

# Labassa *lives*

Volume 10, Issue 3, 2022

## Little United Nations



Labassa



**Above:** A children's party in the Drawing Room circa 1959.  
**Left to right:** Manes Apfelbaum, Maria Correlje, Jim Correlje, unknown boy.  
**Photo:** Maria Bailey.



**Above:** Top row: Manes and Rachel Apfelbaum.  
Middle row: Maria Corellje. Front row, left to right: Norman Rose,  
Michael Minski (?), Marilyn Minski. **Photo:** Maria Bailey.

Labassa became a household of many nations during the post-war migration boom.

Jan Rodseth, recalls: "Labassa was more or less known as 'little UN', without the bureaucracy. There were people with Irish, British, Yugoslavian, Australian, Dutch and Scandinavian (Swedish and Norwegian) background and culture living there. They were Catholics, Jews, Church of England and secular families living together. Most of the time, things ran smoothly."

Some of these families are yet to be fully identified. For example, little is known about the Lacey family from Ireland, who moved into Flat 4 (Upstairs Master Bedroom flat) around 1963. Of this family of seven, only two names are known—father Thomas and son David. David attended a local Catholic school. One evening, a Lacey daughter suffered a serious burn and was attended to by Dr Peter Tuckfield who lived at 3 Manor Grove.

If you know anything more about the Laceys or can put a name to any of the unidentified children in the following selection of photos, please email [vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au](mailto:vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au)

*continued page 8*

### Inside this issue

|                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Little United Nations         | 1 |
| A sunlit time                 | 2 |
| Life on 'the arts grant'      | 4 |
| U3523 (Part 2)                | 6 |
| Birds of a certain kind       | 7 |
| Labassa serenade              | 8 |
| Little United Nations (cont.) | 8 |

## A sunlit time

By Gabriel Brunsdon (formerly Gabrielle Patience)

*Gabriel lived in Flat 2 (Music Room flat) in 1977.*

By the age of twenty I had moved twenty times. At fourteen my life was without parents to care for me, and I had no siblings to turn to. I had walked barefoot for two years – worked in retail at fifteen, shared a house with yoga students who were from affluent homes, gentle young philosophers older than myself, who invariably partnered up and eventually abandoned their shared living.

I had just come from staying in a house in Kew and was between jobs – it was in my seventeenth year in 1977 when I found myself being given a place to stay within the gracious walls of dear Labassa.

Melbourne was very different then – everything was far friendlier and less restrictive. Caulfield was one of the finer suburbs where the sombre families in formal black walked the streets on a Saturday afternoon. For others there was a party or barbecue in every second backyard where Neil Diamond could be heard amid the celebrating, or commiserating, for the day's football match.

We did not wear helmets when riding our bicycles, and we hung out of windows and doors on the clattering red trains. Having just said that, I should also add, that a friend's husband did die tragically on his way to work when caught by a pole just outside of the train unawares.

I liked to lean out of the train (the doors did not close automatically then) balancing in a carriage littered with matches and butts, hazy with the spice of Marlboro and mint of Kool. Everyone smoked cigarettes, not only on the trains, but also on the trams, planes, and even at my school Huntingdale Tech. We smoked at work, and, as I recall, we had ashtrays all over the music room at flat two, Labassa, Manor Grove.

Miriam had given me a room to stay because of Esther who had been a good friend to me for some years – my closest friend in fact. I had met Esther at school, outside on the walkway, and our very first conversation was about mediumship and favourite authors. We understood one another and were comfortable in each other's company. I later got to know her family long before they left to live at Labassa.



*Above:* Gabriel Brunsdon circa 1976.

*Photo:* Gabriel Brunsdon.

They felt like my kind of people – spiritual and sensitive. I remember their beautiful mother working in a publishing company, always being welcoming. They were connected to a greater group of aspirational dreamers – inspiring and generally very thoughtful.

The three sisters all seemed to see the world through the vision of wishing for its betterment. In one sense they were other-worldly, and in another, they had the graciousness of those who revere nature finding its complexities in the here and now. This was a time of Findhorn, Fred Robinson, and Margrit Segesman – the early vegetarians and vegans who kept their lifestyle pure, with perhaps the exception of tobacco, which everyone, including myself, found solace in.

