

Women of Warren Shire

Shirley Todhunter

A resident of Warren for 68 years, Shirley Todhunter has always been an active member of the community, particularly within the local Anglican Church.

Shirley's involvement in the Church saw her initially take on the role of organist, before eventually becoming a licensed Lay Minister and writer of religious columns for multiple local and regional publications. On top of this, she dedicated 14 years to driving for Community Transport.

A selfless volunteer and woman of faith, we celebrate Shirley's contributions as this month's Woman of Warren Shire.

Quickfire questions...

A usual morning looks like...

Another day and I'm still here, still standing, and not under the sod!

I'm most proud of...

I'm not one to think of myself as a proud woman, but I do recall joining the Nyngan Rifle Club when I was seventeen and the following year going to a rifle shoot in Cobar, where I shot against 75 men and won the shoot. In those days rifle shooting was considered a men's sport and women weren't allowed, but in our little country town, the men welcomed and encouraged me.

At the age of 20, I married my husband and moved to Warren. As my husband was also a rifle shooter, I joined the Warren club. The winner of each week's shoot was named the 'Cock of the Walk' but, as I was a woman, the editor of our local paper deemed that was not appropriate and instead dubbed me the 'Hen of the Walk'.

On the weekend you can find me...

On the weekend you will almost certainly find me at the Anglican Church, where I am a licensed Lay Minister, an honorary position, conducting the service of the day.

A quote or piece of advice you live by...

My mother was a very wise woman and as her children, we grew up hearing quotes of which she seemed to have an endless supply. But the one that really stuck with me was "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

How long have you lived in Warren Shire?

I have lived in Warren for 68 years.

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What is your favourite place in Warren Shire?

I love Warren as a whole, but being an avid reader, I would say that the library is my favourite place.

Some more about you...

What do you love most about Warren Shire?

What I love most about Warren is the way that this little community is always ready to support each other in times of trouble. I have been a beneficiary of this support in both big and small ways over the years and have never been more truly thankful in my life.

Can you tell us a bit about your journey, including some of your most significant achievements?

I've never thought of my achievements as being particularly significant. Some 60 years ago I was part of the Warren Art Society, as we were called then. We produced musicals, pantomimes, and a black and white minstrel show. We even took some of our shows to Tottenham, Quambone and Carinda.

I have also been a member of Western Writer's Ink – a group of writers drawn together by the RDA of Outback Arts – which had members from Warren, Nyngan, Gilgandra and Coonamble. We held several weekend writer's retreats here in Warren with special guest tutors. When the RDA was no longer with us, the group shrank to just the Warren members and we continued meeting until Covid came along and brought all public meetings to a halt. Our little group has published four books of poetry and short stories, and some of our members have published of their own. Even though we are all of retirement age now, I am determined that we will produce one final book.

For 17 years, my husband and I decorated our house for Christmas. It started out very simply at first, then gradually grew to a grand production. We made window boxes for each of our two front windows – one for Jesus and one for Santa. These two displays, along with a 26ft Christmas tree made entirely of lights and a star on top in our front garden, made for quite a show.

After my husband died in 1990 I was completely at a loss, not knowing what to do with myself. My doctor suggested that as a writer, I should ask our local paper if I could write something for them. Thankfully, they said yes and I began writing a column called 'Esmerelda's Day' once a week. By then I was heavily involved in the Anglican Church and began writing another column once a week called 'Anglican Antics'. Since then, myself and a group of people from the other churches in town began writing a column called 'Life with God'. Everything came to a halt when we lost our local paper, and now we have our new paper the column has returned as 'Faith Matters', with each church contributing an article as we did before.

You play an important role as the Lay Minister at the Anglican Church. Can you give us some insight into what this entails and how you first got involved in the Church?

I first became involved with the Anglican church when the organist who had been there for years decided to retire. I was asked if I would take this position in her place. Being only self-taught, I was a bit dubious at first but finally said yes to giving it a try. We sang a few of the same hymns over and over

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until my confidence and repertoire expanded and we were able to have more variety. This was until Old Arthur decided that he didn't want to play anymore, and I retired from the position of organist.

During that time I became what was then known as a Pastoral Assistant, who helped the priest during services. In later years, we were called licensed Lay Ministers and were able to preach and conduct funerals. I have conducted quite a few funerals over the years. Since our priest, Linda Boss, retired I have also been conducting services of praise, prayer and proclamation with the aid of our wonderful Secretary/Treasurer, Nerida George, who is my right-hand man and keeps me on track. Unfortunately, we are not in a position financially to employ a priest even if there was one available, which is why we are pleased to have Rev. John Gaff coming every second Sunday of each month to conduct a service of Holy Communion. Our service time has now changed to 9.30am.

As mentioned, you're a keen writer, contributing to the publishing of four books as part of the 'Writer's Ink' group and writing religious columns for the local paper for nine years. What do you enjoy most about this craft?

Most people in Warren know that I am a writer of poetry and short stories, and have published two books of my own. I also produce a magazine for the Cursillo Movement in the Bathurst Diocese and am hoping to reproduce our Parish magazine, 'The Shaggy Coat', in the new year – perhaps even before Christmas!

I have been writing ever since I was a schoolgirl. Once I start writing I can get quite carried away. I remember one of my teachers saying after he had read a composition I had written, "This was meant to be a composition, not a novel, Shirley". I just love using my imagination.

And of course, you assisted local people in accessing medical services for 14 years through Warren Community Transport. What did you find most rewarding about helping the community in this way?

I drove for Community Transport for 14 years and had to stop when Covid appeared. By then, I was considered to be in the age group most likely to succumb to it. I was 84 at the time and enjoyed being able to help people in this way. I really miss it.

What advice would you give to other women living in rural communities?

There are so many ways that women in rural communities can make a difference in their own little world. Driving for Community Transport is not an arduous task and can be so rewarding. Here in Warren, there are clubs like View Club, which helps people locally and internationally who (through no fault of their own) cannot help themselves. Enjoy the company of like-minded people in clubs such as craft, art and music groups. And of course, you can go to church where most congregations are like a family, always ready to help and support each other.

To nominate a Warren Shire woman to be featured in this series, email media@warren.nsw.gov.au

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