

Mary-Rose McLaren Story.
Board Member & Chair Speech & Drama



I first went to South Street in 1970. My mother took me to watch the set poem section for the 9 and under 13 age group. The poem was *The Listeners* by Walter de la Mare and memory tells me it was won by Simon Nette – at least he’s the competitor that I remember! And then my mother asked, ‘Would you like to have a go next year?’ Nine-year-old me didn’t know that both my mother and father were drama teachers. So far as I knew, Dad was a primary school teacher, and Mum was Mum with a glamorous career before us kids were born, working on 3BA. In fact, Mum and Dad had both competed at South Street in Elocution, both had completed their exams with Trinity College London, and they had met in their Drama teacher’s front room. Over time Mum and Dad became very involved in South Street. Mum made endless sandwiches and slices, and worked on the Speech and Drama committee, and Dad was a board member, President and life member. So you could say that South Street is in my blood.

Over more than a decade I competed in Speech and Drama, Piano, written poetry and the one act plays (as both an actor and a director). My own children also competed in Speech and Drama, and in Debating, Dance, choirs, bands and one act plays. I taught for some years at Ballarat Centre of Music and the Arts, and more than 100 of my students from there competed in the 2010s.

Now I am on the South Street board and chair the Speech and Drama committee (a job I’ve had for 11 years). It was a sad moment when we had to accept this year, that we simply couldn’t run the Speech and Drama section. We had put a lot of time and effort into exploring online and streaming options, but in the end, there were just too many uncertainties to proceed.

I’m also an academic at Victoria University, and as part of my research there I wrote a paper on the intergenerational bonds established through participation at South Street. It opened my eyes to an extraordinary history of overlapping stories, and the wealth of experience in the Arts in Ballarat. Because of this insight, I co-wrote a play with Peter Nethercote, which was produced by Ballarat National Theatre, entitled *Honourable Mentions* which dramatized the history of South Street. I am lucky to have had such amazing opportunities and to have been so enriched by the culture of the competitions.

It is increasingly difficult for eisteddfodau to survive. The drop off in volunteers, competing activities, and necessary, but sometimes onerous, compliance requirements, mean keeping afloat is very challenging. Early in South Street’s life, founding member, W.D. Hill said that with the competitions Ballarat was discarding the gold of the earth for the gold of the human mind and voice. I know that I have had a happier, healthier, richer and more rewarding life because of the experiences I have through South Street. I believe that many, many other competitors would say the same. The challenge, the adrenalin, the friendships, the achievement, the discovery, the empathy one develops, the ability to improvise and trust oneself, taking a risk and sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding, and the grace in victory and defeat – all of these make more fulfilled lives. And that is why I volunteer at South Street, and why I hope it goes on and on, way beyond me.