I had brought my dog Oaken with me – a black German Shepherd – who roamed the house freely until one day there was an incident where the sound of a small child screaming brought out a nasty side to the otherwise docile creature, after which he was repatriated to the country.





*Above:* Gabriel Brunsdon circa 1976.

*Photo:* Gabriel Brunsdon.

There was an episode when our flat had attracted a stalker: a troubled man who would sit on the fence and stay there for hours. He could sit so still that one day I walked right past the stranger and did not even see him until I turned at the door to look behind me. The shadow of his feet could be seen at dawn just outside on the step as he lingered there. There was nothing to be done, the police had said, until he committed a crime and then they would come and get him. One day he went away and we never saw him after that.

I also had the experience of a haunting during my stay – of the supernatural variety. It started a few weeks in, when I could feel a shadowy presence at night hovering above my bed. One of the girls in the flat said that she had seen an outline of the ghost in the steam coming off the shower. It was not a pleasant feeling.

One night I had just gone to sleep and felt the cold heavy character in my room again: this time being half asleep and half awake. I literally came out of my body and walked around the music room as a ghost myself – I could see everything around me but only in black and white. Miriam and her sister Leonie were still awake and talking together but they could not see or hear me. I would like to tell you it was a pleasant feeling but it was not; it was like being under water pushing through a storm. When I returned to my sleeping form I awoke in extreme anxiety. Over several weeks the presence would be palpable, until one night I mentally told it: “No!” And then: “Go away!” I did this and to my surprise it worked – the ghost was not to be experienced again, with that one simple but firm command it had gone for good and I wished I had thought of it earlier.

During my stay of many months I hosted a lunch or two for the Theosophical Society, the members of which had also adopted me. Clive Bellgrove, a most remarkable man studied and taught of ‘the Mysteries’ for which Labassa really was the most perfect venue for the deepest of discussions into all things esoteric.

I went on to share a unit in Chapel Street with John Winter who at the time was working for the ABC, and later became a movie producer of *Rabbit Proof Fence*, *Paperback Hero*, and others.

Several months after leaving Labassa I made a return visit. I was eighteen and it was still warm being summer. Just after midnight I called for a taxi that collected me outside the imposing building.

The taxi ride was to be one I would never forget. We journeyed back to Chapel Street, and when it arrived out the front, the driver who appeared to be in his mid-fifties remarked that I appeared pensive. He did not ask me for a fare, but instead offered me a cigarette. His next words were: “I have come to break your cycle of thought.”

He then went on to speak to me for around almost an hour giving predictions about my life to come, which later proved to all come true. He had also told me the exact words my husband-to-be would say to me, and that it would be a way of recognising him – that without this I might just overlook the man. Six months later I heard that sentence and did marry him.

## A sunlit time (cont.)

The taxi driver spoke of my writing in the future, and hoped I would have the strength in life to keep going. On that subject he had said: "If you ever feel you are in a situation you want to walk out of, walk out ... and if you cannot walk, then crawl." With this the conversation had taken on a sombre note.

I asked him if I would see him again. I don't remember his answer; this was over forty years ago now. In my mind I always refer to him as an Angel who had appeared when I had really needed guidance in the most curious of worlds; an Angel I first met just outside of Labassa.

In my pottery and painting, and later, the works of fiction and spirituality, there had to be a glitter and a glimmer that touched my imagination from living in that grand old mansion.

It was such an inspiring place to be, as the majesty of it, although a little torn and worn, still rested deep within the soul – out of time, coupled with the commune of genuine friendship.

I had seen myself almost homeless on many an occasion, and yet for the generosity of those around me I can gratefully say I had a place there to settle for a while. Labassa was one of those happy circumstances – it was a sunlit time. The perfect commune where people resided together and yet separately with a cohesively elegant mix of eclectic and artistic celebration.

## Life on 'the arts grant'

By Ian Sproul

*Ian Sproul lived in Flat 5 (Old Laundry Flat) 1973–76*



*Above:* Ian Sproul seated on the steps at the northern entrance to the rear serviceyard.

*Photo:* Ian Sproul.

