

IN DEATH SHE REPAID THE GIFT OF LIFE

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Source: Newcastle Herald, The (includes the Central Coast Herald).
12/08/2016.

ISSN: 0727-9825

Accession Number: DOC6SOBUP6SUQVTMAVL6UN

NO one knows for sure why Margaret Illukol - left shockingly disfigured after she was attacked by a hyena in Uganda as a child - sat down at her Cooks Hill home on March 10, 2005 and changed her will by hand, and without a witness.

She crossed out a paragraph of the formal will she drew up with a solicitor in 1992, that would have seen half her \$1 million estate sent to a Rotary club in the Ugandan capital of Kampala.

Those strokes of her pen left just one beneficiary - the largely Hunter-based Rotary district 9670, which brought her to Australia as a teenager in the 1970s for significant and on-going surgery, supported her education, and later celebrated when she became a Newcastle nurse and an Australian citizen.

Margaret Illukol, who died after a fall in her home on February 15, 2015, repaid Hunter Rotarians by leaving her \$1 million estate in their care to establish a trust to help people in her adopted home.

In a recent decision NSW Supreme Court Justice James Stevenson accepted that was her intent, after Ms Illukol's executor and trustee, Newcastle solicitor Peter Evans, sought advice from the court about distributing her estate.

Justice Stevenson found Ms Illukol's note on the will, that she wanted to "establish a fund in my name hopefully ongoing one", referred to the retained bequest to "Newcastle Rotary District 967".

"I think it clear that the deceased's intention in striking through the paragraph which formerly provided a bequest to the Rotary club of Kampala was to revoke that bequest," Justice Stevenson found.

"I have concluded that ... the deceased intended, by her manuscript changes to the will of 10 March 2005, to revoke her instruction that her estate be divided in two and intended to express an intention, albeit relatively informally, to establish a fund for the benefit of the remaining named entity."

Justice Stevenson found Mr Evans would be justified "to establish a fund in the name of the deceased to be used for the purpose of service in the community within the geographical boundaries of the Newcastle district, such service being confined to activities which are charitable in nature".

Mr Evans' late father James, who was Royal Newcastle Hospital board chairman and district governor of what was then known as Rotary district

967 in the early 1970s, did not think the region had the capacity to help the teenage Margaret when Ugandan Rotary clubs sought help from Australian Rotary.

Her injuries were so extreme, and the eight years that had passed since the attack when she was eight, left James Evans concerned that more than the most basic help was beyond even the most gifted surgeons, Peter Evans said.

But Toronto Rotarian Kevin Leary was determined, Mr Evans said.

Mr Leary, his wife Val and daughter Annette, 7, travelled to Uganda to find the 16-year-old Margaret, establish her trust and return with her to Australia for treatment.

Mrs Leary remembers the teenage Margaret wore a mask to hide the horrific injuries she received when a hyena mauled her head as a child. Her jawbone was destroyed and largely cut off in a crude attempt to keep her alive before she could reach medical help. Large parts of her face and mouth were torn away, including her nose.

In her book, *Child of the Karimotong*, Ms Illukol wrote of the terrible hours after the hyena latched on to her head and dragged her away from a hut in a remote village in Uganda.

"Whatever was dragging me away was crawling on all fours. It dropped and picked me up several times as the bones of my face tore apart," she wrote.

"Something stopped me from screaming. All the noises I tried to make shut off in my mouth. I was dreamy and confused, out of my senses. I put out my hands to identify my attacker and found myself clinging to a furry coat. Then there was a gap: everything stopped."

Val Leary remembers the first time she saw the teenage Margaret, who was being cared for and educated by Irish nuns and could speak some English.

"You could just see her eyes and she was very quiet," Mrs Leary said.

It is estimated Ms Illukol underwent more than 70 operations. A number of Hunter Rotary families became her carers.

Mrs Leary and Mr Evans said Ms Illukol returned to Uganda up to three times as an adult to make contact with her extended family. Mr Evans said she was always generous.

"She'd given a lot away to Kampala but eventually she formed the view her family was more the people here," he said.

He was unaware of the informal note and the changes Ms Illukol made to her will in 2005 until after her death, but was pleased Justice Stevenson had accepted Ms Illukol's intent.

"It's up to Rotary to manage it for the benefit of people in need," Mr Evans said.

Retired NSW local court magistrate and Rotary district 9670 governor Steve Jackson said he had been made aware of Justice Stevenson's decision "and needless to say the district is very happy with the result".

"We are in the process of establishing an appropriate trust, obviously for charitable purposes, the benefit of which will be available within the geographical limits of the district," Mr Jackson said.

While the terms of the will prevented Rotary from using trust funds beyond the district, it could free up other district funds, he said.

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