

## FEATURE STORY

Marilynne Paspaley is an actor, philanthropist, mother of three and one of the Executive Directors of the world's most respected pearling company, Paspaley Pearls. [She spoke to Wealth Creator about the family business and the beauty of the finest pearls in the world.](#)

# The Jewel of the South Sea

By Jonathan Jackson



**Above:** Marilynne Paspaley is one of the world's most respected women with interests in media and production, hospitality and, of course, pearls

**Right:** The Paspaley fleet of luggers have become an icon in Broome

If one thing defines the driving ethos behind Darwin based Paspaley, the world's largest producer of Australian South Sea cultured pearls, it is a sense of and a commitment to family.

Three generations of the Paspaley family have been involved in the pearling industry since Nicholas Paspaley Sr. came to Australia as the young son of a Greek family fleeing war-torn Europe. More than 80 years later, Nicholas Paspaley's children, Roslynne, Nicholas and Marilynne are the nucleus of a tightly-bound family company that employs more than 1000 people in Australia, Asia, Europe and the US.

Each pays tribute to the mark their father bestowed on them.

"He left a great legacy of integrity and humility," says Marilynne Paspaley. "He was a very honourable man and I like to think we continue in his footsteps. There's not much point in being proud of your business, if you're not proud of the way you do business."

Paspaley senior, who died in 1984, would have been impressed if he could see where his children have taken the

company, though he must have had some inkling that they were every bit the achievers as he. Roslynne, Nicholas and Marilynne are members of the Paspaley board, Nicholas as Executive Chairman, with Roslynne and Marilynne each holding executive directorships. Paspaley CEO John Kelly is the fourth member of the board, his appointment five years ago a rare departure from the hands-on family way of doing things, but a recognition of his excellent knowledge and experience in Australian pearling.

"Marilynne has been instrumental in overseeing the expansion of the retail business since she joined the company in 1987 and in establishing Paspaley's own jewellery production workshop," says Nicholas.

Paspaley pearls have featured in jewellery designed by Carrera Y Carrera, Buccelati, Oscar de la Renta, Leo de Vroomen, La Nouvelle Bague, Christopher Walling, Tiffany and Harry Winston to name a few.

"However, it was in our interest to present our pearls in jewellery designed and created in-house, hence our decision in 1999 to build our own atelier in Darwin



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... a project that Marilynne personally oversaw," continues Nicholas.

It's an indication of Paspaley's commitment to doing things properly that, while jewellery design and production becomes more and more automated, Paspaley goes worldwide in its search for the true artisans who make limited runs of jewellery by hand. Not that they could fail to be inspired by the location of the bright, airy space hovering on the edge of Darwin Harbour at Cullen Bay.

Marilynne however, is humble about her achievements and insists that her brother and late father are responsible for the renown of the company. "Paspaley is much larger than retail although, over

the past 15 years, it has become a major distribution arm."

According to Nicholas the retail arm represents 5-10% of the company's total turnover.

### Marilynne's Adventures

The Leading Women Entrepreneurs of the World honoured Marilynne in 1999 and she has since been captivated by the work the group does in promoting the advancement of women in business worldwide. She applied her entrepreneurial spirit to attracting this year's gathering of The Leading Women Entrepreneurs of the World to Sydney. She unleashed an Australian roadshow on the previous year's event in Bermuda, overwhelming delegates with a display of uniquely Australian products ... pearls of course, indigenous art from the Northern Territory, wine from Paspaley's Bathurst based Bunnamagoo Estate and the Australian chapeau du jour, Akubra hats.

Marilynne had been genuinely surprised by her entry to the list of LWE honourees. "There's no elevator to success," she told the *Australian Financial Review*. "It's one step at a time.

skills recently attracted the attention of the Northern Territory Government which appointed her to the Kakadu National Park Board of Management.

In a statement made in NT Parliament Marilynne was given her due credit.

*"Marilynne Paspaley's appointment to the Kakadu Board of management is an historic one ... She obviously had much to offer the board by way of her business acumen, her knowledge of corporate governance and of marketing and promotion. She will be an outstanding Board of Management representative and, with other board members, contribute mightily to the important role Kakadu plays and will continue to play in the Northern Territory for the betterment of all."*

Adding to the serenity of the Northern Territory is Marilynne's exclusive retreat, McAlpine House, a boutique six-room guest-house - formerly the home of one of the colonial era pearling masters - situated in the centre of old Broome.

Hers has been a life filled with diversity but with such strong family ties, it is Paspaley Pearls that takes pride of place on Marilynne's extensive CV.



**Top:** Paspaley Pearls founder, Nick  
**Above:** Nick senior learnt Japanese cultivation methods and introduced them to Australia

## Paspaley Pearls account for probably 60%-70% of high quality South Sea pearl production worldwide.

It's so mundane, the plodding and the getting there; success comes afterwards. It's not even a goal, a driving force for some of these women, and surprise was their reaction when they realised what they'd achieved."

Despite an overwhelmingly global outlook, Marilynne is unashamedly a Territorian and takes every opportunity to promote that heritage. Other marketing initiatives include the introduction of the Paspaley Magazine.

In 2002 Marilynne purchased the award-winning production company Burrundi Pictures. Burrundi is Darwin's premier film and television production facility.

She was no stranger to media beforehand having had leading roles in former Australian drama *GP*, and the award winning police drama *Water Rats*, with the brilliant Colin Friels. She has also had stints as an announcer for ABC radio and television and has been involved in public relations.

