

WORDS GENEVIEVE MEEGAN PHOTOGRAPHS ITALO VARDARO

# THE AGE OF BEAUTY

The joy of ageing and the humour and humility of the elderly are reflected in an upcoming exhibition organised by celebrity chef Rosa Matto.





It was through her volunteering work at Bene Aged Care homes that Rosa Matto first decided to document the stories of the elderly residents.

The well-known local food identity wanted to shine a light on the joy of ageing; the beauty in a life lived. But it wasn't just stories of the past that Rosa wanted to celebrate, her motivation was also to capture moments in time now.

"It's important to hear these stories because it's a connection with our past," she says. "Each story is unique to these people, but in essence this is about, as Shakespeare put it, the human condition.

"When you get to the age of 80 and 90, you've suffered, but you've survived most importantly, and these are lessons that remind us of our humanity."

Rosa has collaborated on the project with Riverland photographer Italo Vardaro, who has captured beautiful, spontaneous portraits of the Bene community and its characters, including residents, staff, volunteers and family members.

Originally, Rosa had proposed creating a display at Bene, with the images and stories displayed along one wall. However, what started out as a "tiny project" has been transformed into a major exhibition, Living Proof Bene, which will be held at the Migration Museum early next year.

The exhibition was due to be held in November this year, but has been pushed back due to COVID-19.

Rosa says it is her love of stories and the process of storytelling that motivated the project, as well as highlighting the

positives of growing old. She says she's learnt a lot about herself, as well as the residents, in the process of sitting down and simply listening to them.

"I think this project has taught me not to be afraid of old age, because I'm rapidly getting there, and also to maintain a full cultural life," she says. "I think [one of the residents] Santina can't read anymore because of her eyesight but she still asks people to read the paper to her and she has vibrant and dynamic conversations with her best friend.

"None of these people sit and wait for visitors. They have a rich internal life if you like, and that's what keeps them sparky and humorous and a little bit combative, which is wonderful."

She conducted some of her interviews in English, some in Italian, and some in both.

Both Rosa and Italo have clearly been moved by the process of being immersed in the Bene community and, in particular, reflecting the lives of its elderly residents.

"You do leave with a sense of joy in your heart because we have such a lovely time photographing and chatting and it's such a happy place, and humour is quite evident in there, too," Italo says.

"The people who work there are a special breed. Walking in there as a 'Joe Blow', just the reception you receive and the care they all have for others, you come away feeling uplifted because you've had a really good time.

"Laughter is a good medicine I suppose and they do find the joy in the simplest of things. You can't help but laugh with them."



Giuseppe Cavuoto, who visits his wife Tina every day at Bene, has become a happy, positive force around the place. **Opposite page:** Rosa Matto and photographer Italo Vardaro have been moved by their collaboration on the exhibition, Living Proof Bene, celebrating the joy and beauty of ageing. **Previous pages:** Seconda and Maria first met when they worked at the Findon Hotel in the 1950s. After losing touch, they re-established their friendship at Bene Aged Care, where they are now inseparable. Finding Seconda again makes Maria feel "like I've won the lottery".

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Rosa says, through her interviews and just time spent at Bene, she has come away with a sense of humility.

"Because these people don't want pity, they want company," she says. "I think the worst thing for an older person is loneliness, and if we've heard their story 100 times, let's listen to it 101 times, because that is their moment and for that moment they are telling you this story. So, in a way, it's the present in the past. We are letting them relive a joyous occasion in their life.

"I think we can get hung up on asking them, 'can you remember the order of your grandchildren and can you remember what you did yesterday?' What does it matter? These people have given so much to the community for so long and now we can't give them 10 minutes of our time? It's quite wrong."

Rosa says she hopes those who see the Living Proof Bene exhibition come away with a sense of the dignity and fulfillment of all the long lives lived.

"I think it's easy for us to feel sorry for them [the elderly] and think they're just waiting for the next chapter; they're not," she says. "And we should be actively encouraging them to maintain that energy that they've had throughout their lives into this next stage.

"What we need to do is bring the elderly out more, that is what we want to do through this exhibition."

Rosa says the Bene residents have been thrilled with the project, and are



looking forward to seeing the exhibition next year.

