

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE23090841

Notaras, Helen

(1911 - 2007)

Born	19110521, Athens Greece
Died	20071112, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Community Leader, Property developer, Retail worker

Summary

Born and educated in Athens, Helen Notaras arrived in Australia in 1927 with her maternal uncle and his family. Having worked in her uncle's butcher's shop in Sydney, she moved to Canberra in 1933 following her marriage to Harry Notaras. Their Highgate Café served as a focal point for the Canberra community and through the family's property and development interests, in which she was influential, she contributed to Canberra's growth and amenity. In 2005, the ACT Honour Walk recognised the Notaras Family for its long-term contribution to the Territory's commercial and community life.

Helen Notaras was inscribed on the ACT Women's Honour Roll as part of the Notaras family inscription on the ACT Honour Walk in 2005.

Details

"Born to Kiparissoula Vamvakaris and George Poulis, who operated a 'fournos' or commercial oven in Omonia, Athens, Helen Poulis was the eldest of four children. Her mother came from Kythera (she died in July 1973 aged 97), her father from Santorini (he died in July 1937 aged 52). She received a good education to secondary level in Athens and attributed her emigration to her mother's view that she would be better off in Australia. With her maternal uncle, George Peter Vamvakaris (later anglicised to Harris), his wife, and family she arrived in Fremantle in September 1927. The extended family travelled to Sydney, where George Vamvakaris had previously, between 1911 and 1923, operated as a butcher and restaurateur. Helen Poulis and the Vamvakaris family stayed initially with Harry Samios at 472 George Street in the city and then moved to the residence above the Vamvakaris' butcher shop, 'The Phoenix', in Taylor Square.

Helen Poulis worked in the Taylor Square shop developing her knowledge of the retail meat industry, customer service, and business principles as well as her facility with English. Her thirst for learning and knowledge was lifelong and she was admired for her intelligence and articulacy. In Paddington, on 23 July 1933, Helen married Haralambos (Harry) Notaras (21 November 1897-29 July 1971). Their eldest son, Jim Notaras, believed that his parents met in Sydney when his father sought advice from Helen Poulis' uncle, George Vamvakaris, a fellow Kytherian. Following their marriage, Helen Notaras arrived in Canberra where the couple lived behind the Highgate Café in Giles Street and then in Trent Street in Kingston. The family moved briefly to Queanbeyan during the Second World War as Harry Notaras feared Canberra, the national capital, might be a target for Japanese attack. By the end of the decade the family was established in Evans Crescent in the suburb of Griffith a short walk to and from the Highgate Café.

Between 1934 and 1946 the couple had five children: Dimitri (Jim) in 1934, Georgios (George) in 1936, Stamatina (Nina) in 1937, John in 1939, and Emmanuel in 1946. The children testified to the importance their parents attached to education, completing their early schooling at Telopea Park, and then moving to one or other of the Canberra Grammar Schools. John Notaras recollected their mother's interest in, and supervision of, their homework and that they were encouraged to play sport and become involved in other extra-curricular activities. Jim Notaras remembered that, as the only daughter, Nina Notaras, was 'very, very protected' and she remembered extra-curricular classes in deportment, elocution, ballet, piano, and music. This emphasis on education as the path to learning, to a greater choice of careers (beyond the milk bar, fish and chip or fruit shop the three standard occupations for Greek immigrants), to integration and success is a familiar motif in immigration stories and so it was in the Notaras family.

The twin priorities of prospering in an adopted country while nurturing one's inherited culture found expression in the family speaking Greek at home, enjoying Greek cuisine, celebrating Greek festivals and religious observance. Helen Notaras is remembered as a devout weekly attendee (in a pew in the first row) at the Greek Orthodox Church of St Nicholas, in Kingston, and as a long serving, compassionate, and active member and president of the Church's Ladies' Auxiliary, 'Philoptochos' (in English, 'friend of the poor'), which raised money to assist those in need. Her willingness to help new arrivals settle in Canberra and to assist with translating between Greek and English, for example, for Ray Whitrod of the then Commonwealth policing service, were appreciated. The descriptors most frequently ascribed to Helen Notaras by her children and grandchildren were 'strict', 'strong', and 'intelligent'. 'Strict' was often tempered by 'fair' and by the acknowledgement that a mother of five might have had much to arbitrate and conciliate. Her involvement and interest in family carried through to her grandchildren. They remember her as providing sound counsel and having an apposite Greek proverb for every situation. They also recollect her as always looking elegant and being an inspiration. While protective of family, she had a strong work ethic and expected it to be mirrored by her children and grandchildren who were taught that nothing is free. Her devotion to family could take the form of knowing what was best for individual members and making decisions for them (often without letting them know), and she could be unbending in her views.

Helen Notaras worked with her husband in the Highgate Café. The family operated a variety of other retail businesses over the decades. On Harry Notaras' death in 1971, the family development company was believed to be a large holder of Commonwealth leases in Canberra with real estate interests in Queanbeyan, Sydney, and Yass. Emmanuel Notaras described his father as an astute businessman who could see opportunities and capitalised on them, wanting the family to be financially secure and comfortable. Notwithstanding his father's lack of formal education, Harry Notaras envisioned a thriving future for the fledgling national capital of seven thousand and planned to play a role in the capital's development. It was Harry Notaras' good fortune that his wife's side of the family had strong mercantile instincts with Emmanuel Notaras observing 'Mum valued the fruits of enterprise.' Historians Tamis and Tsolakis noted that 'The café's success allowed him [Harry Notaras] to build a considerable retailing empire in the ACT. His wife ... took a leading part in the business and much of his success should be credited to her.' Hers was a long widowhood – thirty-six years – and although her sons, in various combinations over the years, managed the family's interests, they noted when, in 1993, the Notaras family won the inaugural Property Industry Award presented by the Real Estate Institute of the ACT 'it was all done "with mum's support".' She was clearly involved in the business, had views about the most strategic course of action (particularly in terms of property acquisition) and was vocal in articulating her perspective.

Her family, her faith, and her curiosity in the world all sustained her until the end of her long life. On Canberra Day, in March 2005, together with almost one thousand pioneering Canberra residents, Helen Notaras was recognised with a 'Canberra Gold' award for her commitment to the early development of Canberra. Also in 2005, the ACT Honour Walk recognised the Notaras Family for its long-term contribution to the Territory's commercial and community life. The redoubtable and respected Helen Notaras died in Canberra on 12 November 2007 and is buried beside Harry in the Woden Cemetery. Over the course of her seventy-four years in Canberra, she made significant contributions to Canberra's early hospitality industry, was a shrewd property investor and developer, and an admired community leader."

Published resources

Anastasios M Tamis & Demetrios A Tsolakis, The History of Greeks of Canberra and Districts, 1999

The History of Greeks of Canberra and Districts, 1999

The Greek Orthodox Community and Church of Canberra and Districts, 1999

The National Centre for Hellenic Studies and Research, 1999

Archival resources

Oral history recorded with Jim Notaras, 2014

Helen Notaras: A Family Celebration

Author Details

Anne-Marie Schwirtlich

Created 12 July 2023

Last modified