

**Interview with Savvas Athan conducted by Fred Smith on 14<sup>th</sup> February , 2006**

Fred – You came originally from Cyprus. Can you tell me something about your background there?

Savvas - I was born in Cyprus and stayed there until the age of 18 when I finished High School. I was the eleventh of 11 children so it was an exciting situation. It was just after the war when I finished High School in 1952. Work was very scarce in Cyprus so I decided to go to England and study and also work. I didn't really go as a student although I did study - almost two years of Electrical Engineering at Regent Street Polytechnic. Then I joined the British Army and I was in the army for three years.

Fred – Where were you actually staying in England?

Savvas – I was in London because that is where the Regent Street Polytechnic was. It was a famous school at the top of Regent Street where the BBC is. But when I joined the Army I went out of London for training and I spent some time in Great Malvern where I was trained as an Electrician. So I served in the REME in the British Army. Then I was sent to Malta and spent two of my three years in Malta.

Fred – So what happened then? From Malta you came back to England.

Savvas- Yes, I came back to England and got demobbed. Then I worked in England for about one and a half years as an Electrician and I applied to Australia House to come to Australia as an assisted migrant because I had a nephew here.

Fred – What year are we talking about?

Savvas – I arrived here just before Anzac Day in 1958.

Fred – Whereabouts did you land in Australia?

Savvas - I landed at Princes Pier like most of the migrants at Port Melbourne.

Fred – I'm just looking at that magnificent suitcase which you are donating to the Historical Society and you travelled obviously by ship. What ship was that?

Savvas - It was the "Orsova". Funny enough, I've never heard of it since then. Other Orient Line ships kept coming but the only time I heard of the "Orsova" was when I came here.

Fred – And you landed at Port Melbourne at Princes Pier. What made you select Melbourne?

Savvas – My nephew was here.

Fred – Whereabouts in Melbourne was your nephew living?

Savvas – He was living in Preston. You can see the address on the back of the suitcase. My nephew is only three years younger than I am because we have a large

family as I mentioned so his mother was a lot older than I am. My oldest brother was 26 years older.

Fred – That’s a big gap. When you came out you came as a single person?

Savvas – Yes.

Fred – What happened after you went to your nephew’s house?

Savvas – I got a job with a company called A & R Electronics which is still in existence. It is now called Arlec although of the people who started it – A & R stood for Anderson and Rudi, two quite nice young people in those days - I know Anderson died a few years back but I don’t know what Mr. Rudi is doing ; he must be fairly old by now.

Fred – That’s Arlec is it ?– I’ve seen their name around on various electrical components.

Savvas – In those days they were making transformers – it was the television era – and they were making transformers for Sony Electrical and I worked in the factory making transformers.

Fred – Obviously you had no problems with language. You went to England – London and the British Army. When you first went to England did you speak English?

Savvas – Yes. Language was never a problem because I had an unusual schooling. I went to a Greek school up to the age of ten when I was in Grade 4 then I went to an American School. So I started my secondary education after grade 4 . I was at that school for 8 years and all the lessons were in English. They also had a very good system . While on the school grounds you were not allowed to speak in any other language. You had to speak English so I had no problem in England.

Fred – Obviously not. After you arrived here there weren’t any problems with accommodation because you stayed with your nephew. How did you find cultural differences? I imagine after being in England you would have integrated pretty easily.

Savvas – Yes I did although there were a lot of cultural differences. We lived in East Preston at the time and comparing London with East Preston was a big difference. After leaving the transport system in England, the buses didn’t have enough seats – they only had seats around the side. So a few people sat on the seats, but most people just stood up in the middle. It was certainly a lot different and of course as a single man who worked I was introduced to Four- and- Twenty pies early in the piece. Most of my lunches were either a Four -and -Twenty pie or a pasty- so I alternated.

Fred – I was going to ask you if there was anything strange but obviously’ Four –an’- Twenty’ pies were a big cultural shock! You had a job and you found work pretty easily, I gather.

Savvas – Yes because there was a shortage of people in those days so I got a job within a week of coming here.

Fred – Your qualifications were accepted here?

Savvas – No – you see, in England my Army qualifications were enough to be accepted both by the unions – I joined the Electrical Trade Union in England – and also employers. (I had a job with the Waygood-Otis Elevator Co. as a lift director). But when I came here they were not accepted so I had to start from the bottom up. I got a job assembling transformers as I have already mentioned which was not a skilled job at all.

