

Where I Belong
Episode 5: Jenny Woodward
Podcast transcript

Jenny Woodward:

I saw myself very much as a messenger (laughing) but there's nothing worse than saying, "It's going to be lovely and sunny tomorrow!" And you wake up and you think, "No, it's not (laughing)... Damn, damn, damn."

Wendy Love:

If you've ever watched the evening weather forecast on ABC Queensland, you've no doubt seen Jenny Woodward. She's been presenting the weather, passionately, for 35 years. From Cape York to Mount Isa and down to the Gold Coast, she's been a constant and iconic presence for Queenslanders across the state.

Sound courtesy of ABC News

News Reporter 1: And now here's Jenny Woodward with a look at the weather.

News Reporter 2: Weather time now - here's Jenny Woodward.

News Reporter 1: Now it's time to check the weather into the weekend. Here's Jenny Woodward.

JW: Thanks Rod. Well it's been a fine, dry day right across the state, but it was cooler along the south coast and the south easterly winds. Very hot in the west.

WL:

And people love her. There's just something about Jenny. From her colourful clothes, to her entertaining reports from the Ekka, the Royal Queensland Show, Jenny has been with us through floods, fires and droughts. And people feel like they know her. The former editor of Queensland News at the ABC, Bernie Bowen, says Jenny is outstanding in her ordinariness, in a very positive way. And that seems about right.

JW:

I think that I am ordinary, you know. I think that people look at me and they see themselves reflected in me because I am like them. I'm a working mother, who yes, I have the fun of dressing up every night and I get my hair and makeup done, which I love. But I'm in the supermarket too,

hunting down the specials, you know, you'll find me in that supermarket checking out the specials, and "Oooh! What are the best buys this week?" So maybe, maybe it's something like that.

WL:

She's this familiar face that people can kind of count on, in a way.

JW:

You are in people's living rooms every night, and whether it's, you know, the chaos of their family rooms with dinner happening and all of that, or whether, you know, they've sat down to have a look at the news and the weather. That you're in their space. I turn up every day and I do my job to the best of my ability. And I think that I am a constant, that people see me there. They know what to expect.

WL:

But that doesn't mean she can't be surprising. Just wait to hear what she's been up to this year!

I had a long chat with Jenny recently and got some insight into her life and what makes her tick. Her fascination with the weather, vignettes from her childhood, her uni days, her career at the ABC, her dream of becoming an actor. And woven through it all are these nuggets of homespun wisdom - a glimpse into how she makes her way through the world.

INTRO

WL:

From Museum of Brisbane, you're listening to *Where I Belong*, a podcast that tells stories about fascinating and creative people, whose lives have been shaped by Brisbane. I'm Wendy Love and in this episode, Jenny Woodward and the allure of the ordinary. Behind the scenes with the woman known to be the longest running weather presenter in all of Australia.

MUSIC

WL:

I can only imagine the chaos of Jenny's household when she was growing up. She's one of six girls.

JW:

My father used to boast about having six girls all the time because I think it was such an unusual thing at the time and so, he would... So we kind of felt that we were special.

WL:

She grew up in Toowoomba, a 90-minute drive west of Brisbane, on top of the Great Dividing Range in Jarowair Giabal Country.

As a young girl, Jenny was always reading. She'd hide under the covers with a torch and a book at night. And the family loved music - they'd play The Supremes, Matt Monro, The Mamas & The Papas on the record player. The sisters were always making up plays to perform.

JW:

We would set up a stage and Mum would completely encourage all of this. And there might be four or five of us involved, depending on who was around. We'd get the dog involved, we'd have a curtain, and we must have had costumes, I don't really remember. But I do remember we would charge people to come in.

WL:

Jenny's parents were always welcoming people into their home.

JW:

Mum and Dad had such a generosity of spirit that if someone turned up at the door unexpectedly, it was always: "Come in, you know, come and have a drink, have a cup of tea." You know, "Stay for dinner." And she would make it work. And so, I think that was something that has really informed the way that I have dealt with life as well.

WL:

The household was a somewhat conservative one, but by the time Jenny came along - she was child number five - her mum and dad's parenting style became a bit more carefree.

