't know him prior to that. I guess as Premier he got to meet everybody. Did a lot of them stay friends?

Yes, like Lim Chong Eu, he was very good friends with him and then they had a big row and didn't talk to each another anymore.

Did they make up later? I know they had a big row.

No, I don't think they did. We used to hear year after year from Stanley Ho, one of the richest men in Hong Kong, and Don always was amazed by him – I only met him once. I don't know

why, but he keeps sending me year after year a Christmas card. So I think you're right – he did make a lot of friends, more than he wanted sometimes.

Famous people often attract a lot of people. Did you find when you went out that people would come up to you all the time?

Oh yes, sometimes I felt I should almost hide under the stairway away from the attention!

You couldn't have that private life because of all the attention, and I imagine he had time for everybody. He would stop and speak with people.

Yes, I think that's something that I had to deal with as well. It did upset me personally because in those days getting information was not easy. We didn't have Wikipedia or mobile phones and sometimes he had to go home and look for books and try to find out more information, or go to the library.

You said you were having people around maybe once a week but during the week did you have lots of good quiet time, just the two of you?

Oh yes. Don got up very early, always at 6am – at dawn really. He read at least two newspapers: *The Australian* and *The Advertiser* – they were delivered. He would water the garden and check his diary, so he was always going all day. He would take a nap in the afternoon at about 3pm.

Then just recharge and be off again?

Yes, recharge. He was always not far from a book that he was reading.

What sort of things was he reading? He had such a vast variety of interests.

Cookbooks would make him calm, a bit like people playing the piano, and Don did play the piano as well to calm him down and to put his thoughts together about what he wanted to do during the day. I don't think Don felt upset because he didn't have a full-time job because he was a realist. He realised his body was damaged in '79 when he resigned because the doctors said he had irregular heart pressure. He knew that he shouldn't be taking on very stressful jobs.

He was better health-wise if he just - - -

His health was really quite good when he was with me. The only thing that started to affect his health was when the first cancer was discovered.

When was that?

In 1993 – he had throat cancer which was a very aggressive one.

How did he cope with that diagnosis?

He was very upset. All his children were there and before he went into surgery he especially told me, 'If anything happens to me,' – he told his children to make sure that I was being well looked after because there was a chance that he may not have been able to survive. Luckily, it was all healed; it was very good except that the chemotherapy damaged his saliva secretions so he got very dry. After that he decided he no longer really wanted to accept any public speaking. Unfortunately, I think in '95 or so, he got a second type of cancer, I think in the small intestines [bile duct, SC]. It was absolutely unrelated to the first one. He had surgery and he got it removed and he completely recovered from that as well. In '93 he met Gough – I think it was in one of the periods of travelling in Italy that he met Gough - - -

In Italy?

Yes, because Gough was working as a tourist leader. That inspired Dunstan and in '93 he became a tourist leader to take people to Napoli.

Don did?

Yes, Don did. He took groups of people to introduce them to Italian wines and local restaurants.

How wonderful.

Yes. There were a lot of things he did that people really didn't think an ex-Premier would do.

He did what he loved.

He loved people, that's the main thing that is a principle of Don's.

That's a strong part of his history. Right from when he started as a lawyer people just came to him and he gave so much free advice and gave of his time so generously and that obviously continued in his time with you as well.

Exactly, and something happened with the restaurant. In March '97 my brother, Chilly, told Don that he would invest about \$2 million to set up a business.

This is the second Don's Table.⁴

Yes, the second restaurant. He asked Don for help and Don, without any reluctance, did a lot of research and he reported to Chilly about all the different places. There were nine places, all in Norwood. One was 203 The Parade, which is right next door to the current Hoyts Cinema,

⁴ At the end of this transcript a sample menu for Don's Table 1 is included.

and then the one next to it as well. They all came up for sale. Then there was another restaurant on The Parade for sale. It was all about reaching the budget that my brother Chilly said he could afford. He did all that – running around all day talking to conveyancers and builders and designers. He did that for a whole year and on top of that Chilly sent his son, Ka Chun, to stay with us. Don let Ka Chun stay in my room and I was staying in Don's bedroom. Don moved all the stuff into his room. His bedroom was full of stuff – only his bed he could sleep on. He kept it like that for months – it's amazing the way that he could accommodate people. It was extremely generous.

Very kind.

