

Ladies and gentlemen welcome to "Open Your Eyes" at Spooky Hall on this beautiful York morning.

Some months ago Lori and I discussed whom she should ask to open her 1<sup>st</sup> solo exhibition in Australia. I suggested a number of people I thought would give this auspicious occasion due weight but none of them hit the mark in Lori's mind. A few days later she announced that she had decided on someone and it only remained for that person to be convinced to agree. I asked her what criteria she used and she replied that she particularly wanted to ask someone who was familiar with and loved her work that was also around when she began! At that moment I knew I was about to be railroaded – again!! I have many times accused her of not being logical (heaven knows that's a tall order for an artist – gender aside!) but here was a time where she applied absolute logic and how could I argue – I was there at the beginning, walked the road of her growth with her and love her work with a passion that is only surpassed by her own. So here I am.

I have attended many openings of other artists over the years and invariably the speaker discourses knowledgeably on the artist's technique and style etc. This won't be happening much today – I know the limits of my knowledge! Instead I'd like to tell you how she came to be here today – because it in itself is a wonderful story.

Lori spent her early childhood on her father's farm in the southwest of WA and never lost her love for that area and in particular its flora and fauna.

In 1991 we were transferred back to those environs with a posting to Manjimup and quite by chance she joined a small local art group. Every day each and every one of us meets numerous crossroads – what I like to call "Yes/No" moments – this is when you have a choice between 2 alternatives and in the choosing lies a path that will contribute to your life's journey. If you choose "Yes" over "No" on a particular question then everything that occurs thereafter is a direct result of that "Yes" until the next "Yes/No" moment. What happened after Lori joined this group is one such moment that we can look back on with certitude.

The art group arranged a trip to Fairbridge near Pinjarra for an artists' weekend getaway. Lori was invited to go along. She decided, "Yes". Until that weekend and even for a fair portion of that weekend Lori was trying to grapple with the prospect of developing a style involving landscapes but she was having great difficulty – because it just didn't feel right. As she walked and struggled with this demon

her head collided with a clump of honky nuts on a low hanging branch and suddenly she saw those honky-nuts in a different light. From that moment her unique style of intricate detailed studies of flora and fauna began to emerge because as we now realise it was at that moment that she began to truly open her eyes.

I recall her 1<sup>st</sup> exhibition entry. It was at the renowned Brunswick Agricultural Show near Bunbury. The judging was 'closed door' so the entrants had no idea of their results until the show was opened to the public. Lori was beside herself – not with nervous anticipation, which can only come after some success – but with a challenge to her self-belief. Thoughts such as "Who do I think I am entering a competition of this calibre against established artists" amongst similar others coursed her mind. At the appointed time the door was opened and she trooped stoically into the hall to a defining moment in her career. There was her work in a room accompanied by at least 200 pieces adorned with a red plaque "Sponsor's Choice" this less than a year from that fateful day in Fairbridge. The die was cast!

It is worth pointing out that this win was achieved using colouring pencils! In fact, her family (led by me) often accused her (in fun, it must be said) that all she was doing was painting by numbers! The pencils didn't last long and she soon progressed to her favourite medium – watercolour and gouache - Lori is 100% self-taught which has allowed her style to grow as a unique entity in itself without influence by another.

Other exhibitions came and went – all successful in one form or another as her skill developed and matured and her style became unique. And then came another memorable "Yes/No" moment. Lori was invited to conduct classes in her unique style by TAFE. As many of you here today will know that was also a "Yes" and over the last 12 years she has changed the lives of 100's of people including many children.

She has taught all of these people to really "Open Your Eyes" to see the colours, textures and shapes of everything that grows, flies, crawls, walks or slithers. Lori is passionate about the conservation of the natural world and her mantra could be "To be aware is to appreciate – to appreciate is to care".