JW:

I was sort of on the other side of the women's lib era, and so I got the benefits of that because the world was changing. And so, I think my parents' approach to parenting was changing, and no doubt they were worn out by the time they got to number five and six. They thought, "Ah it'll be alright, we'll just let them do what they want to do". They'd probably run out of puff.

WL:

She says her parents made her feel like she could be anything she wanted. And what Jenny wanted to be was a performer, an actor. In year 12 she had a week-long residency with the Queensland Theatre at Churchie, the Anglican Grammar School in East Brisbane.

JW:

It was all on location there and we had tutors like Geoffrey Rush, Billie Brown (laughing), Kate Foy. So we had some fairly extraordinary tutors who were just, I think, probably in their 20s at the time. So, that certainly encouraged me to think, "Yes, I think I can do this." So I guess there was that tussle between, what do I do? I want to be an actress, but I've got this other voice in my head saying, "Well, you need to fall back on something."

WL:

That voice was her mother's. Her mum supported her, but also implored her to have Plan B. So she took her mum's advice and earned a qualification in Speech and Drama at Uni, so she could teach if she needed to.

When she moved over to her acting course at university, she got to know and learn alongside people from other walks of life. That experience influenced her deeply.

MUSIC

JW:

I'm pretty strait-laced, I'm pretty, you know, straight up and down. But I encountered people who were much more creative, and I suppose more fluid in their thinking. So that was really good for me, that opened my mind up a lot and made me much more accepting of other people, and that their way of doing things was different to mine, but not necessarily wrong. That there were different ways of doing the same thing.

WL:

Jenny met her husband Doug at uni, they had a few overlapping subjects. And when I asked her how they met, who made the first move, that kind of thing, I just loved her response.

JW:

Well, I'd kind of spotted him (laughing) and I kind of hung around. And eventually, I don't remember, I don't remember who asked who out. Possibly I sort of, because you know, you're in that uni environment where you can kind of inveigle yourself into a group. And, "Oh, I'm sitting next to you. How about that?"

WL:

Doug remembers it like this as well. It was a gradual thing. Perhaps a bit too gradual.

Doug Woodward:

Jenny always says I was very slow, because I took five years to come to my senses and realise that she was the girl for me (laughing). Whereas she always felt that she knew straight away.

WL:

While Doug was taking his sweet time coming to his senses, Jenny finished uni and eventually got a full-time job with Channel 10 in Toowoomba, reading the news and presenting the weather. Little did she know that the weather would soon become a perpetual force in her life, and not just professionally.

MUSIC

WL:

In 1975, not long after she starts at Channel 10, something happens that makes Jenny see the weather from a different perspective. Jenny was at her parents' house, where she was living at the time, just hanging out with a friend. When all of a sudden, at about 3pm in the afternoon, a storm hits directly overhead.

JW:

And the whole front of my parents' house was smashed. We had a tiled roof, so all of the tiles on the top of the roof were smashed. There was water pouring in everywhere. The yard would have been a foot deep, you know, 30 centimetres deep in leaf litter. Couldn't find the dog.

WL:

Her parents were away on the coast at the time.

JW:

I remember sort of thinking, "Oh my god, what am I gonna do? What am I gonna do?" Trying to, sort of thinking, everything's getting wrecked. And I remember we had a little tiny portable TV in a room and I went in thinking, well, I'll grab that and take that to the other side of the house. And the window exploded in front of me. I thought, "No, I don't care about that." So we eventually just went into the bathroom and just kind of waited in there. And it was all over in sort of 10, 15 minutes. And all of a sudden you walk out, and the house is just, a shell of its former self. And I remember, obviously the phone lines must have still been around, so I rang Mum and Dad. And they were just so wonderful. They just said, "It's all fine, don't worry about it. We'll be home in the morning. Go and stay somewhere else. Go and stay at a friend's."

So I went back to her parents' place, and then I had to go up and do the weather. And it was sort of almost surreal because I kind of raced up there a bit sort of shell shocked. I mean, these days you would not go. You'd ring up and go, "I'm sorry, my house has just been trashed! I can't come in tonight." But it didn't even occur to me to not go to work. So I went up and said, "You know, there's been a really big hailstorm on the eastern side of the city."