"This puts them in the spotlight just for that little time and they relish it and rise to the occasion and are touched that anyone would think their story is of value and interest," she says.

Rosa's motivation and sentiments are perhaps best summed up by something one interviewee, Giuseppe Cavuoto, said in the course of his interview with Rosa: Giuseppe visits his wife Tina at Bene every day and has become a lovely, friendly presence around the place.

"We must work to make this a place of dignity, security and respect. They still have blood, which flows in their veins, hot blood. They do not need pity or donations. We must not become a bank that only takes deposits and does not allow withdrawals. This is not their last home, it is their second home."

#### "WE BOTH FOUND GOLD"

The lives of Maria Dal Santo, 88, and Seconda Ferretti, 90, first crossed paths in the 1950s when they both began working at the Findon Hotel.

Back then, at barely 20 years of age, they were hard-working Italian immigrants, carving out new lives in Australia with their husbands and young children. Maria was a cook at the Findon, famous for her signature oyster sauces.

"The chef before me, he was English but he didn't know about cooking," Maria says.

She once famously served hot chips to singer Johnny O'Keefe.

"There were leftovers, so I saw this young lad and I felt sorry for him, so I warmed them up and put them in a bowl and gave them to him," Maria says.

Seconda was a housemaid at the Findon, making beds and doing the laundry, as well as helping out in the kitchen when needed.

"We met and became friendly at that time," says Maria. "We were both Italian and we chatted, when we had time; but it was busy there.

"It was hard work and I had to ride my bike to work and back again."

The women bonded over their similarities – new country, new jobs, new language, new challenges, young families.

Eventually, they both left the Findon Hotel and lost touch over the years, seeing each other very occasionally at funerals.

Then, a few years ago, life brought them back together, this time at Bene Aged Care in Woodville.

"I was here first," says Seconda, who had been at Bene just a couple of weeks when she spotted Maria across the dining room. Maria had just moved in.

"When I saw Maria I said, 'Oh thank

God! Mamma Mia!'," Seconda says.

The two women embraced and have been inseparable ever since. They sit together, play bingo, enjoy music, and get about the place, side by side, with their matching walkers.

"It's great company," Maria says. "It's like I've won the lottery. I can't speak for her but it's like we both found gold."

And the secret to their special friendship? Knowing boundaries and having a laugh, it seems.

"She minds her own business and I mind mine," says Maria. "If she wants to tell me something she will, it's her business. I don't like a sticky beak."

Seconda says: "We sit together and say some jokes, maybe some clean and maybe some dirty. Sometimes we don't talk because we're tired."

Both Maria's husband, Aldo, and Seconda's husband Orazio, passed away years ago, but they both have children, grandchildren and great grandchildren who visit regularly.

They are a funny, cheeky duo, finishing off each other's sentences, holding hands and sharing smiles. It is this special bond that has been reflected in an interview the women did with Rosa Matto – an interview that will form part of Bene's exhibition, Living Proof Bene.

During the interview, Rosa asked the women, who were playfully mocking each



The residents enjoy the Bene choir, singing Italian songs from the past. **Opposite page:** Guiding each other Seconda and Maria like to play bingo, enjoy music and just sit together to "say some jokes, maybe some clean and maybe some dirty", Seconda says.

other, "do you always fight?"

"Always," says one. "Every day," says the other.

"Really, you know, she should treat me with more appreciation," Seconda jokes. "She should respect her elders. I was 90 in January and she is only 88 years old. Don't you think?"

There is a moment's silence. Seconda's eyes mist over and she looks at her hands folded in her lap. "I am always the second one," she says. "That is why I am called Seconda. I was one of twins. My sister Rita came first, and then a few minutes later I was born. But soon my name meant nothing. Rita died of meningitis when she was only eight years old."

The chatter ceases for a moment and the room is very still. Then Maria says quietly, "And now you have me."

#### "THAT WAS MY DESTINY"

Giuseppe Cavuoto was just 18 years old when he first laid eyes on Tina Russo in Italy. The young boy had been sent to the home by Tina's brother, Eduardo, to collect

something. Tina answered the door.