Fred – Did you pursue anything through the Union or schools to have your qualifications recognised?

Savvas – No. What I did – Mr. Anderson was quite a decent person and he encouraged me so I decided I wanted to go to university. I studied first to get my Matric which I didn't have and while I was doing that I got a job as a storeman doing the buying for the company. I went to RMIT. They started a new course in Purchasing & Supply management and at the same time I passed my Matric. Eventually I went to Monash and studied there. The course there was Economics and Politics which eventually I finished.

Fred - Well, Economics and Politics is different from Electrical Engineering. Quite a difference I would imagine.

Savvas -Of course, once you are thrown off the deep end you do what it takes to swim. But really it was for the best because I'm much more comfortable with that kind of work than working as an electrician.

Fred – Did you join any clubs here like say, Greek clubs or anything like that?

Savvas – No. I don't know why but it never crossed my mind because I lived in England and I lived with English speaking people all the time and when I came here I just carried on like that. My nephew was married. He was married to an Australian girl so there was no connection at all.

Fred – So you finished your degree at Monash?

Savvas – Eventually, yes. It took quite a while because it was part-time.

Fred – You moved out of the electrical work, out of the store and buying. What happened then?

Savvas – By then I was married to Lyn.

Fred – How did you meet Lyn?

Savvas – We met at a very romantic place. At the time I was living in North Fitzroy And I went up to the Moonee Ponds Town Hall where they had Saturday dances. So we met at one of those dances and it was one of my lucky breaks.

Fred – So you met Lyn and ...

Savvas – We were married in 1962.

Fres – So what happened as far as your work was concerned? You shifted into something else.

Savvas – Well no, not just then. When I joined Arlec they were in St.Kilda Road just opposite the Shrine but then they built a small factory in Box Hill. So when we got married in 1962 we built a house in East Burwood. We started our married life in East Burwood and I was working in Box Hill. Hence my connection with Nunawading and Whitehorse. We've spent all our married life in and around the City of Nunawading .

Fred – I gather you started your own company.

Savvas – Yes but that was a while after Arlec. After I passed my RMIT course of Purchasing Management I got a job with Vulcan (who at the time were making cookers and heating appliances) as their Purchasing Manager.

Fred – They were a very big company.

Savvas – Yes, it was a very big job and they were very nice people to work for. I still see the General Manager from there. We have a six-monthly meeting with a few beers and lunch.

In 1970 a friend and I started a manufacturing company making nameplates for the appliance industry and the automotive industry – things that you stick on appliances like the front panel, and those types of things. So we did screen printing on metals and plastics and stamped it out.

Fred – So that would be the compliance and appliance sticker you see on a gas heater which has got all the details about that particular model.

Savvas – Yes but also the nameplate, the thing that keeps the company's name – fairly big type of things.

Fred – Was Vulcan one of those companies?

Savvas – Yes. The first membrane switch, you know, the touch switches you see on appliances? Our company was the first one to start making them in Australia and Vulcan was the first appliance manufacturer in Australia to buy one of those touch switches for the dishwasher.

Fred – So Vulcan made the Dishlex dishwasher?

Savvas – Yes, they were the first one to introduce one of those push buttons.

Fred – Where did you set up business?

Savvas – It was in Surrey Hills but after a couple of years we moved into Blackburn so I was consolidating myself around the Nunawading area.

Fred – When did you start?

Savvas – We moved into the Blackburn place in 1973.

Fred – You married Lyn, you set up a business and you were living in East Burwood and later you moved to Vermont.

Savvas – Yes we have been here for 30 years +. We moved here in 75 . By then we had three children – a growing family. So that’s why we moved to Vermont in 75 to a bigger house for the family.

Fred – Somewhere along the line you got involved in local government.

Savvas – Yes and I’m one of the least likely people you would meet. It all started when I was reading something in the local paper and I thought the Council was doing something wrong. I mentioned it to my wife and she said, ”Well, why don’t you get in and see what you can do?” So, next time there was a vacancy I asked her where the Town Hall was , because I didn’t know! I got a nomination form and the first time I tried , I lost to another person – Ray Meagher who became Mayor eventually, and in fact became my best friend I had on the council. Ray and I hit it off very well so it didn’t really worry me that I didn’t get in. I didn’t know him at the time and he didn’t know me . But I got in at the second attempt.

Fred – So that really started because there was something happening at the Council that you were not happy about?