MUSIC

WL:

And with that, Jenny's appreciation and affinity for the weather was set. She could see how powerful the weather could be, the toll it could take on a community, how critical reporting the forecast was to people. Jenny and the weather, it seemed, were destined for each other.

JW:

So that really brought home to me personally how intense the weather can be. And how, all of a sudden, in the morning everything's fine. And by the end of the day, it's disaster.

MUSIC

WL:

Jenny took her job reporting the weather very seriously.

JW:

Because it was a regional station, we really felt - and I certainly did - that the weather was really important, because your audience was farmers and graziers. So, I really made a big effort to make sure that they were getting the best information available at the time.

WL :

For a lot of people watching, it wasn't a matter of,"Do I need to take an umbrella with me today?" It was, "Are my crops of sweet corn going to survive?"

DL:

The people who watch it, especially people in the country, this is really important to them, you know, probably more important than the news in lots of ways. So they are very attentive. So she's always been very conscious of that.

WL:

Finally, after a good five years, Doug and Jenny tied the knot. And well, the weather gods decided it was the perfect opportunity to once again remind Jenny how much influence they had in her life. Even though she thought she was safe inside the walls of the church...

JW:

It was a hot summer's afternoon, and we had a cracking thunderstorm through the service. And we had to stop it because it was so loud. And then when we all got back out to the cars... everyone had let their windows down because it was so hot, so everyone had wet cars (laughs). But yes, I think it was sort of the weather starting to inveigle itself into our lives.

MUSIC

WL:

Doug and Jenny eventually left Toowoomba so that Doug could work on his family's farm in Pullenvale, a western suburb of Brisbane. Jenny got a job at Channel 7 producing the much-loved children's show *Wombat*. She enjoyed it and was proud of her work there, but it was an incredibly demanding job. So, when she had her first child, her son Sam, she decided not to return.

And then, one day in 1986, she sees an ad in the paper for a weather presenting position at the ABC, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. And just like that, Jenny was back where she belonged, delivering the forecast to Queenslanders. She doesn't remember much about the interview, but she does recall her very first night on air.

JW:

And I remember standing there and being incredibly nervous, even though I had done a lot of presenting in the past, it had been a couple of years. And I'm thinking, "What am I doing here? Am I out of my mind?"

WL:

Was there this like, "Oh, it's the ABC?"

JW:

Absolutely, yes. And, because of that, my parents were ABC lovers, and they watched ABC religiously. We listened to the quarter to 8am news in the morning, every morning, and you know, 7pm news without fail, every night. Everything was built around that. So, there was this kind of feel about the ABC that it was, you know, up there, above everything else. So to get a job at the ABC was terribly exciting. And to be on the news was, "Wow - I've really made it."

MUSIC

WL:

Now, as you can imagine, gathering all the news and the weather forecast to present for the nightly bulletin was a lot different back then - no mobile phones, no internet. The ABC studios were in Toowong at the time and the first job of the day was to drive into the Weather Bureau in the city to pick up the physical printout of the forecast, and the map and the satellite photos, and then drive them back to the ABC to prepare for the 7:30pm news. The earliest she could get to the Weather Bureau though, was 4:30pm, leaving not much time.

JW:

So probably ten to five you're getting back in the car, driving along Coro drive to Toowong. And it's still a traffic jam, it was a traffic jam then and it still is. So that would often be heart-starting, going back there and then you may not get back to the studio, depending on the traffic till 10 to 6, quarter to 6. Then you've got to write a script, you've got to get into makeup, you've got to do all of those things. So, I found that really quite stressful. But I suppose I got quite good at pulling it all together pretty quickly.

WL:

Jenny was always good with a deadline though. When she was a teenager, she loved making her own clothes.

JW:

I was always sewing, usually sewing up until about half an hour before I had to actually put it on my body.

WL:

She seems to thrive under pressure.

JW:

A deadline is a great thing for me because I tend to sort of faff around. I think, "Oh, I've got plenty of time. I've got plenty of time!" And then, "Oh, no, I haven't. Okay. Off I go!" (laughs)

MUSIC

WL:

She may not sew as much now but Jenny still loves her clothes. She loves bright colours and fun prints. And her audience has taken notice over the years. People come up to her at the shops to compliment her on the dress she wore on TV the night before. Some viewers even write letters.

