
A Tribute to Danny Sandor

19 October 1960-21 February 2006

Alastair Nicholson, Former Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia, and honoured member of DCI-Australia knew Danny well, as both a colleague and friend over a number of years. His wonderful tribute to Danny expresses the affection and regard with which we at DCI-A and numerous others felt for Danny and the great loss of his passion, intelligence and enthusiasm.

Vale Danny Sandor

Danny Sandor, who died at the age of 45 after a long and courageous battle with a rare form of cancer, was a truly stellar man with a mercurial personality, who lit up the lives of all around him. His death stunned many of his friends. Although we knew his illness was terminal and he was always realistic about his prognosis, Danny seemed invincible in a way that most of us do not.

He was the only child of Hungarian Jewish immigrant parents, who came from Israel to Australia after WW2 and settled in St Kilda. The family prospered – his father owning the local service station and his mother buying and selling property.

Although as a young person Danny often helped his father, serving petrol was not his choice of a career and while others of his age were playing cricket and football, he enrolled at drama school. He pursued an acting career for some time, even playing parts in Cop Shop and Homicide, before deciding that he wanted to take a different path.

He first turned to nursing and obtained his certificate as a State Enrolled Nurse in 1979. Sadly, while still in his early 20s, Danny's parents both died of cancer within a short time of one another. He was able to use his skills to nurse each of them at home during the palliative phase of their illnesses.



Danny then became interested in psychology and began an Arts degree at the University of Melbourne, which he completed with First Class Honours in 1982. His tutor in psychology at that time, Dr Doreen Rosenthal, remembers him as someone who 'bounced in as if he was six inches off the ground' exuding enthusiasm, excitement and enjoyment in everything he did and as a brilliant, charismatic and idiosyncratic student. He brought all those qualities to his later life.

Between 1983 and 1988 Danny worked for Community Services Victoria in various management areas involving young people. At the same time he also completed a Diploma with Honours in Criminology in 1984. His interest in children and young people stayed with him for the rest of his life and he had a particular interest in child protection and juvenile justice issues.

While with the Victorian Department he managed the Streetwork Project, a unique protective service

for young people subject to drug and sexual exploitation in Melbourne's inner suburbs. Later he became an active member of the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, and subsequently its Chair. He was also a member of Defence of Children International and occupied a number of senior positions in that organisation, with which he continued to work closely until his death. Danny's particular affinity for children and young people was enhanced by his ability to speak to them as equals and to listen to and understand their problems.

In 1989, Danny decided to study law, and he threw himself into it with his usual energy and commitment. He immediately became very interested in Discrimination Law, a third year subject, which as a first year student he was prevented from studying. However he eventually charmed Professor Jenny Morgan into allowing him to enrol in it and needless to say, he obtained first class honours in it. He finished his law course in three years, and graduated with a First Class Honours Degree in 1992. Asked why he had decided to enter such alien territory as the law, he said he believed it was necessary, if he wanted to change anything for children, to know from the inside how the system worked.

Danny was gay and proud of it and worked hard to end discrimination against people of different sexual orientation. He was an instigator of the Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby and a key player in law reforms instituted by the current Victorian Government. He was a Board member of the National Children's and Youth Law Centre from 2001 and was also a member of the Victorian Attorney-General's Advisory Committee on Gay, Lesbian, Transgendered and Intersex Legal Issues, through which governmental understanding of the problems associated with these issues was greatly improved. This was recognised after his death in tributes paid by two MPs in the Victorian Parliament.

I first met him in 1992 when he applied for a position as my legal associate. Following his interview one of the three members of the selection panel expressed concern that he may be 'too radical' for the Court. Fortunately the other two members considered him outstanding, as indeed he was. There

began what was for me a wonderful association, which I will always treasure. We had an immediate rapport and I enjoyed his infectious personality, sense of humour, and great intellect and, as I got to know him better, his gentleness, courtesy, strength of character and principles.

Danny worked in my Chambers, first as my associate and later as one of my two Senior Legal Advisers until 2004, when I retired. As such he was an integral and leading part of the closely knit group that constituted my then staff, all of whom are devastated by his death.