In 1999 she decided on a life-change and went to live in a small town in Ireland – little did that quiet little town know what was coming! Shortly after arriving she set-up a studio in part of a converted convent and started teaching the locals how to paint Australian flora

& fauna! Hearing of this "Home & Away" type character in their midst the local paper ran a story on her that prompted the principal of a neighbouring town's primary school to contact her with a plea. To paraphrase him "I have 8 hooligans that will be in prison before they're 16 unless we can teach them some self-esteem – do you think you could do that through your art". Never one to say no to a challenge Lori said Yes (Yes/No moment again) and on arrival day one discovered that not 8 little darlings needed saving but 15! The 1<sup>st</sup> few lessons were a nightmare. The kids were hopelessly unruly and fought all the time. But there had to be a solution – and Lori found it! Talk about tackling something from left field. Given that these kids were well on the way to borstal, were grouped together to protect the rest of the school – and I suspect the teachers – from their attentions and had a very low level of academic achievement it seemed logical to Lori that they should be given the opportunity to write and illustrate a book. Yeah – right! Only Lori would see that potential in the little horrors – but she was right. It was there. The transformation was nothing short of miraculous! It wasn't long before they were greeting her at the car to carry her bags, absenteeism vanished, manners improved, fighting ceased. They became happy and enthusiastic. The book was a huge success. Of course the topic isn't hard to guess – open your eyes to the detrimental effect of your litter on nature. These kids turned from being Nature's nemesis to its greatest local ally.

Whilst in Ireland Lori exhibited at The Granary in Waterford, Damer House in Roscrea and lastly at Oscar Wilde House in Dublin. This latter was at the invitation of the Australian Embassy in Dublin and was opened by HE the ambassador. Given the connection with the AE many people from the diplomatic circles of Dublin attended making this exhibition extremely successful and there are now originals of her work hanging in diplomats' homes as far a field as Japan, Estonia, USA, Poland, Germany, Italy plus many more and of course that other place considered foreign to us in the West - Canberra.

Around this time Lori was encouraged by one of her students to enter a competition being run by the National TV broadcaster "RTE". She was short-listed in the finals and appeared on National TV where she was interviewed before being awarded "1<sup>st</sup> runner-up".

Her last project in Ireland was to represent Australia at the World Art & Craft Fair in Dun Laoighre just south of Dublin. Though this is not to imply that she is finished in Ireland as she has also undertaken a project for Lord Rosse of Birr Castle Demesne – one of the most famous residential castles in the country – to help him record his

world renowned collection of endangered species from places as diverse as the Yunnan district of China and the Brazilian rainforest.

In 2002 Lori returned to WA and commenced teaching at Atwell Gallery in Alfred Cove - an association that continues today.

This past year has been spent in preparation for today. The creation of the work you will view shortly is painstaking in the extreme - hundreds upon hundreds of hours work - often into the wee hours. Some of the pieces grow at such a rate, often with a brush devoid of all but a few hairs - that nature would loose patience with the original if it were to grow so slowly!

Next year she will tackle the Lord Rosse project (though 1 piece can be seen here as a sample) and thereafter an exhibition in Austin, Texas beckons whilst there are also plans for a series covering the unique flora and fauna of Rottnest Island - not to mention a children's book that she has written but needs to find the time to illustrate!

I promised Lori that I would not speak this morning as though it was a eulogy - and I trust that I have not given that impression - but it is very important to me for you all to understand just who it is you have in your midst. I can only speak to the person as I have a dearth of knowledge for the techniques of her art. People who know their stuff hold this lady's art in the highest esteem around the world. It is thus held because she is both passionate about her subject and extremely accomplished in its portrayal. You now have a rare opportunity to view a collection of exquisite work - most of which is for sale - before anyone else has seen it or had the opportunity to acquire a piece for themselves.

In closing I would like to just say a couple of words of thanks - to Lyn & Meryl of Spooky Hall for hosting the exhibition - and incidentally, something we only discovered early this week - relatives of Lori's owned Spooky Hall in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century! Talk about thin threads! To Ivana St John a great friend to us both who spent the day with us here on Friday erecting the exhibition. And to Bruce Cameron of Captured Ideas in Applecross (a fellow countryman) who does an exquisite job of framing Lori's work.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Lori Spencer-Neuzerling, my closest friend, the love of my life, invites you to "Open Your Eyes" whilst plebeian me invites you to open your wallets!

Thank You.