"There appeared before me a vision," Giuseppe says. "She had big eyes, beautiful and she really knocked me down. I started to shake. That was the end of it. After that, I found any excuse to visit.

"Tina was a dressmaker, teaching young girls, so I got my sister to get a dress made. I arranged so many things."

At 23, Tina was a few years older than her young admirer, but just as smitten. Over the following years, the lovebirds left letters for each other in a hole in a tree by the railway station, as their love deepened.

"She was just so kind, looking after her mother and father, there was just

something simple and genuine that attracted me," Giuseppe says.

However, hopes for a wedding were halted as both families were against the romance. Giuseppe was from a village outside Benevento, while Tina was a "city" girl. It could never work.

Eventually, Tina, grappling with uncertainty, consulted a priest, Padre Pio [who years later became a saint].

"Padre Pio used to counsel people, help them do the right thing," Giuseppe says. "Tina went there to confess and say, 'What am I going to do?' Tina told me, 'If he says I can marry you, I will'.

"She went to see him and he said, 'You can marry him'. He blessed her, touched her on the face and said, 'Love one another and you'll be okay'. It was a miracle. That was my destiny, she decided to accept me."

They were married on April 30, 1950, in the Chiesa di San Modesto in Benevento. None of Giuseppe's family attended.

Then, in 1954, the couple moved to Australia to start a new life. Giuseppe eventually got work with the railways, rising

PEOPLE SAY SINGING IS THE  
VOICE OF THE ANGELS.



**Above:** Giuseppe is devoted to his beloved Tina. The couple celebrated their 70<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary this year and are still madly in love. Giuseppe says that during a recent visit to see his wife, "she held my hand and said, 'You have cold hands. Here, put them on my heart'. And she gets my hands and puts them on her heart. We were like little children."

to the position of supervisor. He was there for 35 years.

The couple went on to have five children, and today have 10 grandchildren and 13 great grandchildren.

Life has had its ups and downs, but a pivotal moment was when, four years ago, Tina was diagnosed with dementia and moved into a Bene Aged Care facility. Now, Giuseppe visits Tina every day, helping her with lunch, holding her hand, just being with his love.

He has also become a favourite with other residents and staff, lifting everyone's spirits through his gift of giving.

Sometimes Giuseppe will lead prayers with the residents, or his regular bingo game, tombola, giving out chocolates to the winners.

"I cheat and make them all win. I make them happy," he laughs.

Then, a couple of years ago, Giuseppe had another idea. He had noticed a 96-year-old woman, Erminia, who sang every day before lunch

"They were songs my mother used to sing," he says. "So, I said to the lady in

charge, 'That lady is singing every day, could we make up a choir and sing with her?'"

And that's what they did. Now, every day the residents, some of whom are non-verbal, will sing together, led by Giuseppe.

They sing songs such as *Un Mazzolin di Fiore*, an Alpine song from the Resistance, or *U Prim Amore*, my first love.

Rosa Matto has interviewed Giuseppe, in Italian, about his incredible love for Tina and their life together. It will form part of the upcoming exhibition at the Migration Museum.

Rosa says she has been incredibly moved to hear Giuseppe's choir sing at Bene.

"Sometimes the residents are a bit droopy, sitting in their seats and when they start singing they sit up and it looks like lines are actually dropping from their faces," Rosa says. "I was so moved. There is a woman who just makes up a song at the end. They always finish with her song and she may sing about being young and working in the fields. She just puts a story into music and sings."

Giuseppe says he loves the choir because "the music revives them".

"It has an extraordinary effect for older people," he says. "You have to have a delicate heart and recognise them, look into their eyes, and they smile. That is the connection.

"People say singing is the voice of the angels."

Sometimes, Giuseppe says his wife is there but not present.

"I see her but she is not there," he says. "The pain is indescribable; it reduces me to tears. I have to remember the joyous times, the pride we have for our children and the life we made."

But there are good times, too. Giuseppe, 90, and Tina recently celebrated their 70<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and Giuseppe also recalls a recent visit to see Tina that filled his heart with love.

"She held my hand and said, 'You have cold hands. Here, put them on my heart'. And she gets my hands and puts them on her heart. We were like little children." 🌸

*Excerpts from Rosa Matto's interviews have been used in these stories.*



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