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The Profile: Kerryn Phelps

CV

Current activities

President, AMA (NSW)

GP, FRACGP

Health Editor, Today Show, Nine Network

Health columnist, Australian Women's Weekly

Honorary medical officer, Department of General Practice, Royal North Shore Hospital

Australia Day Ambassador

Chairman, The Satellite Group

1997-99: Chairman, Medical Practice Committee, AMA (NSW)

1998: Subject of ABC TV documentary, Australian Story, "The Way We Are"

1993-98: Columnist, News Ltd newspapers

March 1997: Drove in celebrity race, Australian Grand Prix, Albert Park, Melbourne

January 1996: Walked Kokoda Trail in PNG for Nine Network's "A Current Affair" documentary on events of World War Two

1994: Executive committee member, AIDS Council of NSW

1992-93: Presenter, reporter and medical consultant for the "SEX" series on Nine Network

1987: Appointed as GP representative, Northern Metropolitan Health Board Community Health Services Committee

1984: Commenced general practice in Sydney

1981: Graduated, University of Sydney

THE NEW GUARD

The cafe breakfast dishes have been cleared away, and at last Kerryn Phelps is starting to loosen up a little, perhaps even drop her guard for a few minutes. Asked to name public figures whom she admires, Phelps leans into her life partner and business manager, Jackie Stricker, and whispers into her ear, almost giggling.

Phelps has already nominated Germaine Greer (“she said a lot of things that needed to be said in a way that got peoples’ attention”), Oscar Wilde (“he thought outside the box and I admire people who think outside the box”), and Barbra Streisand (“she’s a woman in a male dominated industry who’s managed to rise to the top of her profession through excellence and personal effort - and she’s a damn good singer.”)

After the whispered consultation, Phelps adds Elton John to the list: “He had to stand up for what he believed in and take a great risk, and I admire his philanthropy.” Later, Nelson Mandela joins the list “because he steadfastly stood by his principles at great personal cost.”

We have already spent several hours together - chatting in her new home in Sydney’s well-moneyed eastern suburbs, at work in Channel Nine’s studios and now more talk over breakfast - and this feels like the first real glimpse of the person who is Kerryn Phelps, as distinct from the GP, media performer, and medico-politician.

Given her high profile and decision last year to go public about her relationship with Stricker, it is surprising to find that Phelps is such a private person. Perhaps she is just being media savvy - realising that this will be a story for her medical peers, she wants it to focus on professional issues.

But many of her colleagues also remark on Phelps’s reserve - some call her aloof and controlled, others talk of shyness and humility, and some describe an inner vulnerability despite the confident image she projects. One observer sees it as the mark of a perfectionist who is always “on duty”. Those who taught her years ago remember a serious, reserved student.

Phelps is comfortable talking about her achievements - whether as school dux and sports champion or as a health communicator - but seems at an uncharacteristic loss for words when the discussion turns more personal. Stricker often answers these questions on her behalf.

“She’s very committed to everything she does,” says Stricker. “She has an incredibly inquisitive mind. She loves intellectual pursuits but she’s also very interested in health and fitness. One of the things she didn’t tell you is that she worked as an aerobics instructor.”

When Stricker describes her as a workaholic, Phelps protests that she's not. "Yes you are," says Stricker. "She's happiest when she has a project."

When pressed, Phelps describes herself as "deeply spiritual" but says it's something she finds difficult to talk about because it's such a personal issue. Stricker adds: "She has a great feeling for humanity and the earth and nature. She believes in religion but she doesn't want to talk about it."

On politics, Stricker describes her partner - who turned down an offer to stand for Liberal preselection some years ago - as "moving with the issue" but probably "a little right of centre".

When asked to describe her weaknesses, Phelps laughs "you won't get any negative comments out of Jackie", and proffers "if somebody's agenda's running at odds with mine, they might find my determination a little problematic."

Phelps, a fit 41, has taken on the NSW presidency at a tumultuous time for the AMA. The NSW association (it is no longer a "branch") has a poor record, compared with other states, of attracting members. And longstanding tensions between the NSW and Federal AMA have been exacerbated by the leadership stoush.

The NSW Association represents only 42 per cent of the state's medical practitioners, with 7,650 members. Only 30 per cent of NSW GPs are members. It is widely hoped within the AMA that the profile and image of the new president will help recruit more young doctors and GPs.

"It's important that the AMA in NSW has a prominent role and an obvious role in representing the medical profession in anything to do with the health system," says Phelps. "I think it hasn't had the profile that it might have. It's not seen to be there. And quite often the reality of life is that if you're not seen to be there, you're not as effective as you could be because you're not engaging the public in the debate to the extent that they need to be engaged."

No-one could accuse Phelps of keeping a low profile in her first few months in the presidency. She has won an extraordinary amount of media coverage, both for herself personally, the AMA and hospital funding problems. She takes credit for being a driving force behind the establishment of a NSW inquiry into health services as well as the Senate inquiry into hospital funding.

However, her involvement in Dr Bruce Shepherd's campaign against the federal leadership has met with mixed reactions. Even some of her strongest NSW supporters privately admit they are glad she will now have more time to devote to the NSW association. There have also been rumblings that the leadership stoush may have been "distracting" for her.

Some even question her commitment to medical politics, noting her current bid to be elected as an NRMA director. Phelps was also recently appointed chairman of the Satellite Group, a gay and lesbian media investment group, which has announced plans for a "pink" float.

But despite recent knockbacks - including failed bids for election to the AMA Council of General Practice and to AMA federal executive council - there are few doubts that Phelps is a political career to watch with interest. The question on many minds is whether she will nominate for the federal AMA presidency when Dr Brand steps down next year.

