

Celebrating Independence

Meet ten Super Agers
aged 85+
living life independently



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Introduction

This resource introduces you to ten individuals, who are aged 85 and older, who are role models for ageing independently. There are many ways we can stay independent as we get older and these individuals share with us their thoughts and practices that have helped them to stay independent.

Each individual featured here has used, or is using, a Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) service to help them to stay independent. CHSP services, such as community transport, social support, domestic assistance and home modifications, offer a basic level of support to help older Australians remain living independently in their home. The individuals you will meet teach us the attitudes and behaviours that can support independence as we get older. The CHSP is provided under a guiding philosophy of wellness. These individuals embody wellness principles and teach us how we can do the same.

These stories were collected from March to June 2021. Anita Mulally of 85 Prime was contracted by the MDS Training Sector Support Development and Training Project with funding from the Australian Government's Commonwealth Home Support Program. The Sector Support Development and Training Project is tasked with supporting CHSP providers to embed wellness and reablement principles in their service delivery. Meeting role models who are aged 85 and older who live by the principles of wellness show us how it can be done. Their stories help us all to see that age is not a reason to give up on being independent.



Australian Government

Department of Health

1. Bea, 88



There's a sparkle in Bea's eye that is quietly taking my measure as she greets me at her door. She has been defying odds since early childhood, overcoming childhood illness including tuberculosis. She is still defiant against the stereotypes of ageing and continues to work, although she doesn't feel like it is work. She has been teaching music for 70 years. She calls herself a, 'Delinquent geriatric,' and when I am shocked by this and nervously laugh at her

turn of phrase she says, 'I don't know what is funny about that, let's be honest about it. **Well I am a geriatric, a delinquent geriatric.**'

And that sets the tone for a refreshingly honest conversation about getting older and staying independent. At 88, Bea lives alone after her husband Mac died some years ago. She says she is lucky but after our chat I know that it is not luck, but an ability to adapt to getting older that has kept her independent. Bea has generously shared how she thinks and what she does that has helped her to stay independent. She has a little help from the Commonwealth Home Support Program domestic assistance service but even the way she uses that help contributes to her independence. Here is what Bea has to say about adapting to getting older and staying independent.

'I have a lot of things I have had to alter, not that I have had to give up.

Take my house cleaning for instance. In years gone by the whole house would be done in one day. Wednesday is housecleaning day and everything is done. The house still must be cleaned but it can't be done in one day anymore. It has to be one room maybe, and if necessary, a section of one room, but it doesn't mean that you can't do it. It just means that you have had to change the way that you do it. I have a cleaner come once a fortnight through the system. My helper is brilliant with the vacuuming but I don't want anything else. She is willing and asks me if I want her to do anything else, but I say no because I want to do it my way. I would hate to be totally reliant on anybody for anything, and pray that never does happen to me. The only thing that would ever stop me if my brain went, I can't control that. But if my brain still continues to function I will find a way. Because there is a way to be found, you just have to have the will to find it, and ***be prepared to do things differently, but still do them.***

'That's the biggest thing in all of this – don't think that you have reached the end of anything. You haven't reached the end of anything. There is still more that you can do, more that you can achieve and more that you can learn, about anything at all. ***There must be something in everybody's life that interests them.*** It can be as simple as housework.

Keep your interests going and aim at perfection, because perfection only exists in the life of fools. Only a fool can think that they can reach perfection, but you can be very good.

‘I can’t see myself ever being without music. I don’t spend a lot of time at it anymore, but the time I do spend at it I enjoy. My harmony was never very good so I am thinking that I will go back to studying harmony.’ (*Is that singing?*) ‘No, that’s written work.’ (*So there is more to learn for you Bea after more than 70 years?*) ‘Oh God yes, if only I knew half of it. There is a lot more there. The only thing is I think, “What will I do with it?” But I will go back to it, soon, because the urge is getting stronger that I really do want to understand harmony better than I understand it now. It’s not going to do me any good, I’ll never use it, but I will have the satisfaction of having mastered it.