I moved into Flat 5 in 1973 after taking over the lease from Charlie Zarb who'd taken it over from my old mate Dennis Bennet. That's how Labassa worked, the agents LJHooker had no idea what was happening at any given time and weren't really interested. Marijuana and LSD abounded at a time when getting caught meant a lengthy gaol sentence.

It was an integral part of the music scene back then and cheap as chips with no attachment to the criminal scene. It was confined to the artistic scene and therefore friend to friend and word of mouth. Through playing live music I was befriended by one 'Lebanese John' who lived just around the corner and used to import suitcases of Lebanese Gold<sup>1</sup> complete with the Government stamp of authenticity; he was a very generous, gentle and jovial fellow, anything but a criminal.

The detectives tried on several occasions to bust the place, but failed miserably as we were one step ahead. ASIO was even in on the act, but one of our mates had a sister who worked there and gave us the heads up very early on.

You have to remember that the Vietnam War wasn't long finished. I and Peter Ethel, who also lived there later on, had been conscientious objectors after being conscripted. It was our age group who put Whitlam in power, so the lower level authorities were on our case at every available opportunity. Heck my folks went so far as to say it'd make a man out of me, which indicates the extent of the general populace brainwash the authorities were fond of, witnessed by the "all the way with LBJ" motto of the time. I recall how I had the biggest and best stereo system and a recording studio set up which the detectives wanted to see receipts for as a lot of us lived on what we referred to as 'the arts grant' which didn't actually exist at the time.

<sup>1</sup> Hash that is a mix of sativa varieties.



### *Living on 'the arts grant' (cont.)*

But I had been a maintenance fitter at Red Tulip Chocolates in Prahran prior, which is how I was able to afford the gear. The police actually said "We'll getcha another time Ian."

There was a French political refugee and artist who was in constant fear of being found and extradited. Many times he'd come to party central in the wee small hours in order to stop the record going click click click because nobody was capable of getting off the floor. His partner was a talented Radio Australia presenter and together they were friends with Pink Floyd and had spent a lot of time on the road with them prior to coming here.

Parties abounded at any given time and regularly went on for days on end. It was amazing what you could come up with when 20 or more people pooled their meagre resources and meagre they were as witnessed by the need to intercept KFC/McDonalds vouchers from the surrounding neighbourhood, or raid the TipTop bakery in the wee small hours. Grabbing milk off the horse and cart while the man was busy was quite common too.

One night, a long-time friend stole a bannister from the bottom of the staircase. We made him come back and replace it. Sadly it wasn't uncommon for visitors to walk away with some artefact or another. We actually had a resident thief who was fond of ripping things in the dead of night from our cars etc.

The views from the roof were astounding; one could see 360 degrees over Melbourne right up to the Dandenongs. As a result it wasn't uncommon for the party to move up there while the music blasted from down below. I commandeered the tower around this time as it was empty and derelict, so I painted, cleaned and generally made it habitable because it was a safe place to go and look out over the horizon or over the Dandenong Ranges – much better than the roof and a whole lot safer.

The original stables were still there and a violin craftsman was just beginning his craft from there. He was doing it hard at the time and couldn't afford to put wood in his fire place. Well I couldn't either so I would go down to Malvern railway yards in the dead of night and appropriate a boot full and stack it up in the cupboard outside my flat.

I noticed it was being depleted somewhat more than we were using it, so attached a bell inside the flat via a string to the cupboard door. Ding Ding ! Gotcha. From then on he'd ask and also came on our regular wood-finding missions because Labassa was a very cold building during winter. During summer it was exquisitely cool and not affected by heat waves one bit.

A guy who had a front flat was our resident capitalist, in fact the first in Melbourne to dream up the idea of going up into the Dandenongs and buying a load of flowers from the Dutch flower farms, which he would sell from the side of Dandenong Road, Windsor.

There was a major film made in the Drawing Room but they didn't consult the other residents regarding their needs so we just went about our business. My business was making loud music which annoyed the producers so much they paid me to stop for the duration.

Near the end of my tenure the utilities began breaking down and LJ Hooker wouldn't fix them. During that time I didn't pay any rent for about six months, nor did LJ Hooker require me to. Sadly it just became too hard to function and so we moved on to the next chapter.

