

HERALD SUN 22.06.2019

weekend

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MEDIA STAYER JENNIFER KEYTE ON SINGLE MOTHERHOOD AND GETTING HER GROOVE BACK

New world order

More accustomed to reading the news than making it, Jennifer Keyte created headlines with her defection from Channel 7. A year on, she looks back at the move to Network Ten and if the upheaval was worth it

COLIN VICKERY

LOTS of laughter. That's what you can expect when you spend any amount of time with Jennifer Keyte.

When the 59-year-old is in news presenter mode, she is the epitome of calm professionalism, but it's a different story away from the cameras.

Viewers caught a glimpse of the other side of Keyte when she was the news presenter on *Tonight Live* with Steve Vizard in the early 1990s — the sly smile, the cheeky retorts.

These days Keyte is grinning because this month she celebrates her one-year anniversary as the presenter of Network Ten's Melbourne evening news bulletin.

The move has been a resounding success. After 15 years reading news on weekends, Keyte is back in the spotlight and shining.

"It was a massive change and it's been beyond my expectations," Keyte says. "If you love your work then a busy working life is so stimulating. The energy at Ten is electrifying. It's so refreshing, so different, and so progressive. It has such a vibrant working staff and they're so young. They make my head spin sometimes and I need a quiet cup of tea."

Keyte needed a cuppa to calm her nerves just over 12 months ago when she was first sounded out about a switch from Channel 7 to Ten for the weeknight news role.

"When I got the phone call, I knew my life was about to be turned upside down," Keyte says. "I started thinking about where I was at in my life. I'd been doing weekends for so long and not seeing my kids play sport (for all that time).

"I'd missed out on all those family events on a Sunday and all those gatherings on a Saturday night that go on and on (late into the night). I was always leaving early.

"I thought, 'OK, have an open mind' ... (and) was really impressed (by Ten).

"When you get an offer like that you have to say yes. At Seven, I would have liked to have done more but it's about opportunities.

"Mitch (Peter Mitchell) is flying that (weeknight news presenter) flag so well. My kids (sons James and Alexander) were old

enough. One was at university and one is in the last few years of school. They're pretty independent now. I've taught them how to cook. I thought, 'if they can look after themselves a bit more I can take on a bit more'."

Single mother isn't a title Keyte expected but that is the reality. Keyte split from husband of 16 years, Ben Faggetter, in 2009 and they are now divorced.

"It (being a single parent) is hard work," Keyte says. "I don't think it matters what way your life goes, everyone has challenges.

"I think about my mum (Dorothy) with six children and I still don't know how she did it. Mum ran a military operation and she used to say 'that's my job'.

"If you have children it's your job to bring them through life and help them launch and do the best you can. There have been really difficult times but you have to find it within yourself and ask for help if you need it.

"As a single mother, I've had to ask for help. You can't cover all bases. There can be days when you get wobbly and you need a girlfriend or a sister or a cup of tea.

"I am proud. It's wonderful to see James and Zander develop into independent fine young men. It's a matter of letting them go and seeing them broaden their world."

James, at 1.98m tall, has made a move into modelling. The 19-year-old is signed to FRM Models, the agency that represents Melbourne-raised supermodel Ajak Deng. "When James said, 'I'd like to try this (modelling)', I remember saying, 'Really? Are you sure about this?'" Keyte says.

"But I knew he had it in him because he has always loved clothes and fashion and style. He wanted to do architecture (at university) but for him it became too electronic and computerised.

"He loves freehand — he's more tactile. So I said, 'Fine, you're 19 now, it's up to you'. It's time for them (sons) to try different things and find out who they are."



one day. I think it would be nice, but it hasn't been a priority. It depends what you need and want in your life. As a single mother, my job was the boys. I love my work, my family, my friends, and hopefully one day there will be time for romance. You don't know anyone, do you? I'm not above matchmaking."

A jolt for Keyte came when Dorothy was diagnosed with breast cancer. She passed away five years ago. Dad John is 94 and in a care facility.

"They say no one loves you like your mum," Keyte says. "Losing Mum was a very difficult time but I still have my beautiful, smart father. He has always been my mentor. He's my voice of reason. He's got a great sense of humour.

"That's another responsibility I tend to have as well. I've got a sister in Sydney, a sister in London, a brother in Singapore and two brothers here. Between the two brothers and myself, we look after Dad. He's only around the corner from me.

"It's gold to have those times with your parents. I took Mum to all of her doctor's appointments. When she was feeling blue, she'd talk to me. It was such an honour to have that intimacy with her. When she was a busy mother of six, I probably didn't have that with her. Now I've got it with Dad."

A change of networks and change of job has meant different life priorities for Keyte. Weekends are special.

"Number one is take Alexander to sport on a Saturday morning," Keyte says. "It may sound mundane but to me it's precious. I felt quite sad and sentimental the first time.

"I was standing there watching these big boys with hairy legs and deep voices and I thought the last time I was here they were babies. It's giving me chills now. I thought, 'I've missed that huge chunk'.

WHO is the real Keyte, some viewers would ask. The job of a newsreader can be constraining. You have to maintain a controlled facade as you present sometimes-horrific news stories. There's no room for error in your private life either. An actor can get away with a wild drunken night but that's the death knell for a news presenter's career.

"I always remember Steve Vizard saying to me many years ago, 'You picked the worst job in television because you can't do anything,'" Keyte says. "He said, 'The rest of us can go out and drink until dawn but if you put a foot wrong, you'll be in trouble'.