Marilynne's community work through Burrundi, her business acumen and media

### History and Her Story

Marilynne had been acting since she was knee high. While her father steered the luggers, the little girl was putting on performances. Then when many years later the crunch came and Nick Jnr asked her to join the company, she couldn't refuse. In fact she once told George Negus "I reached a point and thought 'if I have to give something up, what will it be?' The reality is, the business enables me to be more with my family, my husband and children, than the acting did - it takes you away from it."

Marilynne has fond memories of the early years of the business, of her father working hard to make ends meet while setting the standards for pearling.

Those standards were set with Marilynne's grandmother who raised five children in a foreign country (Australia), with little understanding of English after her husband died when Nick Snr was six.

"She was very strong," says Marilynne. "In fact we only recently found out a couple of years ago that she used to trade in Mother of Pearl shells in Port Hedland,

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so there's a real connection with the pearling industry and it's possibly why my father became interested in it."

Nicholas Snr was four when the Paspaley family moved to Australia from Greece in 1919. As an impressionable youth he would have held his single parent in high regard. Later on, when Nick's sister married a man already working in the pearling industry, he moved to Broome to help her out.

"He became fascinated by the industry," says Marilynne. "He bought his own lugger (age 19) put together his own crew, built his own ships and became an extremely successful Master Pearler."

When World War II threatened to destroy economic and social advancement, Nick was forced to leave the business behind for the duration of the war. When he came back the market had changed. Previously, the pearling industry consisted of diving for mother of pearl shells that were shipped to New York and used for the production of buttons. Australia produced about 75% of the world's pearl shell. Post war, the invention of plastic buttons had decimated the pearling industry and diving was no longer commercially viable.

Pearlers of that era would occasionally find a natural pearl in the shell that they harvested, a bonus highly regarded by the buyers who gathered around the world on the Kimberly coast for each harvest. A natural pearl, still found occasionally in shell harvested from the wild today, grows when a small piece of organic material enters the shell as it lies on the sea floor, filtering the nutrient rich waters in which the Pinctada Maxima grows. The oyster secretes nacre round the foreign body to create a pearl. Cultured pearling is the same process but with a specially shaped nucleus surgically implanted in the oyster's mantle by highly trained technicians.

"Without the cash flow from the shell harvest, natural pearls were so incredibly rare that the industry was not sustainable," says Marilynne. "My father therefore began exploring pearl culture in the early 1950s, inspired by the Japanese success with their native Akoya shell.

"However, the Akoya had no similarity to Australian pearls and Dad felt if we could learn how to culture our pearl oysters we would have something truly magnificent, because natural South Sea

pearls were already regarded worldwide as the finest in the world.

"From the start, harvests were small but Dad felt that if we could work out the problems we could grow extraordinary pearls," she recalls. "That started to happen when my brother finished University and joined the company."

Nick Jnr joined his father in 1970 with an economics degree under his belt. He brought business acumen to the company but, as he further immersed himself in the industry, he began to realise that producing beautiful pearls in large quantities was more than just a dream. He introduced new farming techniques far removed from the Japanese methods.

"On a global scale, Paspaley is now the largest producer of White South Sea Pearls in the world," says Marilynne. "We have a greater investment in pearling than any other company in the world. We have the most modern pearl farms and a fleet of purpose built vessels specifically geared for the pearling industry. They reflect our knowledge and understanding of the pearling business and of working the oyster. We're extremely efficient and effective in every step along the way"

"The annual production worldwide of jewellery quality South Sea cultured pearls," says Nick, "is approximately two million pearls. Paspaley Pearls account for probably 60%-70% of high quality South Sea pearl production worldwide."

Paspaley is also famous for pearls 15mm and above, a size which can take between two and six years to achieve. The farms where such pearls grow are in isolated, pristine waters in Australia's northwest where the entire operation is under constant supervision and monitoring.

"The highly delicate oysters and pearls grow in their natural environment," says Marilynne, "we have learnt through many years experience that the Australian oyster needs to be under what amounts to intensive care."

### Coda

The history of Paspaley Pearls is rich and as vast as the South Seas the luggers harvest.

And like other members of her family, Marilynne is fully committed to keeping their company and pearls the most revered in the world. At the helm they are sure to continue to dominate, support, refine and define the industry for many more years to come.

## The Business

Nick Paspaley doesn't like to say that Paspaley is made of different companies, he describes the Group as being made up of different business units.

"Companies in large groups exist for all sorts of reasons," he says. "Our group is better understood when described in business units."

The units that make up the Paspaley Group are as follows:

1. Pearl production group
2. Wholesale pearl sales group
3. Domestic properties investment group
4. International properties investment Group
5. Rural investment group
6. Aviation investment group
7. Industrial investment group – ship repair and engineering

To put all of this into some perspective, the company employs over 1000 people across Australia, Asia and North America. One unit, Pearl Aviation owns and operates 24 special operations aircraft, eight fixed bases and has over 110 staff.

Meanwhile Paspaley Group produces 70% of Australia's gem quality pearls, exporting directly to Europe, Asia and North America. And although loath to divulge sales figures, it is reported that annual Australian production is valued at well over \$200 million.

For a long time Paspaley Pearls has sold to and been distributed by some of the world's top jewellers including Tiffany, Cartier and Harry Winston. It is also understood that an anonymous bidder, thought to be legendary crooner Frank Sinatra, set a world record at a Sothebys Auction in New York, when he paid US\$2.2 million for a strand of pearls.

However as Nick says, when asked how much a pearl wholesales for, "there is no answer to this question. It depends on the quality of the pearl. How long is a piece of rope?"