JW:

I've got a whole swag of viewers' letters from people who like stuff I wear; not liked stuff I wear. Liked my hair; don't like my hair. You know, there's a lot of opinions out there.

WL:

We all know it happens, I guess, but I still find it baffling that people take the time to write letters to say, "You looked terrible in that red frock."

JW:

It's astonishing. And you kind of think, you've taken the trouble to write a letter. You've found the address. You've gone to the post office and bought a stamp and you've put it... how much did you not like it to have done that?

WL:

But Jenny takes the criticism in her stride.

JW:

Some people think they're being helpful too and letting you know, because obviously you are clueless and you need all the help that you can get! But then there are other people who write and say lovely things, so...

MUSIC

WL:

Coming up after a quick break: Jenny thinks about taking another crack at the whole acting thing.

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MUSIC

WL:

When Jenny Woodward first started doing the weather, in regional Queensland, she got to see the rainfall totals from lots of isolated and far-flung towns.

JW:

And I kind of thought, these places don't really get a mention in any other context. So, I thought it would be really nice to just mention their rainfall. So places like Giligulgul or Bogantungan (laughing). I would try and include them if they had a rainfall, because I thought, it's just a nice little kind of nod to them thinking, "I know you're out there, and no one thinks about you much, but hey, hi. Hello, tonight, yes."

WL:

And over the decades of people tuning in to watch her on the ABC, her audience has come to see the genuine care that she takes with her job. Her husband Doug admires how, even after 35 years, she still looks for ways to improve how she presents the weather.

DW:

I think Jenny evolves because she keeps, unlike her husband, she keeps up with the technology. She keeps rethinking how she does it. And she'll change the way she does it, even if it's just how she does the graphics, or how she explains something. So, she's always looking to improve the way she does it. But I think she exudes or conveys a warmth when she presents the weather that people can sense. I think she has a manner of presenting and talking, as opposed to just rattling off figures, and talking so that people are drawn to her warmth and take her into their heart.

MUSIC

WL:

For a long time, the women who presented the forecast on TV were shrouded in this weather girl stereotype, this sexist attitude that trivialised their work.

Jenny says she was lucky though. That because she started in a region that took the weather very seriously, she wasn't exposed to that stuff as much.

JW:

Because there was a lot of dolly bird stuff happening with weather presenters in the 70s particularly and into the 80s, but things were starting to change. And I guess I was lucky that I managed to just kind of slide in after that was a big thing. And I found that people took me seriously, despite being a woman. I did observe for a long time, however, that women were doing the weather, because it was almost as if the weather was perceived as a sort of bit of fluff at the end of the bulletin.

WL:

She noticed a shift about 15 to 20 years ago, when people started to take climate change seriously, realising that these weather changes were affecting everybody.

JW:

And it became the headline of the news that we started to see a lot more male presenters coming back into the field. I mean that is just an anecdotal observation on my part, but I thought it was interesting. And even today, we've got a lot more women coming back into the space, but for a long time, I was the only female doing weather in Brisbane.

MUSIC

WL:

In 1988, a year after they had their second child, Alex, Jenny and her husband Doug moved closer to the city, to Ashgrove.

JW:

I mean, I love Brisbane. I see it actually as a place of many villages that kind of come together. You know whether it's Ashgrove or Yeronga or, you know, anywhere else.

WL:

And that's where they had the third and final son, Michael. Yes, this woman who grew up with only sisters - five of them - has three boys. And she says it was a lot to juggle.

JW:

The struggle is real being a working mother. And I think women need to make it as easy as possible. Don't take the hardest road.

WL:

She says she was fortunate to be able to outsource some of those domestic jobs, like getting a cleaner to come to the house sometimes. And she says her husband Doug also had to step up and carry a fair share of the load. He took over dinner time and the bedtime routine.

JW:

I mean what woman would not want to be out of the house at the witching hour. So, often I would get home and they'd either be in their pajamas, or they'd be in bed and I'd, you know, I'd bounce in, read a story, sing a song and you know, off to sleep. And I know there was always, sometimes I'd come home, and he'd be really harried because they'd been like, "I don't like that. I don't want that." (laughs) You know? And a few times he said, "They had cereal for breakfast tonight!" And I said, "Fine! That's fine by me."