"It's true. You're signing up for this path which is that you represent the network all the time. The thing people don't get to see is probably my humour. You can't be cheeky on the news."

Can the high profile also affect romance? A year ago Keyte said it would be lovely to have a partner. Is that any closer to happening?

"No," Keyte says. "What do they say — make some room and something will grow? — (but) there hasn't been any room. But maybe



Network news: (Clockwise from main) Jennifer Keyte at home with son James; with Steve Vizard on *Tonight Live*; Keyte in 1986; and in 2005, with sons Alexander, 2, and James, 5.

MAIN PICTURES NICKI CONNOLLY

"I love doing my shopping. It's really basic stuff, isn't it? I love a Saturday afternoon at Toscano's in Hawksburn or Leaf in Elwood, and taking my time and browsing. I'll maybe meet a girlfriend for coffee, then perhaps go out on a Saturday night when the rest of the world is out and be part of that. It could be a Sunday barbecue with the family or going to a movie. "Last week it was watching *Game of Thrones* — all three of us on the couch, blankets over our laps and hot chocolates."

Keyte's job is to tell viewers what's going on in the world and sometimes those stories can be mighty troubling. What does she do to switch off and recharge the batteries?

"I like to work hard and I like my quiet time," she says. "I couldn't do what I do without balance. My little comfort is that cup of tea. (When Keyte was a young mother), Mum said to me, 'A little piece of advice — a cup of tea can be the most beautiful balm'.

"She said, 'Teach your children that while you've got a cup of tea, you're not available'.

"My kids learnt that. It was great. They would come over and check — 'How much (tea) have you got left?'. Now James will say, 'Mum, do you need a cup of tea?'. That's the language in our house."

AT SEVEN, I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO HAVE DONE MORE BUT IT'S ABOUT OPPORTUNITIES

Music is another salve. Keyte's favourite artists include David Bowie, George Michael, Simply Red, Richard Hawley, Matt "The The" Johnson, and Zola Blood. The soundtracks to *Interstellar*, *The Untouchables* and *Fargo* are also on high rotation.

"The food for my soul is music," Keyte says.

"A joyous moment is to walk along a beach — that boardwalk down at Brighton and Elwood — as the sun is setting with some glorious music. A state of bliss.

"That, for me, is enough. I don't overload myself with social stuff. I'm not a gym person. I'm not a team-sport person. I'm pretty isolated when it comes to that. I like to be alone."

Whatever Keyte is doing, it's working. She looks ageless. It's easy to forget that her first media job was in radio at EON FM in 1980. Two years later, she switched to television to be a reporter at ATV-10 Melbourne, and in 1987 went to Seven to present the evening news alongside Glenn Taylor. In 1990, she made history when Seven jettisoned Taylor and, at 27, she became the first female solo prime-time news anchor on Australian commercial television.

Back then, male news presenters could age gracefully but women were destined for the scrap heap once they headed towards 40.

"For many years every interview I did (journalists would ask) 'what's your use-by date?' and I used to think, 'Oh my God,'" Keyte says. "But then ... it's like I hit 50 and it isn't even in the mix anymore. You're right that there's a difference for men and women. I totally agree with that. But I think we've grown up so much as an audience, as a country.

"I won't be going grey though. My grandmother Mavis, who lived to 97, got her hair coloured even in the last week of her life — bright red. There was bright red nail polish on her toes and her fingers, too.

"I remember sitting and chatting to her in her final week (of life) saying, 'You got the hair done' and she said, 'Never go grey, dear' and 'I don't intend to leave this world grey either'.

"I said, 'good for you', and we sat in the corridor of the hospital and I got her a brandy and dry and it was 10 o'clock in the morning and she said, 'Isn't this great?'"

ONE hiccup in Keyte's move from Seven to Ten was that it put Stephen Quartermain, a colleague from the ATV-10 days, out of a job.

Quartermain had leapt from sports presenter to full-time news presenter in 2013 when Mal Walden stepped down after 25 years at the helm.

Quartermain was offered a return to sports presenting, which had to be a hit to the ego, and early reports had him looking at other networks. Finally, though, he signed back on.

"Of course I really wanted him to stay but that had to be his decision," Keyte says.

"That was a tough time waiting to find out how the dust would settle. It all came together really well. Quarters is very funny. He is so dry. He's got a wicked sense of humour. I'm very happy."

Keyte's professional life has come full circle. Ten is where she started her television career and now it's providing a wonderful renaissance in the lead-up to turning 60.

"When I started at Ten's newsroom at Nunawading, it was known as The Nursery," Keyte says. "There was Bruce McAvaney and within 12 months we had Eddie (McGuire), Quarters, Jennifer Hansen, Brigitte Duclos. It was so much fun.

"It's like that at Ten now. The make-up room is fabulous. I get enough laughter there to satiate me for a week. This morning Magda Szubanski was there, Lucy Lawless was in there. There's always someone from *The Project* in there. There is laughter overflowing.

"It reminds me of the old days at Seven when *Full Frontal* and *Fast Forward* were being made and Magda and Marg Downey and Jane Turner would be there and Steve would pop in. The banter was electrifying.

"I'm a glass half-full girl. People often say to me, 'Do you look back and miss the old times?'. Yes, they were great days, but look at the landscape now and it's never been more exciting."