The people I've spoken with all say it was just an incredible part of their early adult lives, the best in fact. I for one feel privileged and very fortunate to have experienced and been part of that community, not a commune as such.

It must be said that contrary to public opinion of the time, sexual promiscuity was not part of the Labassa community. Children were safe and there were a few of them. Just ask Matt Sproul and Tascha Edwards, they certainly retain a very special connection to this day.

It was more orientated to family and child care than the normal family blue print of the day. It was more communal in as much as we shared our daily lives and dreams of a better future and looked after each other with no strings attached.

We were 'hip', yes. We were alternative to the old school and therefore radicalised or marginalised as a result of our collective desire to forge social change. We were therefore seen as a threat to the crumbling establishment of the day.

Long live Labassa. Thank heavens the Trust got it.





## U3523 (part 2)

By Margaret Gleeson

*Continuing the memoir of Margaret Gleeson (nee Brown), the niece of owners William and Sarah O'Callaghan, who moved into Labassa with her mother in 1940.*

The war years carry the most poignant memories for me at Labassa. I remember the residents of Manor Grove had appointed Mr Jones (Barry Jones's father) as our Air Raid Warden. One of his duties was to see that all the windows had their blackout curtains securely closed on the nights of air raid practice. When the eerie sirens sounded, we pulled the curtains and dimmed all interior lights. The blanket of darkness over the rooftops of Caulfield all the way to the Dandenongs was a strange sight to behold. As searchlights criss-crossed the night sky, those wardens who had specific duties took up their posts. Mr Jones, carrying a tin helmet, a first-aid kit and a torch, quickly knocked on anyone's door should the tiniest chink of light seep through the window. When the all-clear alarm rang out practice was over and lights blinked on again all over the suburbs.

During those early war years, we all shared a coin-operated public telephone, stationed downstairs on the old Laundry verandah. Coins were needed for ringing out, but incoming calls could be received on it, too. I remember the telephone number, as familiar to me now as my own name U3523. Labassa was, after all, home for me.

The general routine was, Mrs Brearley answered the telephone; often, however, it was the tenant who lived closest to the instrument who picked up the receiver first. Mr Ackerly, who lived in the Tea Rooms flat [Flat 9] found it annoying having to run telephone errands all over Labassa and call people down to the verandah. He was quite a genius when it came to mechanical, electrical and technical ideas, so it was not long before he devised an incredible system whereby he hooked Labassa's doorbells up to the phone box. He fashioned a 'switchboard', bearing the names of all the tenants and placed it above the phone. All the person answering the phone had to do was press the button belonging to the name the caller requested, and the doorbell rang in the nominated flat. We even had a kind of Morse code identifying which tenant in the flat was being hailed – three rings for my mother; two rings for me.



*Above:* Margaret Gleeson (nee Brown) circa 1947. *Photo:* Gleeson family.

It was Mr Ackerly, too, who had the foresight to save the Labassa sign which hung over the gateway. My brother Brian had painted it for my uncle in the early 1930s, but it was knocked down by a furniture van a few years later. It could easily have landed on the rubbish heap; instead, Mr Ackerly wedged it securely in the rafters of the garage, where it can be seen to this day by visitors to the house<sup>1</sup>. I doubt Mr Ackerly – or Uncle Will – could ever have imagined that Labassa would be of interest to future generations. How proud they would have been, and how grateful we should be to them in our turn.

Labassa had its own Red Cross-registered Comforts Fund. The tenants formed a committee to raise funds through card parties, raffles and even a fete. We sewed, knitted and wrote letters to servicemen. On one happy occasion, we held a small dancing party out on the front verandah. That night, everything was lit up: the ship's lanterns in the front hall, the staircase lights, everything. It was wonderful to witness such brightness again after so many dreary years of war.

<sup>1</sup> The sign is currently in storage.

## U3523 Part 2 (cont.)

As war was waged in Europe, Mrs Brearley listened to the broadcasts of the bombing of London. 'Poor Sister! Poor Sister!' she used to say, distressed almost beyond words. Then we would, with great relief, hear the siren and the all-clear come over the wireless.