WL:

She means dinner, of course.

JW:

My wonderful, wonderful husband. Love him to bits.

If you can take those shortcuts and make life easier for yourself, then don't feel guilty about it, just do it. Enjoy it. Mothers do a lot of that mental load of, you know, who's going where, and we've got swimming this afternoon, and then on the weekend, we've got that sport game down at Runcorn or, you know, how are we going to coordinate all of those things? And coordinating their social life. So, there is a lot of load on women's minds and I think that's something that you need to cut yourself some slack and say, well no, unless you can organise to get there yourself then you can't go or we'll have to do something else.

MUSIC

WL:

A lot of people have told me that they love watching Jenny Woodward report from the Ekka, the Royal Queensland Show held every August at the Brisbane Showgrounds. It's an event that brings the country to the city. There's equestrian shows and woodchopping competitions, carnival rides, and heaps of arts and crafts too. And of course, no visit is complete without a strawberry ice cream sundae! But one of the biggest draw cards is getting to see the animals: bulls, ducklings, donkeys and pigs. Kids can bottle feed a lamb or milk a cow.

Jenny loves animals and gets up close and personal with some of them at the Ekka every year.

Sound courtesy of ABC News

JW: Hello everyone, well I'm in one of my favourite places at the Ekka, which is in the animal nursery. Although I have to say the last time I was up close with a camel it tried to bite me and spit on me, but I'm hoping this will be a much better experience with the lovely, gentle Fatima...

WL:

Of course, presenting alongside animals can be unpredictable.

JW:

It was in the animal nursery, and I had this huge duck, like a Muscovy duck, which was really heavy. And the guy who handed it to me, this huge beak, and I said, "Is this thing gonna bite me?" And he said, "No, no, they don't bite, it's fine." So, you know, I did the weather. And when I looked back at it not too long ago, I obviously was really struggling to hold it up, the poor thing. It was kind of sinking lower and lower as I'm talking. But eventually, I got the weather done. And while I'm talking about the weather, I handed it back to the guy. But before I did that, it actually bit me here (laughing). So I kept going and got the weather done. And at the end I said to him, "You told me it

wasn't going to bite!" 'And he said, "Yes, but if I'd told you it might, you would never have held it, would you?" So there's that kind of stuff going on.

WL:

The thing about Jenny Woodward, though, is that she is a consummate presenter. And why wouldn't she be? I mean, she had studied performing arts, she'd always wanted to be an actor; a performer. And while she is genuinely playing herself on TV there is an aspect of performance to it.

JW:

While I'm very much me, and what you see is what you get, because it's in that very tight timeframe, it is a heightened version of me, I suppose. So yes, it is a performance to a certain degree. And at the end of it, you think, "Oh, that went well!" Or sometimes you think, "Oh, I wish I could do that again."

WL:

And in a lot of ways, she said her role, presenting the weather each night on the ABC satisfied her performing aspirations.

JW:

Absolutely. Yes, it does scratch that itch, having that performance every night. And I know it sounds corny and cheesy, but when I go into the studio every night, there's always that little sort of, you know, buzz. Because, you know, I'm thinking, "Oh, I'm going in to do it now." And all of the work that you've done for the previous couple of hours, it all comes down to this 2 and a half minutes.

MUSIC

WL:

Still, her dream of being on stage persisted. Her son, Alex, shared Jenny's dream of becoming an actor too. He's performed on stage in *Book of Mormon*, *Pirates of Penzance*, *Grease*. He's a producer as well. So, a few years ago, she kind of started pestering Alex.

JW:

And I kept saying to him, "Well Alex, surely there's a part for me? You know, you must have a part for me. Have you got a part for me in this? Why don't you find a play that would have a part for me?" (laughs)

WL:

Finally, in 2016, her persistence paid off. Alex was producing a pop-rock musical called *Bare*, that's B-A-R-E. It centres around two high school boys who fall in love with each other at a Catholic school. Jenny played one of their mothers.

JW:

You know, it was moderately terrifying because I had to sing as well, because it was a musical. So I took this small part, which was great. That was so wonderful for Alex to give me that opportunity.