Yes, and he never asked for any money. He never asked people to pay him. Don was very upset – every time he tried to put a business plan together of how much it was going to cost to buy, or how to get the licensing, car parking, restaurant permit and all of that – he did all the work and then my brother, Chilly, would turn around and say, 'Look, we didn't like it.' He would always repudiate anything that they had agreed on and that was the hardest part for anybody. Don went through nine of these exercises – anybody else after this happening once would say, no that's it.

That's amazing that he would do so much.

He went through nine exercises. Even when he knew that there was trouble ahead he still kept doing it because he just wanted me to be successful. He was so worried that I would lose a good opportunity to have a better restaurant. Don never really misused his power; he would always ask my brother, 'Would you like me to give you suggestions on how to decorate the restaurant?' and 'What is the theme to the restaurant?' He always asked permission – he would never do anything without letting them know.

Do you want to talk about what happened when you moved to Kensington? It sounds as though it was a beautiful place and incredibly well-decorated. Your brother, basically, did the dirty on you, didn't he?

Yes, of course I can talk about it. When the restaurant was eventually completed, Don called his friend, Tony Baker [food critic]. Tony Baker came to the restaurant and tried it out and he wrote a fantastic and beautiful article about the restaurant – the beautiful furnishings of William Morris; there was a local artist [Cedar Prest] who decorated the stained glass. They also invited concierges of the major international hotels to come as well for the opening night.

What was opening night like? That was a special event.

Yes, it was a very special event. He wanted the restaurant to be successful and he - - -

And he saw it as your restaurant.

Yes, he saw it as my restaurant but Don did all the work, and lent his name freely and contacted all his friends and asked them to come over and try the food.

What was the opening night like?

It was fantastic; it was just absolutely beautiful.

What sort of food were you serving?

There were Moreton Bay bugs in ravioli served with a beautiful saffron sauce. I can't remember because it was a while ago.⁵

A very special night – how many did the restaurant seat?

It would hold 120 people. There was a private dining room at the front and the big middle room could seat over 80. At the back there was a conference room that would seat 20 to 30 people.

How did you manage to cook for so many? How much help did you have?

We had a huge kitchen; next to the building we had a 25 metres long kitchen.

Did you have help?

Yes.

So you were running it but you had help to do the bits and pieces.

Yes.

You must have been exhausted by the end of that night.

Yes, we were.

A tough night, but I can just imagine that Don would have been in his element with all his friends there.

Yes.

Did you enjoy working in the restaurant? It must have been long hours and hard work.

⁵ Post-interview information from SC: Another menu item was a flaky beef pie with a reduction sauce.

Yes, they were long hours. I wanted to develop a good rapport and have returning customers. I would be down at the restaurant from 9am and I didn't finish until 1am in the morning.

That's ridiculous; that would just destroy you. That became your whole life.

I wasn't really resentful about the hours being so intense but I could imagine people's hopes and expectations of me.

It did last quite a few years, didn't it?

Yes, from '94 to '98, so about four years.

That's quite a long time. It's well-known it ended in disaster with your brother, and that's on the record.

Yes, also as I said, Don was very clever. The restaurant won three restaurant awards during that time as the best restaurant by the Restaurant Association.

That's quite an achievement.

Yes, I think it was three years running and there was a Don Dunstan Life [Hall of Fame, 1998] Award for his contribution to the restaurant industry.

That's a really appropriate award for all of the work that he did in South Australia to put us on the food map.

Exactly. While I'm thinking of that, I remember that during the same time Dunstan was chairman [president] of the Mandela Foundation from '87 to '91⁶ and he was also president of the Movement for Democracy in Fiji from '87 to '97. Then he received a post-doctorate university degree as an adjunct professor in '91 in the Department of Social Enquiry. Then he was chosen as national treasurer by the National Trust of Australia in '98.

He wasn't exactly idle in his retirement!

He did a lot of work and he wasn't really frail - - -

You said earlier he was a prolific writer. There was that book [*Politics and Passion*] that John Spoehr edited of all of the articles that he did for [*The Adelaide Review*].

For social inclusion.

⁶ From 1987 to 1993, Dunstan served as president of the Nelson Mandela Foundation of Australia, whose goals included working towards freeing Mandela from gaol and ending apartheid (source: Angela Woollacott biography, *Don Dunstan*, p. 254).

That's right. For someone who has had several doses of cancer still getting up at six o'clock and running a full life - - -

And he did it all for people, not for financial gain.