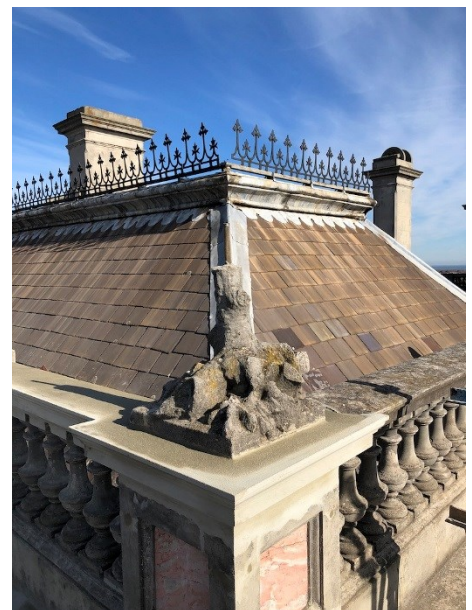
My worst memory of Labassa is of going to answer the doorbell one evening. I found the telegram boy at the front door, with news my brother Brian had been killed in action in Italy. He had been overseas nearly two years. He was just 23 years old. He was a fighter pilot in the RAAF. The day he was shot down was to have been his last tour of operational duties before coming home on leave. It was April 5, 1945 just one month prior to the declaration of peace in Europe. I stayed downstairs for quite a while before returning upstairs to break the news to my mother, not knowing how or what I was going to say. All the tenants rallied around.



*Above:* RAAF pilot Brian Brown at Labassa while on leave. *Photo:* Gleeson family.

Their camaraderie was such that you would have thought it was a family member of theirs who had died. I know that even though it has been fifty years since those dark days, we all still feel a strong sense of belonging. Labassa had that special magic.

## Birds of a certain kind



*Above (left):* Bill and Gwen Westwood. *Photo:* Westwood family. *Above (centre):* Two unidentified women. (Source of photo unknown). *Above (right):* Parapet showing remains of brolga feet. *Photo:* Samantha Westbrooke.

In 'U3523 (Part I)', Margaret Gleeson refers to Labassa's brolgas as storks. Folklore determined that storks were the harbingers of pregnancy and birth. Margaret made sure that no 'stork' was in sight when her wedding photos were taken in 1948. A picture of a bride beside a baby-bringing stork would have been "unseemly". Kate Watson had similar misgivings when her husband wanted to buy the mansion in 1904.

Kate already had five children and wasn't looking for any further deliveries.

Twentieth century photos confirm that Labassa's brolgas were of various sizes. As they deteriorated they were progressively removed from the parapet. Only their feet remain in situ. At least one of the larger brolgas survived in the garden until the 1950s. Its current location is unknown.



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Contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles are welcome.  
Please forward to:  
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PO Box 363, Chadstone Shopping Centre,  
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### Labassa serenade

**Sunday 4 December 2022**

10.30am – 4pm

(last entry at 3.30pm)

Experience the sights and sounds of Christmas in the lavish surroundings of Labassa. We've decked the halls, decorated the tree and set the dining table. Elwood Community Choir will serenade visitors with songs that warm the heart, reflect Labassa's history and celebrate the start of the holiday season. Short performances on the quarter to the hour will be heard in atmospheric locations around the house and grounds. Their first performance will be at 10.45am and last at 3.45pm. Guided house tours on the hour and tearoom available. The tower will be open with a limit of 12 people per tour group.

**Bookings recommended:**

<https://vic.nationaltrust.org.au/857/1761>

## Forthcoming Open Days

Labassa is open on the third Sunday of each month, except in December when it is open on the first Sunday. Please check the National Trust website to confirm dates, times and booking details: [nationaltrust.org.au/places/labassa](http://nationaltrust.org.au/places/labassa)



### Little United Nations (cont.)

Are you able to identify the unnamed children in these photos?



**Above:** Jan Rodseth's 10th birthday party. *Left to right* Alida Kelders, Sandy Ceferin, Unknown, Jan Rodseth, Janna Ceferin, Marianne Kelders and Aksel Rodseth. **Photo:** Jan Rodseth.



**Above:** Jan Rodseth and dog Sonja. Unknown girl on the right. **Photo:** Jan Rodseth.