Savvas – I spent four years then on the Council and I found that the children were growing up and I was spending too much time away from them at nights, so I decided to give it up. I gave it up for over ten years and then I got back for another four years.

Fred – I’m looking at a notice here from the local newspaper, the Nunawading Gazette, and it’s got a picture of a handsome young fellow and Lyn your wife, and the heading is “The Stirrer is Back”. How did you get that title?

Savvas – I got the title because , you see, I was ahead of my time. Now it is fairly well accepted that if a dog fouls the footpath or the nature strip that the dog owner will pick it up. But in those days that wasn’t so, and I found that our nature strip was covered with dog poo. One day when we had a Council Meeting , I went to the nature strip and collected as much dog poo as I could find. I put it in a bag and took it to the Council Meeting. When General Business came around I stood up and waved this plastic bag with dog poo in it and said it was disgraceful that people who have pets don’t care about the community and are allowed to foul other people’s nature strip, and I think that we should do something about it. So, that is one of the things that I did.

Fred – So that’s how the name came about?

Savvas – I was just 20 years before my time, that’s all.

Fred – You became Mayor – you had a term as Mayor?

Savvas – Yes, I did - and Deputy Mayor.

Fred – Did you enjoy your time with the Council?

Savvas – Everybody should have a turn as Mayor. It's the only way to get to know your community. There are hundreds of organizations around the City, and as Mayor you are asked to attend most of them, so you get to know the people around you and the good things they do. There are all sorts of people doing good things and most of us are not aware of them. I had a excellent time as Mayor, meeting people and encouraging them to do what they were doing.

Fred – The paper says, quoting you, that the time you were Mayor 91-92 was difficult economically for Nunawading. What happened there?

Savvas – Before I got in for the second time there were some problems in the City and I don't remember the detail. We had accumulated some unfunded liabilities and this was the problem. When I got back for the second time it was a time when there was a spill of all Councillors. Normally the Council laws were enacted for 3 years for the 4 wards. Each ward had 3 Councillors and we rotated as to who stood for election, but the wards were re-drawn and all 12 Councillors had to resign. (7 were re-elected & 5 newly elected) As there was a completely new Council, one of the things we had to do was to find ways and means to pay off our unfunded liabilities.

Fred – So that was a difficult time for you and the whole Council?

Savvas – It was and we had a new CEO – Warwick Dilley and some new Officers. So we had new Councillors, new CEO, new Officers and we had to get stuck into it and put the City back on it's financial feet.

Fred – Did you feel that you did that ?

Savvas – Yes, by the time the four years were up we had funded the liabilities and were ahead of ourselves.

Fred – One of the highlights you said during you time as Mayor was the organizing the Mayoral function. Can you tell us something about that?

Savvas – It was a bit of a function with a difference. Normally the Mayor invites people he thinks should come from different organizations to a mayoral function and they are prominent people. In my year, I decided to organize it around migrant communities. So, instead of having it catered, we contacted the various national groups and asked them to contribute some national dishes. So we had Greek dancing, we had Hungarian Goulash etc.

Fred – So it was a really multicultural event.

Savvas – That's right. We paid for the ingredients and the community groups prepared it. In exchange for that we invited them to attend and these were people who had never attended a mayoral function. It was a good time for the City because a lot of people felt that suddenly they were drawn into the life of the City.

Fred – That’s a marvellous idea! The disappointment of your year was the failure to get through the idea of a weekend retreat. These are pretty commonplace today, people going off for a retreat. You were certainly ahead of your time. What did you hope to get out of it when you put forward the idea of a weekend retreat?

Savvas – I really can’t remember saying that . We did have a retreat - but I don’t know if that was while I was on Council or when I was Mayor – (yes)we did have one. While I was a Councillor and it was at a place called Trawool. You asked what I did expect to get out of it . In fact, we got a lot out of it but some Councillors – we always had one of two Councillors – who came out with the thing that we were wasting ratepayers’ money. What I got out of that retreat was that we met informally with other Councillors and discussed things. One of the things that I always had friction with one of the other Councillors was about something that has changed now but then was about having too many flat in the municipality. In those days there were very few, because it was before the dual occupancy legislation came in. This other Councillor was always for more density and I was in favour of less density. We were at loggerheads at Council – but when we were at the retreat and had a few beers, we found out that we had common ground and I think that’s the kind of thing that can happen at a retreat.

Fred – Sort of bringing everyone together.