"I haven't made a decision yet," she hedges, when asked about her federal intentions.

Not surprisingly, Dr Shepherd, a self-described "talent scout", has only glowing words for his protegee, who shares his strong views on professional independence. Shepherd has known Phelps since she was a resident at Mona Vale Hospital, and is impressed by her "barristers' mind", and ability to grasp situations quickly. He also enjoys "the way she treats me like a father".

Some observers have been surprised by their friendship, and Phelps acknowledges they have different styles, but emphasises that they are philosophically on a similar plane.

"She has what Bruce has, and that is a drive to win," says Dr John D'Arcy, a medical consultant to the Seven Network, who has previously worked with Phelps on radio, and also knows Shepherd well.

“She’s much more patient than I am,” says Shepherd. “She handles people very much better and expresses things so much better. She will bring great dignity to the profession, which is probably something that I didn’t always do.” He laughs and adds: “I couldn’t get the attention any other way.”

Dr Brendan Nelson, Federal MP, former AMA leader and another Shepherd protegee often compared to Phelps, is also a friend and professional supporter. Apart from sharing the observations which are widely made - that Phelps is highly intelligent and a skilled communicator - Nelson adds that she has “a brave heart”, “a well developed sense of social conscience”, and is a “loyal and honest friend”.

“She’s someone who always tells you what she believes you need to hear rather than what you want to hear,” he says.

Phelps’ priorities for her presidency include winning better resources for the public health system, tort law reform to address medical indemnity concerns, and achieving some regulation of complementary medicines. She is keen to encourage debate about Medicare, and drug law reform is also high on her agenda, with one NSW Councillor describing her as “a terrier” on this issue. Another AMA source describes her as “like a blue heeler” on certain issues.

Phelps prides herself on a willingness to tackle difficult issues, whether it be with patients, government or her television producer. “It took me about three years of approaching successive executive producers on television to do a story on incontinence,” she says. “They kept saying to me, ‘you can’t talk about incontinence on breakfast television, it’ll put people off their corn flakes’. I kept saying, it’s something that affects lots and lots of people and I think it would be something that would really help a lot of people. Eventually, I got an executive producer who said, ‘you can do it but make it tasteful’.”

The NSW AMA’s executive director, Laurie Pincott, is impressed by Phelps’ “thirst for knowledge”, and ability to master the nuances of complex issues. “She’s a tiger for devouring briefing papers. I’ve never seen anybody like her,” he says. “She doesn’t take short cuts. If there’s

a path to follow, she treads it with an enormous amount of confidence because of the homework she puts in.”

He adds: “This woman has an unbelievable capacity for work. I just can’t believe that she does what she does in a seven day week...we’ve been run off our little legs keeping up with her.”

Sean Brogan, a former producer of the Today Show who worked with Phelps for four years, describes her in similar terms - as an energetic hard worker who “never went on air without being completely briefed on the subject”.

But ask Phelps what she is doing tomorrow, and she has to ask the “keeper of the diary”. Stricker, for 20 years a teacher, continues some private tuition but devotes most of her time to managing Phelps’ schedule and acting as minder. Her role has irritated some within the AMA, but helps Phelps maintain a hectic pace - which includes television reporting, writing a column for the Women’s Weekly, general practice sessions and assisting a surgeon once a fortnight.

“She’s a big picture person,” says Stricker. “I run round tidying up the details.”

Prominent Sydney urologist Dr Phillip Stricker, who socialises regularly with the couple at family get togethers, says his sister gives Phelps “total undivided support” and that the two are a “formidable team”.

Helen Grasswill, a producer with the ABC TV program Australian Story, approached the couple to tell their story after being disgusted by a newspaper report which had publicly “outed” them early last year. She says they initially wanted to do a political story highlighting some of the legal and human rights issues surrounding gay relationships.

“I didn’t really want to do just that because I saw it as essentially a love story,” recalls Grasswill. “A purely political story would only further alienate people who have dogmatic views whereas it’s fairly hard for most people to ignore love.”

And a moving love story is what went to air: Phelps and Stricker cuddling, and speaking frankly of their relationship. There were interviews with their families, including Phelps' two teenage children by a previous marriage, and her brother, actor Peter Phelps. There was also footage from their Jewish wedding ceremony in New York, and of Phelps as a young girl growing up on Sydney's northern beaches.

After spending some weeks with Phelps, Grasswill says her impression is of a "kind and honourable person" who is also resilient, focused, conciliatory, and thorough. Phelps was "terribly, terribly nervous" about revealing all, she says.

The show had a huge response - Grasswill says the biggest ever - but it is not something on which Phelps and Stricker wish to now dwell. Questions about their personal life are deflected, although Stricker does mention several talks by Phelps on gay rights and related issues, including an address to the Mardi Gras launch.

Phelps interrupts her: "I don't want this profile to be about gay rights, OK."

Dr Penny Adams has known Phelps since they were residents at the Royal North Shore Hospital. They shared maternity clothes and set up a general practice together in the mid 1980s. The practice, on Sydney's lower north shore (Phelps insists its location not be identified) has five female GPs working part-time.

Adams laughs when asked whether Phelps is as serious, controlled and reserved as she seems, and speaks instead of her being too trusting, having a lovely sense of the absurd, and not having a malicious bone in her body. Their relationship has been volatile, with many heated words exchanged over the years.

"When we're together, we're either laughing or fighting," Adams says. "She would see me as being a bit obsessive, well very obsessive, and a control freak. And I would see her as being the delegator, the ideas person and not doing the grind."

Adams adds that Phelps doesn't let many people get close. "Very few, in fact. But those who she does (let in) would see a different side."