WL:

Jenny loved it and she wanted to do more. She wanted to make the dream she'd had since childhood a reality. And this time, she wanted to have a bigger role. After the final performance of *Bare*, the cast got to talking. They were spit balling about what Jenny could do next.

JW:

And they said, "Well you should do a show with weather songs or something." And we chatted and I thought, Alex said to me, harshly, but probably quite rightly he said, "Mum, no one is going to come and see you sing." And I said (laughing), "Yeah, that's probably right Alex."

WL:

She is a capable singer, but it was never something she was going to make a career out of. Still, the idea of a show drawing on her decades-long career stuck with her. She talked through some of her ideas with Alex and with her friend, the journalist Karen Berkman. And together they came up with a concept for a one-woman show starring Jenny.

During this time though, Jenny had a health scare; she was hospitalised with an inflamed heart. She recovered, but the show was delayed another year thanks to COVID. Jenny sometimes questioned whether to even do it, and when that happened, her husband Doug was there.

DW:

And she would say, you know, "Should I do it? Should I do it? Should I do it?" And I've always said, "You should do it, you should do it. If you don't do this, you'll regret it. You know, whether you enjoy it at the time of doing it or not... doesn't matter. Because if you don't do it, when you're old and grey, you'll really regret you haven't done it." So I mean, I was very, I could say supportive or pushy, because I thought she should do it.

WL:

And so she did do it. Proclaiming “It’s Raining Jen!”, the show is called *Weathering Well* and debuted at the Powerhouse in April. It’s a mishmash of comedy, video, live music and plenty of funny and heartwarming tales from Jenny’s 35 years on TV. It toured around regional Queensland recently and is returning to South -East Queensland for a few more shows in August. Alex produced the show and despite what he said a few years ago, Jenny actually does sing some songs in it.

JW:

So I'm really excited about it because it has got that theatrical flavour about it, but it is still me.

WL:

And Doug got to go along with her on the regional tour.

DW:

And I had sort of said before I go, I said, “I’m going to watch every show.” And she said, “Oh God, you wouldn’t want to do that.” But in fact, I did watch every show. And every night I found myself getting a warm inner glow and a smile. Absolutely.

MUSIC

WL:

Once again, we can always count on Jenny Woodward to be a constant, familiar source of comfort and entertainment, but still a force brave enough to chase her dreams, even after all these years. Jenny has no plans to leave her job at the ABC, she’ll still be in our living rooms for a while yet. But after *Weathering Well* finishes up, she’ll no doubt sink her teeth into something else. She says it’s crucial she always has something on the go and has this bit of homespun wisdom that she got from her mum.

JW:

My mother who lived to 98 and three quarters.... she always had something to look forward to. She was always busy; she always had a plan. She was going to be doing this or she was going to go there, or she was going to see that person. And my mother was delivering Meals on Wheels into her 80s and she was part of the pastoral group at the church until she turned 90 – going out to see the old and infirm (laughs). And she said, “Well, I’ve told them I’m not going to do it anymore.” She said, “It’s my 90th birthday. And I think it’s actually, I’ve done enough and so I told them that I was 90 now and I wasn’t doing it anymore.” And they all said, “Oh my god, we didn’t know you

were so old! Sit down and have a cup of tea, put your feet up.” So, I think I get that from my mother. And my father was the same, he had lots of projects on the go. And my father died relatively young, at 67. And I think I have this sense of urgency that, you know, you don't know how much time you're gonna get, I mean, I might be lucky, and I might get what Mum had, but I might not. And so, we've only got this finite time, you just gotta make the most of it and do everything. I don't want to be sitting there, you know, in the old people's home and thinking, “I wish I had done that” or “I wish I hadn't been too afraid to do that.”

MUSIC

WL:

There's a saying that common sense is not so common and maybe Jenny's ordinariness isn't so ordinary after all.

END

Where I Belong is brought to you by Museum of Brisbane. To learn more about this episode and the Museum head to museumofbrisbane.com.au

A very special thanks to Louise Martin-Chew and to Dylan Ransom-Hughes for doing the final mix on all of these episodes.

Where I Belong is written and produced on Turrabul and Yaggera land by me, Wendy Love. Museum of Brisbane acknowledges the Traditional Owners of this land and pays its respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

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