



Jenny Kee at her interview in the 'gal house'



Grose Valley, Blue Mountains, NSW

A Chance Encounter

CREATING JENNY KEE'S EXHIBIT FOR 'CHANCE' IN THE ETERNITY GALLERY

In the early 1980s two little girls in the same class at Blackheath Primary School, in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, became friends. They wanted to play together out of school time, so their mothers met to organise this. The girls were Grace Kee Ramsden and Katie Russell.

Grace's mum is fashion designer Jenny Kee: Katie's mum is Roslyn Russell, the author of this article, and curator of Jenny Kee's module in 'Chance' in the *Eternity* Gallery. At that time I was combining running a Blackheath guest house with teaching English at Katoomba TAFE College, and studying part-time for a Masters degree in History.

Jenny Kee, with her exciting clothes and ebullient, outgoing personality, stood out in the conservative mountaintop community of Blackheath. As our daughters spent more time together, I got to know Jenny and her then husband, artist Michael Ramsden. I visited their home, 'West Hill', on Evans Lookout Road, explored the bushland with Jenny and the girls (and Jenny's Nubian goat), and attended parties where the guests included writers Richard Neville and Julie Clark, and Richard's late sister, Jill Neville, and singer Gary Shearston. Sadly, although Jenny invited me, I was unable because of work commitments to attend one of her fashion parades that broke new ground in Sydney for this type of presentation.

On one visit to 'West Hill' Jenny and Michael told me the story – then just a few years old – of Jenny's incredible escape from death in the Granville Train Disaster of January 1977. The import of her story made an immediate impression on me. If Jenny had boarded her usual carriage for her weekly trip to Sydney to the boutique she ran with her business partner, Linda Jackson, the famed 'Flamingo Park' in the Strand Arcade, she would have died along with many other people from Blackheath who were on the doomed Blue Mountains train that day. So when Museum curator Amanda

Reynolds asked me to think of someone whose personal story was affected by chance for inclusion in the *Eternity* Gallery, I thought of Jenny's miraculous escape from the Granville disaster straight away.

Two years after Grace and Katie met at school I left Blackheath to come to Canberra to work full-time in History. Jenny Kee stayed in Blackheath, where she still lives. She found a buyer for my guest house, and the Kee-Ramsden family visited us once in Canberra. Over the years we lost touch, although it was easy for me to track Jenny's progress as she was famous for her innovative fashions, especially hand-knitted jumpers featuring Australian motifs, and opal-inspired silk scarves. She was seen on television as the face of 'Softly' washing liquid, with her colourful knits.

Some years later I heard of the tragic death of her new partner, Danton Hughes, son of art critic and historian Robert Hughes and his former wife Danne, in Jenny's Blackheath home. A magazine interview with Jenny revealed later that she had coped with the ordeal of Danton's death and its aftermath with the help of her Tibetan Buddhist gurus.

The exhibit preparations coincided with the release of Jenny's autobiography, *A Big Life*. Over a weekend I read the book from cover to cover – and I marvelled at Jenny's raw honesty about the events of her life. Although I had known her in the past, there was so much that had happened before and since of which I had no knowledge, so the book was invaluable when I came to Blackheath to interview her in late 2006.

Mid-November in Blackheath is, technically, spring, but on the eve of the interview a freezing wind funnelled down Govett's Leap Road in a way I well remembered from twenty years before. The next morning was clear and the sky a deep blue as I went with the crew – producer Mike Harrison, and camera and sound technicians John Kovacs and John Haberfield – to film at locations around Blackheath before the interview with Jenny in her home. We filmed at the railway station where Jenny and Grace, running late, boarded the first rather than the third carriage of the Blue Mountains train



The waratah, Jenny Kee's signature flower, at 'West Hill', Blackheath.



Jenny Kee's signature on wall of Antique Centre, Blackheath

on 18 January 1977; and survived the wreck that occurred a couple of hours later; at the old theatre in Govetts Leap Road, where Jenny had designed and supervised the painting of a colourful community mural along an exterior wall; at Govetts Leap Lookout and Evans Lookout where we gazed across the immensity of the Grose Valley with its dense carpeting of trees; and at 'West Hill', Jenny's former home, where, after obtaining permission to enter, we filmed in the grounds, and discovered a beautiful waratah, Jenny's signature flower.

Then it was off to Jenny's home in another part of Blackheath, the home that Danton had built of galvanised iron, beautifully crafted with the edges butted together and soldered and smoothed to perfection. In her book Jenny called this 'the gal house'. She chose to be filmed in front of her Tibetan Buddhist shrine with the photos of her gurus visible in the background. We all felt very privileged to be able to talk to and film Jenny in this space that held so many powerful memories for her. For an hour we discussed the role chance played in her life and the effect of her experiences on her art practice and on her spiritual life. Jenny is a relaxed and natural communicator, with a fine dramatic sense, and her descriptions of key events held us spellbound.

The full videotape of Jenny's interview is held in the Museum's archives: her dramatic story of how she survived the Granville Train Disaster can be seen in the *Eternity* Gallery, along with quotations from her autobiography and photos relating to various aspects of her life story. Jenny Kee is also represented by a significant object: a calico doll that she painted in 1973, which established her signature caricature. Jenny wrote of this doll in *A Big Life*: 'I loved making and painting the Jenny Kee doll. Although I wasn't aware of it at the time, my doll was a totem, symbolising my transformation into an artist.' (p.132)



(Left to right) Mike Harrison, John Kovacs and John Haberfield filming at Blackheath Railway Station



Community mural designed by Jenny Kee on wall of Antique Centre, Blackheath
Photos: Roslyn Russell

Roslyn Russell is Editor of *Friends*