Simon Townsend's Biography

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Born to be a journo

Simon Townsend's personal and professional biography

By G R Hart

Simon Townsend has enjoyed a successful and varied 47-year career as a journalist in print, radio and television. He is best-known as the originator of Australia's first current affairs style afternoon program "Simon Townsend'sWonderWorld!" During the eight years 1979-1987, Simon was the show'sanchorman andpackagerfor2,000 daily shows. "Wonder World!" won various prestigious awards including five Logies for television excellence.

Simon Patrick Townsend, now 63, startedas the Woy Woy correspondent for a county weekly newspaper (at Gosford NSW). He had a flying start to his media career - he walked out of high school and straight into a job at just 16. At first his duties were junior (wedding reports, bowls club results, traffic accidents, youth club doings and so on). But within three months at age 16, he had his own column ("Teen Topics"). Today Simon laughs at himself for being young and over-confident, and is embarrassed to admit that in his third year of journalism, he began work on a textbook for journalists!! Simon has been a columnist many times, for newspapers and magazines. He spent a few years learning his craft on regional NSW newspapers in Tamworth, Maitland and West Wyalong. Simon has also worked as:

?a photographer ?speechwriter ?ghost writer ?court reporter ?sub-editor

?whimsical philosophical columnist ?commercials presenter ?oddities columnist

?US correspondent for (Australian) Copley News ?documentary scriptwriter

?pictorial editor ?CNN news editor ?crime reporter ?parliamentary reporter

?TV-magazine-and-radio reviewer ?quiz compiler ?newspaper editor

?PR officer for the Australian Film Television & Radio School

?movie actor (once, for eight seconds on screen)

Simon migrated to the USA in 1969. In 1970 he was an associate editor in the newsletter division of the publishers McGraw Hill, New York. Later he worked as the United Nations correspondent for the famous wire service United Press International. He wrote a "believe-it-or-not" style comic that appeared in

"Women's Weekly" and then "New Idea" in the late 70s. He's anchored 2UE-3AW talkback, done midnight-to-dawn talkback on 2UE and produced 2GB breakfasts for David Koch. Though he can't sing Simon put out an album of novelty songs, singing one track himself (The 1910 Fruit Gum Company's hit, "Simon Says"). The vinyl LP recording sold 3,000 copies.

At one point in his varied business career, Simon was half-owner of a television station. He invested in VEW-8, Kalgoorlie, WA, then Australia's smallest TV station (one camera, four staff and less than 95,000 potential viewers). He founded the bookshop Bestsellers?.

Simon sometimes made news. In 1978 he sneaked into Buckingham Palace and wrote an article about this adventure in the old "National Times". He made headlines when his airliner hit a volcanic ash cloud over the Indian Ocean in 1982 and all four engines stopped. "Simon victim of Phantom Freeloader" screamed a headline when Simon was the victim of a strange thief who would move into Simon's weekender Mondays to Fridays and eat and drink to his heart's content, evading police time after time. Simon announced a TV series on the life of PM Bob Hawke. And he was on the front page when a sniper threatened to kill him and "Woodrow" if he opened an RSPCA event.

Simon lived at Gladesville, Sydney, with his late wife Rosanna and their children Michael (now 30) and Nadia (now 28) from 1980 until 1998. Mike is a computer executive (IBM, Dell) and Nadia is an actress in movies, TV series (currently City Homicide), commercials and stage plays, and soon to appear in a Nicholas Cage movie "The Knowing" (due in March 2009). In 1998 Simon and Rosanna bought a city apartment. After moving out of the big family home they had loved for 20 years, they turned it into a rental property. Following a mild stroke, Simon changed the way he eats and walks, and is recovered and well . . . and 30 kilos lighter.

His late father was, and his two brothers are, journalists. In 1971 Simon was a sub-editor on "The Weekend Australian" and one of his jobs was editing a children's page. He was so entranced with the quality and volume of the children's own poems, stories and drawings he saw each week, that Simon started a national children's newspaper "Zoot" in 1972.

In 1973 Simon sold out of "Zoot" and got his first break into television as a reporter on the original "A Current Affair" hosted by Mike Willesee. In the days of black-and-white 16mm film, Simon's fellow reporters were Steve Raymond, Tony Ward, Judy Lynne and Paul Hogan. Simon married Willesee's secretary Rosanna. Twenty years later in 1993, Mike was back at the desk at "A Current Affair" and his protge Simon Townsend was up against Willesee in the 6.30pm timeslot. Simon was hosting another of his ideas, "TVTV" on ABC-TV.

Simon wasareporter and producer on ABC-TV's "This Day Tonight" in 1975 when Iain Finlay was that famous current affairs show's final compere. Simon was associate producer to the legendary "60 Minutes" producer Gerald Stone, on a uranium documentary in 1977. Simon was John Laws's 2UW producer and writer all of 1978. He also scripted Laws'sMediawatch segments in "A Current Affair" during 1978. Simon worked for Willesee several times, producing and writing various TV talk shows and magazineformat TV shows. He was a writer and ideas man for famous Sydney radio stars Steve Raymond and Bob Rogers in the 1970s.

After "Zoot"and "A Current Affair", Simon in 1974 combined his two experiencesof producing quality entertainment for young people and of fast moving daily current affairs . . . and he conceived "Simon Townsend's WonderWorld!" In 1974 and 1977 Simon made pilots of "Wonder World!", but it wasn't until 1979 that the Ten Network bought the show from Simon's production company. It went on to its successful eight-year run in every market across Australia. The show dominated the afternoon ratings for most of its life. It was so popular that for a two-year period an old show and a new show ran back-to-back every afternoon.