Savvas – You can discuss things in different circumstances and on a different level and good things can come out of it. Certainly I reckon that people whether it is parliamentarians or anybody else go somewhere for a weekend together, I don’t think that is necessarily bad.

But one of the other things was that at the time we proposed to buy new crockery and I supported the view that we buy Australian crockery with the City of Nunawading logo instead of just common garden typed crockery you but in a shop. There was a lot of argument again from the same Councillors who were against the retreat and wasting money. There were letters to the Editor about it that it was terrible and wasting money. The way I looked at it was that we had a fine City and we wanted to showcase it and what would a few sets of crockery cost the Council ? - a thousand, maybe two thousand dollars but when you considered the budget we had was about \$50 million dollars, it was nothing! But some people like to be small-minded and nit-pick.

Fred – So you got the crockery?

Savvas – Yes, I think we did and it was an Australian company – I think from Ballarat.

Fred – Have you been back to England or Cyprus?

Savvas – Yes, I’ve been back to Cyprus and England quite a few times. Not lately; I think the last time we went overseas was about six years ago. Cyprus especially has changed. The place is not the same as I left . Whereas when I left unemployment was very high and young people couldn’t get jobs, now it is so busy that they have to actually import guest workers from Eastern Europe. The small town where I came from , where nothing had changed since the Crusades, now has a five-star hotel with a heli-pad. I come from a small place called Polis. One of my ex-army friends and I still

keep in contact. We were talking on the phone a few months ago and he said "I'm thinking of going to Cyprus. Have you heard of a place called Polis?" So, the world has changed!

Fred – You're retired these days. What are you involved in ?

Savvas – Yes, I sold my business which amalgamated with a similar business so all my employees got jobs with the other crowd and occasionally, every Christmas we meet and have a drink and something to eat with my ex-employees. What am I doing these days? One of the things I got interested in was Philosophy. As I mentioned before I found that Economics and Politics was more my level than being an Electrician and Politics is really part of Philosophy. So I got interested in Philosophy and went to the Nunawading U3A. U3A is an organisation which is run by retired people for retired people although they would accept anyone and the Council helps with expenses and some of the rent. They occupy a place in Silver Grove belonging to the Council so I started in the Philosophy class and after about six months, the leader announced that his circumstances had changed and he could no longer teach the subject or lead the class and he was going. The class was going to fold up so I decided to have a go at being the leader. I found it a bit difficult at first because I didn't know much about Philosophy, but I just had to read a lot and get in front of the class. Before leading the class I just had to learn it myself. So it was a case of hand-to-mouth so to speak. I have been doing it now for 6 years and I've been reading quite a lot so I find it quite satisfying. Many of the people in the class were there when we first started. The class at the moment has 21 people and there is always a waiting list.

Fred – Well that says something for it. There is a saying that you no doubt know that if you want to learn something you should teach it. You're also involved in attending a class yourself, aren't you ?

Savvas – Yes, there is a Current Affairs class there and I attend that. In fact, I also take that sometimes when the leader is away on holidays. That's a good class too, because it is mostly retired people in their 60's 70's and some of them 80's – very interesting people with a lot of experience.

Fred – What about family – grandchildren?

Savvas -For a start I was very lucky to go to that dance in Moonee Ponds and meet Lyn. We were married in 1962 so we have been married for 43 years and they have been very happy years. We started badly – our first baby died in infancy so that was a hard time but then we had 3 healthy children. One daughter lives in Sydney and she has a daughter but earlier in the year she lost a son to leukemia when he was 8 years old. Those are the only major bad things that happened to me. Apart from that, I've had a very happy life. My son has got a son and his wife is expecting and my other daughter has two children 5 and 7. By and large we are happy with the way things have turned out. We live in Vermont and Vermont is a very nice place.

Fred – Did your children learn Greek?

Savvas – No, unfortunately they didn't. I did send the older two to a Greek school in Box Hill but they didn't speak Greek at home, and as the other children spoke Greek

at home they just couldn't cope. They went there for a term but we found they weren't really happy.

All three of them have been to university. Christopher is an Electronics Engineer with a Master's Degree in Telecommunications, Penny has a Bachelor of Economics and a Master's in Information Technology and Anne-Marie trained as Primary Teacher and took an Arts Degree majoring in English and Italian. We are very happy with our children.

Fred – Well Savvas, you have had an interesting life. You look well and healthy. Thank you for a very interesting interview this afternoon and thank you for your time.