

A life dedicated to campaigning for Pymont

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Community activist Jean Stewart in her Pymont home. Photo: Ann-Marie Calilhanna

By ANNIE LEWIS

For more than 20 years, one Pymont resident has staunchly campaigned on behalf of the community against planning and development proposals that have been “nonsense”.

Jean Stuart is the convener of the Pymont Community Group, an organisation she helped start up in 1991.

“In 1993, we urban gorilla-ed a block of land on the headland and turned it into a green park, because there was no park in Pymont,” she said.

“The Sydney Morning Herald always runs a competition every year for conservation, and in ’93 we won the award for a park in Pymont, creating the park.

“On one weekend, 130 people descended on it and just created the park. They just did what they thought they would like, and everyone was allowed to bring the plants they liked and plant them. It was a great day.”

Jean and her partner Allan began flipping properties while living in Victoria.

“I’d renovate a house and then at the end of the year sell it, make a capital gain, buy a slightly better property and upgrade,” she said.

“So my children were brought up in the rubble.”

Then after attempting to live on a farm, Jean and her family moved to Sydney and came across an old hotel which was “25 rooms of dereliction”.

There wasn’t one room that didn’t need a new floor, or new windows and doors, and squatters lived in every room.

“We had never been to Pymont, and Allan and I stopped outside this house. I looked up, and I could see a tiny little sign, which said For Sale, it was only about half a metre wide,” Jean said.

“There was a vacant lot beside it with a lot of covered shelters, and a guy was working in them, and I thought, “Oh my God, they must be growing marijuana here.”

“So I went around, I said to him, ‘Do you know anything about this house?’ And he said, ‘Yes, I do, I’m a squatter, and I live here. Do you want to see through?’ So I said, ‘Yes’.”

Allan thought it was too much work, but Jean knew she wanted the property. After buying the property at auction, it took five years to restore.

Jean has lived there ever since. As a resident of the Pymont area, she has never been afraid to rally when needed.

Her primary cause for concern has been surrounding issues of planning and development.

“It can take 25 minutes to get from here, going down Point Street, turning into Pymont Bridge Road to get to the fish market, which is ridiculous when you can walk it in 15,” Jean said.

“There’s no forethought, for the public moving. It’s very dense. Something like 26,000 people come every day to work in Pymont.”

Jean said that over the years, the fabric of the area has changed. When she first moved in, it was mostly housing commission before being handed to council.

“Pymont was always a working-class area ... there were only 300 people or so living in the main area,” she said.

“Now it is different.”

In late 2019, NSW Premier Gladys Berijiklian announced that Pymont and the Western Harbour precinct would be transformed into the next jobs hub and economic driver of Sydney.

At the time, Planning and Public Spaces Minister Rob Stokes said the NSW Government would immediately move to amend the planning controls with a focus on jobs and economic activity to better support proposals to develop the area.

“We can support larger-scale development and maintain the unique heritage nature of Pyrmont – it’s not an ‘either/or’ choice,” he said.

“However, we must plan for the precinct strategically, rather than on a site-by-site basis, to ensure the long-term liveability and sustainability of the area.”

In Jean’s mind, the plans do not take into account what the community has been saying for more than 18 years.

She added that it also does not adequately account for social infrastructure and would see Pyrmont lose its essence.

Jean has one message that she urged her fellow residents in the area to take to heart.

“People should remain alert, involved and write to their politicians,” she said.

“The last thing we need in Pyrmont is the removal of the height restrictions.

“We do not need to be an extension of the CBD. We are not geared for it. We need to be alert, so we don’t have that thrust upon us.”