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# SPLASH!

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# Endless games in the backyard

By **Therese Spruhan**

**ABOVE:** The excavators were the first sign that the pool was on its way

**T**his is an extract from Therese Spruhan's book *The Memory Pool*. Spruhan interviewed a wide selection of famous and not so famous Australians, from popular author Trent Dalton, filmmaker Leah Purcell, Olympic champion Shane Gould, iconic actor Bryan Brown and funny man Merrick Watts, to less well-known but equally interesting Aussie characters.

This extract tells the story of former Tasmanian Premier, David Bartlett. Fostered by the Bartlett family when he was 40 days old, David spent his first five years living in the Hobart suburb of Moonah. In 1973, the Bartletts moved to Mount Nelson, high above Tasmania's capital

the backyard was still full of massive boulders that had been unearthed during the building process.

When work started on the pool, those boulders had to go, so large excavating equipment was brought into the back of the block, which butted up against the bush. In one of the many photos my father took during the construction phase, there's a guy on a big earthmover, and as he enlarges the hole he's still digging up rocks. Eventually those boulders and rocks were moved to the edge of the bush, the hole was dug, foundations laid, the concrete poured, the tiles and pavers installed and the pool was completed. Finally we could start filling it with water from the garden hose, which ended up taking three days. My sister Catherine and I didn't wait for the chlorine to be added or for my father's intricate heating system to get to work. We were in straight away.

The pool was 11 metres long and about five or six metres wide. It was a standard rectangular shape with a slight curve on one side and a little triangle cut out in a corner where there were steps leading into the water. The interior was white concrete with a single row of ugly brown tiles around the top. They were probably the cheapest tiles they could find – by no stretch of the imagination were my parents rich; they were bringing up six children on a teacher's income. My father also tried to save money by installing the pavers around the pool himself. His expertise was maths teaching, not paving, so over a couple of years they sank to varying levels around the pool, and we were always stubbing our toes. The measure of a good summer for me was how many stubbed toes I had. When it was completed our pool was the opposite of that image of a sparkling turquoise pool at a middle-class family home with a nice glass fence and manicured lawns around it. It was this pool with undulating, falling-apart pavers facing on to bushland and overhanging eucalypts that used to drop their leaves in the

*"The pool was a refuge for me. It was also a place of great freedom, joy and friendship."*

city. The family of six children settled into life at their new house among the bush and on hot days cooled off at Hobart's Kingston Beach. In 1980, just before David turned 12, an important announcement was made that would have a big impact on his young life: the Bartlett family were putting in a pool!

## **David Bartlett**

I remember very clearly the day my father laid out plans on the kitchen table and announced to the family that we were getting a pool. After that it seemed to take an inordinate amount of time to build. It was seven or so years since our rambling six-bedroom AV Jennings house had been completed, but





David Bartlett with Therese Spruhan and Shane Gould

water, staining the bottom. Those leaves were the bane of my father's life and still are today. On the side of the pool closest to the bush there was a drop of about eight feet, so a fence was installed as soon as the pool was finished so that people didn't fall off the edge.

The other key part of the pool was the blue cover, which was also the bane of our existence. It wasn't like the fancy ones you see today that get rolled out. It was like blue bubble wrap that floated over the top of the pool. If you didn't put it on properly, my father got cross because of the leaves. He is more than 80 now but those eucalypts still drop a ton of leaves and drive him insane.

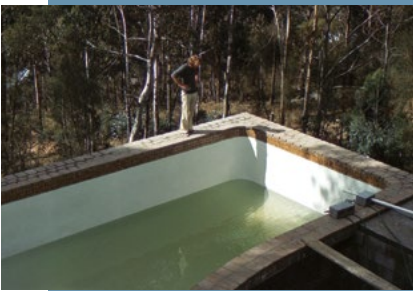
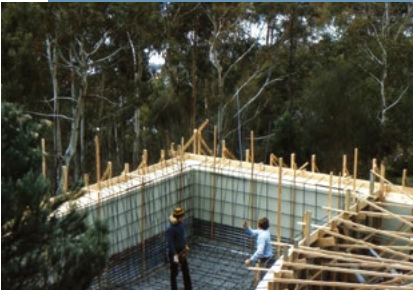
The eldest child in our family was a boy, then there were three girls, then me and the baby, another boy. They all had red hair and freckles and I had dark hair and dark skin. When the whole family and some friends used the pool, there'd be 20 people in and around it. There was only one other backyard pool in Mount Nelson, so we'd get kids knocking on our door to see if they could have a swim. My parents would always welcome them in, so at times there would be a crowd in the pool, but that wasn't the norm. Usually it would be my next-door neighbour Owain and me in there until we were wrinkled or called to dinner.

In the 1970s and 80s there weren't a lot of houses in Mount Nelson, but we had houses on either side of us and Owain, my best friend on the planet, lived in one of them. He was a year or so older than me and his kitchen window looked into the side of our house. We had all sorts of secret signals that were invitations to either play cricket, roam the bush or swim in the pool. I even had one to tell Owain the water temperature, which didn't bother me as I swam in the pool all year round. I loved the cold water and the feeling of being completely invigorated afterwards. For everyone else, when the water hit 18 degrees, that's when the swimming season started. Others preferred the pool when Dad's home-made solar

heating system was working properly and the water could be as warm as 27 degrees.