What about when he got the final diagnosis of cancer – the lung cancer that was inoperable? Had he been ill? What led him to going to the doctor for that?

I think it was towards the end of September '98 he suffered pain. He went to see a doctor and they did some tests on him. They said that they had found a very aggressive cancer in both of his lungs. They said to him straight away that it was inoperable. It was a very terrible thing for him.

Were you with him when he got that diagnosis or did he come home and tell you?

He came home and told me. I think he went with a friend – I'm not quite sure who that was. I believe I was working.

I just can't put myself in the place of someone when you get news like that. How did he handle it, particularly knowing that it was inoperable?

I think Dunstan looked at death as a part of the natural process of life. He was so pleased that people rallied around him and wanted to honour his legacies. John Spoehr was very good – he mentioned setting up the Don Dunstan Foundation and asked Don to write all the visions for the foundation.

Which he did.

Yes.

Had Don been thinking about his legacy before John Spoehr - - -?

No, not before.

So it was basically John's idea.

Yes, Don always had this amazing ability to be able to instantly write - - -

He just sat down and did it.

Yes, he just sat down and did it. It was like writing his novel⁷, which was never published - - -

Have you got that?

⁷ *The Education of Roger Kenwright.*

I've got the original script – he wrote it in three days. I do not know how you can finish a novel in three days. He was just amazing, he had the ability - - -

And that's a substantial book.

Yes, he was able to perform under a lot of pressure.

Three days!

Yes. Apparently, he must have been thinking about it for a long time.

Yes, it would have been something that was in his head and he just needed to write it down.

Yes, because I think in those days when you were studying or training the demand on you was very high and they wanted you to be able to perform under pressure. It's like sport, you've got to be able to gather information when you need it. He had this amazing ability to do it.

As you said, when he had his [throat] problem he stopped doing public talks but he did do one more big talk which I was at.

Yes, the Gough Whitlam Lecture [*We Intervene or We Sink*].

Were you there that night?

Yes, and I saw him leading into it. He was practising for hours and hours in front of the mirror.

To get it perfect.

Yes, he just wanted it to be really good.

I was lucky; I was actually sitting in the front row and I got to shake his hand as he came onto the stage. At that stage, my own father was dying and he had a very weak handshake. I shook Don's hand and it made me realise he was so close to death, because of the frailty of that handshake. Then he gets up on stage and he was magnificent. That talk is still very famous and here is a man who is seriously, seriously ill. I felt, watching, that he just got energy by talking to all these people in the audience. Is that how you saw it? It was much more personal for you, of course.

Yes. A couple of days before his passing he was blacking out into a coma but when he woke up he started giving a speech that he had given when he was a parliamentarian.

My goodness!

Yes, he was giving a speech and it was so glorified. It was amazing.

Also, just before he died he did that very famous interview with George Negus at home.

His mind was very, very sharp. Nothing escaped his mind right to the very last hours.

He was ill for several months towards the end. How difficult was that for you? I know he had a lot of friends who rallied around but you were the one who was the chief person there. How difficult was that for you?

The problem was I didn't have any experience with somebody dying. I needed to ask people for help and when people saw that I was asking for help they just took over. I was a bit upset – they took over, but don't blame me that I didn't look after him properly. I just needed some help and people took over and then they turned around and said, 'Steven is useless.' Really, you're damned if you do and damned if you don't!

Clearly, one person could not look after him.

And he was very delicate. He was demanding things and by that time he'd lost a lot of weight.

Was he still eating OK?

No, he had an ulcerated mouth and it was always dry and he was always burning. He complained about being really, really hot so basically he was half-naked at home. Then the air conditioning broke down – would you believe it. Luckily, we got it organised but it was a horrible thing to happen then.

Was he in bed most of that time?

No, he would just sit up. He would sip cold water and we tried to put on some pleasant music.

I know people were coming to say goodbye, weren't they? There were lots and lots of people.

Lots of people. There really should have been some kind of control. At one stage I think there were 40 or 50 people there and they were not talking quietly. It was like just before a show at the Festival Centre with people talking everywhere.

And he didn't mind – he didn't tell them to go away or anything?

Well, it was almost impossible because the last thing you wanted to do was make a scene and they all believed they were Don's friends.

And I guess he wanted to say goodbye to them too.

Yes. There were other people in one at a time to talk to Dunstan, but by that time Dunstan was in a coma. They just kept talking to him and they believed that Dunstan could hear their voices.