Simon's famous companion for those eight years was his family pet, "Woodrow" the Bloodhound(died 1986). Simon's reporters included Angela Catterns, Edith Bliss, Phillip Tanner, Wednesday Kennedy, Maurice Parker, Brett Clements and JonathanColeman. "Wonder World!" also gave first breaks to many directors, cinematographers, editors and other TV professionals, including Andrew Lesnie who won an Academy Award? for cinematography for the first Lord of the Rings movie.

In late 2000 Simon was one of the surprises when Jonathan Coleman was guest of honor on "This Is Your Life" shot in London.

At age 42, after "Wonder World!" closed in 1987, Simon retired for a few years. He designed and built a sandstone mansion in bushland in the lower Hunter Valley, NSW, using stone and timber from his own land. In the property-crash of 1989 Simon was a failed developer of luxury mansions on Sydney's north shore, and Simon went broke.

During 1990 he was the TV critic on Terry Willesee's "Live At Five" on Nine. In 1991 he was TV critic for Ray Martin on "Midday". These experiences gave him the idea for "TVTV".

A publicised anti-Vietnam War campaigner and conscription resister in the 1960s, Simon was jailed twice for his opposition: 32 days in Long Bay Jail in 1967 and 28 days in an army prison, Holdsworthy, in 1968 including three days in solitary on bread and water during which a lot of news coverage evolved. When Gorton Cabinet papers were released in 1999, Simon was delighted to learn that he had been such a thorn in the government's side that discussing him had taken up Cabinet time on four occasions in 1968. Never missing an opportunity to be a freelancer, Simon wrote articles about prisons following his own imprisonments.

In1992Simon and the 24-year-old daughter he had never met until then, told their reunion story in "Women's Weekly" and on Ray Martin's "Midday" show. In 1993the Post Adoption Resource Centre made awards to Simon and his actress daughter Lisbeth Kennelly, now 41, for their work in re-uniting birth parents and adopted children.

"Chance And Coincidence" was the name of a two-hour special for the Seven Network, devised and produced by Simon and aired in 1992. The show told stories of amazing chance events and incredible coincidences, and was the world's first TV show to offer a million dollar cash prize.

In 1993 Simon sold his idea of a television show about television to the ABC, with himself as host. "TVTV" went to air in the week's hardesttimeslot, 6.30 weeknights. In August 1993 Simon left and sold the production to the ABC with a continuing royalty to himself. He collected a royalty fee for "TVTV". He also collected royalties for format rights to the Nine Network's new "Wonder World!", produced by two of his former reporters, Brett Clements and Phillip Tanner.

Inventing games is one of Simon's passions. It started with "Zoot" and inventing silly fun games that appeared as centre-spreads in his children's newspaper. In1985 he invented a family board game "Simon Says" which sold well for twoyears. Two more games "Townsend Towers" and "Mumble Mumble" may be marketed in late 2009 by games maker Crown & Andrews. Simon's game"Soaked!"inwhich kids splashand spray each other to adult dismay, has never been accepted by any games manufacturer . . . But today copies of Simon Says often come up for sale on eBay.

ThenSimoninventedaTVgame. Inearly1994Simoncombinedwiththe Seven Network and Telstra to put to air a successful idea called "Cash Call", a telephone concept in which viewers dialed in their phonenumbersto databanksonthechanceof winning$50,000 cash.

This led to Simon's latest and most ambitiousproject. It's a fun concept that is convergence of internet, telephone, television and computers, a cyberspace formof entertainment. Details of Simon's project are secret.

Simon Townsend has found a new love: teaching. He does part-time tutoring in journalism for Learning. He has created an eight-part columnist's course - by distance learning - a world first, and which may be marketed by . He also does private on-camera coaching for companies.

He worked as a news producer for CNN during the Sydney Olympics. In 2001-2000 he was occasional producer for personalities on radio 2GB. In 2002-2003, he worked four hours each weekday as Producer of the "Jon Harker Show" on 2UE Sydney.

In 2002 Mike Munro surprised Simon and "This Is Your Life" made a program about his life, which aired in September 2002. The ABC-TV show "Talking Heads" made a half-hour show on Simon's life, airing in August 2005. Also in August 2005, in the Network Ten special on 40 years of Ten, Simon and his "Wonder World!" were featured. In April 2006 the Seven show "Where Are They Now?" reunited Simon with his former reporters from "Wonder World!"

His daughter Lis gave birth to Simon's second grandchild, a boy named Lenny in early 2006, a brother for Rex, now 6. Simon's son Michael and his fianc Emma had a daughter Lola, born in 2007. Simon suffered his third stroke in June 2003 but continued tutoring.

Simon met his beloved wife of 27 years Rosanna in 1976, when she was assistant to Mike Willesee and Simon was Mike's producer. Rosanna was not only Simon's soulmate and mother of two of his children, but his business partner and co-owner of the Wonder World! production company. Rosanna died of lung cancer in 2003.

Simon's health remains okay, and he keeps busy. Today Simon regards himself as "retired", but runs a family property investment company and does his tutoring. He reads a lot, sees every new movie and fires off letters to the editor when upset by world events. In 2007, he was lured back to television and made a pilot of a panel show called Celebrity Advice. Keep an eye out for it!

- G R Hart now teaches creative writing in New York. She was a journalist and colleague of Simon.

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.