Marvellous Margaret

MARGARET ‘MUG’ LYTLE inspired some of Melbourne’s leading artists. Now they’re putting on a show in her honour, writes JOANNE SIM

When it came to choosing a school for his children back in the 1970s, Ray Magid suggested to his wife that they look into Preshil in Kew, where he’d spent a few years during his primary education in the late 1940s. He wondered at the time whether the headmistress Margaret Lytle would still be alive, as his childhood memories were of a “very old lady”.

After one visit, his wife fell in love with the school and the decision was made; joining Magid’s family to Preshil for the next 40-plus years. And yes, the headmistress was very much still there.

As a child, Lytle couldn’t have realised that the “old” woman, better known as “Mug” by the students, was much more than just a headmistress. Lytle’s aunt – Margaret (Greta) Lytle – began Preshil School in August 1931, with just five students whom she taught in her living room. The school’s motto was “courage”.

After completing her teachers training, Lytle joined her aunt at the school and after Greta’s death in 1944, became headmistress at the age of 32 – a position she would hold for the next 50 years. Magid has a long personal association with the progressive school: as a student, parent, board member, business manager and now, as one of Lytle’s legal guardians. As a trustee of the Margaret Lytle Foundation, he has helped organise a concert to honour Lytle and celebrate her recent 100th birthday.

The concert at the Melbourne Recital Centre will feature performances by many talented former Preshil students including Glace Bowitch, Timpan Orange, Benjamin Martin, Louise Breen and Tessa Duddy. It’s also an opportunity to raise funds for the foundation, which was set up several years ago to look after Lytle, who never married or had children of her own, instead dedicating her life to the school.

“One of her great gifts to Preshil was to always give everything to the school,” Magid says. “I don’t think she realised she would live to over 100, so money became an issue in looking after her.”

From all accounts Lytle was a dominating, yet much-loved figure during her Preshil teaching days. Drawing on the philosophies of great educators such as Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner, she was a passionate and dynamic educator who firmly believed in learning through creativity and play. The first progressive school in Australia, Preshil took the approach of treating children as active rather than passive receivers of learning. And more than 80 years on, it took a personality as strong as Lytles to