You have to believe that.

Yes.

What about when it got very close to the end? I think he got a doctor – I'm just referring to my notes – he had palliative care come in, Professor Ian Maddox. Was that so he could actually die at home that he got that extra care towards the end? That was his wish?

Yes, that was his wish.

What was the situation when he actually died? It was in the middle of the night, is that correct?

Yes, I think it was about 3am in the morning; it could have been 2am.

Who was with him at that time?

I was actually on his bed.

So you were sleeping on the bed next to him.

Yes, because there were so many people in the house I was actually sleeping on his bed. There was a palliative nurse there.

So he was in a coma and just passed.

I was terrible. I was sleeping and they woke me up. I was in a very deep sleep and they had to shake me to wake me up. I was terrible because I didn't have enough time to grieve on my own because there were always people there.

Was Bronwen staying there at the time?

Yes, Bronwen and, of course, Rodney [Don's daughter and son-in-law].

What happened when you were woken up and he had died? Were there immediately people around you?

I think there were certain protocols that were followed. I think they had to call a doctor to certify the death certificate. I feel I did something that maybe I shouldn't have done. I called Don's lawyer and told him that Don had passed away. I don't know really if I should have done that or not. I didn't know what to say. Nobody told me what to do anymore. Maybe it was a bad thing to do, I'm not sure.

You clearly were shattered and you can't possibly prepare yourself for something like that. As you said, you had a house full of people and when did you have time to grieve? You had to wait until it was all over.

Yes.

How quickly after that was the funeral? I know it was a private funeral.

I think less than seven days. There was a newspaper running [items] for eight days to the build-up of Don passing and then there was the front page for seven days. Then the memorial service was organised and the orchestra very kindly played at Don's memorial service.

I was lucky enough to go to that memorial service and it wasn't sad, it was a beautiful celebration. Did he organise - - -?

He certainly wrote down the music and he wrote down who he wanted to talk on his behalf. He certainly wanted, I think, Gough Whitlam to speak.

Yes, Gough spoke. It, again, was one of those events that has gone down in South Australian history as a fabulous send-off that Don would have been happy with.

Exactly, yes.

Except you wouldn't have been very happy.

No, I wasn't. I was quite ill – I don't know why. I think I caught quite a serious illness at that time. I was unable to drive. They wanted me to go and talk about the memorial service at Bronwen's house and I couldn't drive. I had lost the skill of driving and they sent someone to come and pick me up.

It's been commented on several times that you weren't mentioned at that service. I know you would have been full of grief at the time but how did that make you feel?

They did ask or suggest to me that I speak but I didn't want to accept the opportunity because I thought I would ruin the beautiful memorial service by saying something I shouldn't. I don't have any skills in public speaking and I would have made it worse because I would have been so nervous. If people see somebody who is nervous they think you are guilty – they would think I was very guilty of something!

It was a good send-off for him. You must have been pleased.

Yes, I was very pleased when I saw in the newspaper that they published condolences to Don's partner, Steven Cheng, but that only appeared once. I don't know why that happened. Then suddenly it all quietened down.

You said you couldn't drive, and that was probably stress-related. You went back to Bronwen's. Was that just for the family?

It was for the memorial service and then there were some legal things we had to agree upon.

Don left the house to you. You would have known that he was doing that.

Yes.

It was not really the financial side.

I don't think there was anything to do with the financial part. I think there was a lot of guilt-pointing. Maybe I misunderstood, but I was under the impression that I was thought to be responsible because I created all this restaurant drama and shortened Don's life. I don't think I did shorten Don's life. All the things he did was so much and he was running around looking at properties.

That's just what Don does.

That's right.

There's no way he was going to sit home and be idle. That's nothing you made him do. Sometimes family when they lose someone who is so loved, they have to blame someone and maybe you were the person who got picked on.

Yes, but I tried to distance myself from Chilly. I actually took legal proceedings against him, so I did my part. I just wanted to make sure that I wasn't the one who tried to destroy his legacy. If your restaurant so suddenly has a spectacular collapse there must be something wrong. The main thing was that Chilly refused to pay the bills.

I think everybody realises that Chilly was the reason the restaurant failed. Have you had anything to do with your brother since then?

No, not anymore. I refuse to talk to them.

Now the sad part, you were on your own. How did you cope with that grief?