He was of great assistance to me in so many ways. He was fascinated by the technical aspects of appeal work and loved discussing and questioning the issues raised. But he never forgot the human side of family law nor the damaging impacts such disputes had on the families concerned, and particularly on children. He was a great researcher and we worked together, often at my home, on drafts of judgments. He had a particular interest in children's cases and cases that involved gender issues. He also made the burden of my speaking engagements bearable and meticulously checked and footnoted my judgments and speeches.

Danny did not keep normal office hours and would frequently arrive at work as late as 10 or 11 am in the morning. No one would question him as his work was always up to date, and we knew that he had probably been working in his office or at home until all hours the previous evening on urgent court matters, as well as assisting some under resourced community group or the like.

Once a cause attracted Danny's support he worked for it tirelessly, relentlessly, never with any wish for thanks or recognition and always in a pragmatic and unsentimental way. He was a formidable and relentless opponent, both verbally and via the written word, whenever he saw the rights of vulnerable people being compromised.

Danny did not suffer fools gladly and he was a stern opponent of individuals and systems when he believed criticism of their activities - or inaction - was warranted. However he was never disparaging of

others and his criticisms were always constructive and useful. He was always courteous but was no admirer of hierarchies, and as a consequence he had friends throughout the Family Court, from judges to junior staff. We all found him always ready to learn and to help, and no job was too menial or time consuming. He gave freely of his time for colleagues and friends and his generosity extended to financial support for friends who needed help from time to time.

I learned much from him, as I hope he learned from me, but I think I was the greater beneficiary. He taught me new attitudes to issues like gender and racial equality, and opened new pathways in thinking on all sorts of issues, particularly in relation to children and the law.

Danny was very well regarded in England, where he worked on loan for a period in the Chambers of the then President of the Family Division of the High Court, Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss. A number of messages of sympathy have been received from English judges and court staff. His influence also extended to New Zealand, Canada and South Africa, where he had many friends amongst judges, human rights advocates and legal academics. Judge Jennifer Coate, the President of the Children's Court of Victoria commented "He made a huge contribution to many aspects of laws surrounding children and young people, not only locally, but internationally".

After Danny left the Family Court in mid 2004 he was employed by the Soros Foundation in Budapest managing a programme for intellectually disabled young people living in countries of the former Soviet Union. Unfortunately he became ill several months later and returned to Melbourne for treatment.

Although he was too ill to work full time, he continued his work for Soros in Melbourne as best as he could. During the past year he also collaborated with me on submissions to Senate Committees on Anti-Terrorism legislation and to the Victorian Government on child protection and its proposal for a Bill of Rights.

Danny was a passionate civil libertarian and really believed in the principles embodied in the UN Charter

and particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. He was a great supporter of the concept of giving more heed to children and was highly critical of the fact that most Australian Governments have failed to do so. He regarded them as committing human rights abuses through inaction.

Danny's prodigious appetite for work was matched only by his love for a party and for enjoying the company of his many friends. With a glass of champagne in one hand and a cigarette in the other, he was a wonderful, and inexhaustible companion.

Danny was also a musician, linguist and enthusiastic traveller. He spoke Hungarian and Spanish fluently and had reasonable capacity in German. It was not unusual for him to be found in the early hours of the morning in Melbourne, Budapest, Nice or Buenos Aires, playing a hotel piano to the sleepy approval of the late night bar staff.

Danny remained committed to the end of his life. As late as the first week of February this year, less than a month before he died, he was discussing proposed submissions to the Victorian Government concerning its version of anti-terrorist legislation, and offering his services to the Victorian Government to assist in the development of the proposed Community Court.

Although by this time unable to cook as he loved to do, he also entertained about 30 of his friends at a gathering on Australia Day this year. He made arrangements following his death for a party to be held at the St Kilda restaurant where he had celebrated his 40th birthday. The celebration was attended by more than 150 people from the many walks of life upon which his activities impinged.

One constant in Danny's life was his home in St Kilda. It was in this place that he and some of his closest friends lived and where he finally died, lovingly cared for by friends and family.

Even a shooting star needs a home.

**Alastair Nicholson,
Former Chief Justice of the Family Court of
Australia**