

18 SUNDAY MAIL INDEPENDENT LIFESTYLE MAY 2021

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

# Lives well lived

A new exhibition captures the beauty of ageing and the vibrancy of those living in residential aged care, writes LYNN CAMERON



**B**ehind the doors of hundreds of residential aged care centres in South Australia lie thousands of stories waiting to be told. Not the horror stories of the royal commission but stories of lives lived – and being lived still.

Stories like Guiseppe and Tina, whose Romeo and Juliet-esque forbidden love took them from a small town in Italy to South Australia and now, 70 years later, to Bene Campbelltown, where Giuseppe makes daily visits to see his beloved Tina and hold regular choir sessions with other residents of the aged care facility.

Stories like Nello, the former

bricklayer with a love of gardening who is bringing new life to the grounds of Bene St Clair; or of Maria Zadnik, a Yugoslavian refugee who married an Australian and ended up in Coober Pedy.

It's these stories and more than inspired Adelaide writer and chef Rosa Matto to put together a celebration of aged care residents in South Australia, with the help of local photographer Italo Vardaro.

"I am a volunteer at Bene and I always hear laughter, I see people chatting, and I found that a bit incongruous with all the sadness and negativity around ageing," she says. "I wanted to tell a positive, uplifting story."

Over a period of 18 months, Matto did just that, enlisting not just residents but also staff and volunteers to the project. By her side was Vardaro, to capture those insights into his subjects' souls. "I've always valued a full-bloom flower like a rose when everything is revealed, and photographing these people, I can see that bloom; they've reached their absolute peak," he says. "There's beauty in having lived a life."

Seconda Ferretti and Maria Dal Santo are prime examples of those lives lived. The 91-year-old and 89-year-old respectively met more than 50 years ago when both worked at the Findon Hotel. Life and family respon-

sibilities took them away from each other until fate brought them back together in 2017, when Maria moved into Bene St Clair just 11 days after Seconda.

Today, the two are like sisters. "We hadn't seen each other for many years but it didn't take long for the friendship to reignite," Seconda says.

But it's not just about connection within the aged care residence: the exhibition creates opportunities for new connections to be made. "To me, the project is introducing the older generation to the younger generation," says Lynne Smith, a volunteer who credits the past five years at Bene as rescuing her from chronic depression as a result of



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debilitating medical conditions. "I think whoever goes to see the exhibition may come out a bit more connected than when they walked in."

For Matto, it's also about changing the conversation around ageing. "We're breaking down stereotypes," she says.



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"They are very much individuals who have had their own experiences – they won't fit in a box."

"Older people are embracing modernity yet we won't let them – we have this fixed idea they should sit in a chair in the sun and they want to be doing things."

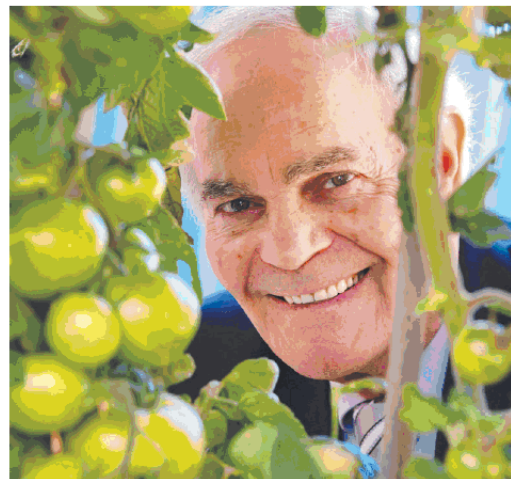
What started out as some words on a page and a couple of photos on a wall quickly evolved into LivingProof, a full-blown exhibition currently on display at the South Australian Migration Museum. "I thought these people deserved a wider audience – they deserved to have their stories told far and wide," Vardaro says.

On until June 30, the exhibition is a multi-layered experience with photos, excerpts and an audio-visual element. "I felt it was very important to hear their voices because so often we speak for older people," Matto says. "Even when they're with us, we're talking about them without engaging them."

The exhibition has been an emotional experience all-round. "I did shed a tear when I saw it all come together," Matto says. "I was very proud." Adds Vardaro: "It's beautifully presented and it gives honour to those who are coming to the end stages of their lives: it's quite emotional."

For the participants themselves there is pride in having been a part of the experience. "It brought many of our residents, staff and volunteers closer together, and that really came together at the opening of the LivingProof exhibition," Bene St Clair site manager Louisa Broadstock says. "It has been a lot of work but it was good to be a part of a feel-good project."

"I was surprised to see my big picture – it was beautiful," Seconda says. "My family keeps saying I'm famous."



#### OUT OF THE BOX

Clockwise from opposite page: Bene aged care residents and LivingProof Exhibition participants Maria Dal Santo and Seconda Ferretti; Jean Fowler; the Campbelltown choir; Nello Raciti; and Bene St Clair volunteer Lynne Smith with site manager Louisa Broadstock.

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