The pool was a place of invention for Owain and me and we spent thousands of hours playing in and around it. Owain held the record for swimming four and a half laps underwater, whereas I could only make four. Both of us nearly drowned trying to beat the record but we didn't think about that at the time. At the end of each day our fingers would be shrivelled and we'd have worn out the pads on our toes from running around the bottom of the pool on that old concrete surface that was slightly rough, like fine-grained sandpaper, and would tear your feet apart.

The deep end was about seven feet, so we'd make up all kinds of games involving diving for sinking bricks and endless games in the backyard rings. We played pool volleyball, tennis, golf, cricket, basketball and had elaborate bomb-dive competitions. For those we made our own scorecards to hold up for each other like they do in real diving competitions. We'd get points according to the degree of difficulty of the bomb, such as adding a somersault, and we'd give them all elaborate names. We had intricate sets of rules and regulations for each of these games and we were always arguing over whether one of us had broken a rule. With pool basketball you had to bounce the ball on the surface of the water while you were swimming; with pool tennis the rule was you had three seconds to get to the ball and hit it back. There were always challenges over whether one of us was counting too fast. Major discussions over rule compliance were part of the fun and we never took it too far, not like schoolyard cricket, when all of us would be very serious and there'd be lots of disputes about whether someone was out or not. Once we got back to the pool after those contentious cricket games, it didn't matter if you'd had barneys all day, because you returned to fun at the pool. The pool was always the salvation and the place of forgiveness.



LEFT & BELOW:  
Progress of the  
pool build



In those early years of high school, when I was going through an angry period about my identity and feeling different to everyone else because I was fostered, the pool helped me in lots of ways. Before we got the pool, I was an okay swimmer, but because of it I became quite a good swimmer. I wasn't a great swimmer by any stretch of the imagination but I was faster than anyone else in Year 10 at Taroona High except a girl my age called Anna, who is still a friend today. She was a really outstanding swimmer and had the potential to go much further than the school swimming carnival and inter-school events. I didn't like the constraints of school much but I did enjoy my involvement in swimming and in Year 10 I was the swimming captain. I was always the slowest runner because I was born with a problem with my foot and had eight surgeries before I was seven to try and fix it. So I enjoyed doing well at swimming at school.

High school was about forming new circles of friends, especially girls. Having one of only two backyard pools in the neighbourhood from Grade 7 to Grade 10 was a pretty cool way of having friends around, and sometimes that encouraged the girls to come to my house. My parents had a lot of rules about girls coming over and they didn't like them being with me and my mates without supervision. They were very strict Christians and I think my father's reason for putting in the pool in the first place was so that my three older sisters would bring their boyfriends home rather than going out with them.

I certainly had a lot of friends over and when they turned up at the house they didn't knock on the front door, they'd just walk down the side of the house to the pool area, where there was a rumpus room with a table tennis table and a cheap pool table. We'd spend all afternoon alternating between playing table tennis and pool and jumping in the water.

At some stage in my teenage years my parents built a shack down the coast. I didn't like going there as I thought it was boring, so sometimes I'd get to stay home and that's when I'd invite friends around to the pool, usually at night. At that time you could get a bottle of Stone's green ginger wine for \$5.99 at the local bottle-o. My mates and I would invite the girls around and we'd sit around the pool drinking wine together and feeling pretty free. Most of us had our first sexual experiences in and around that pool. Nothing serious but lots of pashing off.

Our backyard pool in Mount Nelson gave me a space of my own because the rest of the family didn't use it as much as me. The idea that my older sisters would bring boyfriends home didn't happen. Most of the time it was my place and during those high school years when I was having issues about my identity, the pool was a refuge for me. It was also a place of great freedom, joy and friendship, especially with Owain, who after all these years is still my best mate, and jokes with me now that the only reason he was my friend was because I had a pool! ■

The subject

David Bartlett is a former premier of Tasmania and Labor MP for the seat of Denison in the Tasmanian House of Assembly from 2004 to 2011. He is currently a keynote speaker on innovation through technology, the president of the Hobart Chargers basketball club, and for four years chaired the Brave Foundation, a charity that equips teenage parents with resources and

opportunities for education. In 1987 he was reunited with his birth mother, and later with his father. In 2014 when his portrait was unveiled in the Tasmanian Parliament, both his birth parents and foster parents were present. A cold-water enthusiast, he swims with a group of hardy souls in Hobart's Derwent River throughout the winter. He lives in Hobart with his wife Larissa and their two children.

The author

Therese Spruhan has a passion for swimming pools. She writes about them on her blog Swimming Pool Stories (<http://swimmingpoolstories.com.au>) and shares photos on Instagram @swimmingpoolstories. She has published articles on places to swim in the Weekend Australian and contributed words and photos to The Pool, Australia's exhibition at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, which

was re-exhibited at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2017–18. She lives in Sydney.

*The Memory Pool: Australian Stories of Summer, Sun and Swimming, is published by Newsouth Books and retails for \$29.99. To purchase the book go to your local bookstore, Booktopia.com.au, or go here: <https://www.booktopia.com.au/the-memory-pool-therese-spruhan/book/9781742236582.html>*