One way I tried to cope was that I got a job working in a nursing home. It is very calming to me to be able to help people on their final journey. I met all these people in their 80s and 90s and talked to them.

That would have been lovely, and that helped you?

Yes, it did help.

I've had a look at your resumé. You've worked in so many different places. Are you working now or have you retired?

I came to the conclusion I'm really no good at working anymore so, basically, I've retired. I should update my profile.

What is life like for you now?

I've met a partner now and we are building a life together. We are going to do a lot of travelling, gardening and go to see shows and stuff like that.

I'm sure Don would be very pleased.

Yes, and I've lost five kilograms so far and I'm doing a lot of bike riding and exercise.

So you've changed your lifestyle a bit too.

That's right.

People will never forgive me if I don't ask about the pink shorts. You did donate those shorts to the Museum of Democracy. Are they still there?

I wouldn't call it a donation but I was so pleased that the Centre of Democracy became the custodian of Don's pink shorts. It was such an important piece of this state's history.

They're not really pink anyway, are they? – they're sort of pink.

Yes, the most extraordinary thing was that they were so small and so tight, they would not fit most people's waist. They were an incredible fit. When you look at a political figure – he was so attractive and he could talk so eloquently and he loved to recite poetry and was able to act, and he loved the casualness about his clothing.

They were always elegant casual.

Yes, and his love of people – it emanates from his picture how much he loved people around him.

I know a lot of his official papers and documents have been donated to Flinders University but at home have you still got a lot of his artwork and some of his personal memorabilia? Do you still keep that or has that mostly gone to the university?

When Don passed away I gave a lot of books to Flinders University but Flinders didn't have any room so they gave some of them to the foundation – or the other way around, I think I gave it to the foundation and the foundation gave it to Flinders. Most of the books that Don was reading are there and Don had acquired a lot of paintings and artwork. I still have them. I treasure them.

Do you still feel his presence in the house?

Definitely. I think of the maintenance and upkeep of the property as my sole responsibility.

It's quite a big property, isn't it?

Yes.

I walk past it every time I go down to The Parade. There's one other thing I did want to talk about – it's a bit out of context but you helped organise a very fine 70th birthday party for him.

I wouldn't take too much credit for it!

I remember seeing in the press the picture of the two of you arriving in a gondola. It's one of those photos – you can't imagine him looking any happier than he looked that night. Was that a good night for both of you?

I think Dunstan really wanted to separate his private life from being a public figure. That's why when George Negus asked him about his sexuality Don really tried to explain to him that I am what I am and people just have to take me as I am. Sexuality should be - - -

It's his issue.

It is his issue and he really didn't want to talk about it.

It's purely private, isn't it?

That's right.

But the press love a story, don't they?

And the 70th [birthday celebration] was one of those very rare moments when he opened up his private life to people.

I think he did a very good job of telling them it was none of their business.

I was very surprised that Don had a lot more lovers and they didn't come out and say to the biographer [Angela Woollacott] I was a Dunstan lover too.

I think we were surprised at how many he had, and the variety, but he clearly loved people. A lot of that that I read in the book about some of his lovers, I didn't know about until I read it in the book and she did it very well, didn't she?

Don had three most important things about love. He said there has to be sexual pleasure and has to be trust and he must have a kind of intellectual satisfaction – that's all he looked for really.

That's a lot though if he got all of that.

Yes, and he always found those three main things with people.

One of the other interesting things that I read in my research was that he said domestically he had never been happier in his whole life than he was with you. What a compliment.

Yes, I didn't do a lot but I think it was just being there with him and supporting him.

He obviously thought the world of you and obviously you felt the same. I thought that was a lovely comment to make for such a long life. You were together for well over 10 years, weren't you?

Yes, it was almost 13 if I count the time we shared in Victoria.

That's a wonderful story. I know you've got some notes there. Is there anything that I haven't raised that you would like to talk about?

I think Don's only regret was – people who became the next premiers of the state, they chose a style which was the complete opposite of what he was trying to do. He wanted South Australian people to have a better chance to succeed – like cheaper electricity or better government control – but all of the successive governments were disappointing to him.

It was the complete opposite to what we call the Dunstan decade with the achievements – we could go on for days listing them.

That's right.

It was incredible and I think a lot of people were very disappointed after that. Thank you for today because those memories of Don are very, very special and I know people are going to love listening to them.

Thank you very much.

I very much appreciate the time you could give us, so thank you very much.

Thank you.