‘You can’t help that your body changes, you have physical changes. You have to learn how to manage those changes and they are all manageable. **Every single thing is manageable, you just have to find the way.** I have a current example – three weeks ago I had a nasty fall in the bathroom. I didn’t break anything. I just knocked myself around. I am still not completely out of pain yet but I am good. But for two weeks afterwards I could barely move.’ (*You live alone, you can’t move, how did you not panic?*) ‘Ok, things were rough, very rough and various suggestions came up from friends as to how I was to handle this – wheelchairs and God knows what. There is plenty of furniture I can get from one piece to another. I crawled around, but it’s over now. It’s a passage in time I don’t want to re-live, it was ghastly. I was in a lot of pain and I did a lot of yelling and it was all atonal, none of it musical whatsoever. I’m over it now though. You have got to make up your mind. **You can make up your mind one of two ways – you can either say, “Well this is the end of me, I am now incapable, I am frail, I am fragile.” Or you can say, “This is a bit disbuggerous, but I will find a way around it.”** I now have a bath chair in there and it has the handles on the side and a back on it. It annoys the hell out of me, I don’t sit on it, I do not like it, I just push it to the back, but it is useful. But that was the solution, better than having someone come and help me to shower. It’s a safety measure and I am not letting my pride stop me from being safe.

‘If anything you get better as you get older. Nobody can take away the knowledge that you have gained. That is with you forever and it’s something that even the government can’t touch, and they can’t tax it either. So, if you keep remembering that, that knowledge is still with you, plus the extra knowledge you are about to gain because you are looking at a different set of circumstances, so you are going to gain new knowledge, then how can you be that much worse off? I look at it this way, **I am more of value now than I was 10 years ago because I have 10 years experience behind me.** So, instead of thinking that my knowledge and my usefulness is diminishing I tend to think it is increasing and as far as I am concerned I have a lot to offer, as everybody that we are talking about here [the over 85s] has to offer, they just don’t always see it. The big thing is, don’t let the world try to convince you otherwise. And the world does try to convince you otherwise but I won’t play that game.

'You have to acknowledge your age, but you don't have to accept it. You have to be realistic, you can't suddenly think you are a spring chicken when you are not. You have to acknowledge that there are things now, not that you can't do, but that you have to do differently. That's a big thing. Accept that. ***Don't accept that you can't do it, but that you have to do it differently.*** I acknowledge my age, I acknowledge the fact that I am slower now than I was. Although I am still a lot faster than a lot of young people but I am slower than I was. I had to do a plane trip a few years ago. I had to walk out to the plane on the tarmac and there were a lot of stairs going up to the plane. I thought, "This is going to be fun," I knew I was going to be slow. So I said to the people behind me to go ahead and I went slowly. That's what I mean by accepting it, I knew I was going to be slow and aggravate the people behind me, but I didn't say I couldn't do it, I was slow and I let the people behind me pass me.

'Acknowledge the situation but don't accept it. Acknowledge the situation, right I can't do much about that. I can't do much about growing older, I can't stop it, I can't halt it, I can't reverse it in any shape or form, but ***the limitations that are there are society's limitations. They are not legit.*** I love it when I hear that the oldies should be off the road, I have a medical once a year to prove I am capable of being here on the road, you don't. Here we come to adapting again, I decided for myself that at 85 I was going to opt for a modified license. [Reduced KM]. I am ok with my driving but I am not happy driving with the rest of them so I keep it local to driving around here. So I then had everything centralised as much as possible to my local area, like doctor and dentist and optometrist. I could get to the train station to get anywhere further I needed to be. My neighbour and friends give me a lift when I need it if I can't get there myself.

'Adapting with shopping, instead of getting someone to go for me, I go when its quiet. I go early or at lunch time. Lunch time is a good time, the Mums have got the kids to school and done their shop and they are home again, the workers are gone and its pretty quiet. I will never go in the peak times. I shop in bulk. I don't buy one or two I buy a dozen, of course you have to have the storage to do this.

'I can't be bothered to sit there woe is me, I can't be bothered with that. I can get down and get depressed and can think why don't I feel well, I am tired of this. I get all those normal feelings. But there is no time for me to be bothered by this. I am incredibly lucky and I know that. I look around me and I think God I am blessed, I've got everything I need. Not everything I want, but certainly everything I need. I have more comforts in my life than I think a lot of people have. A lot of that is because of forethought. Like my bed, its electric. Mac and I got them for our retirement, mainly because we had breathing problems, but what a blessing when my back was bad. ***You have to make your home suit you when you get older.*** We used to live at the other home on the property and we built this home planning everything around eventualities for getting older. It's all designed for a walking frame and a wheelchair should it ever need that, or space for a second person to help. I have a good life.

2. Isobel, 100



Just when I'd settled myself in all cosy for a chat to Isobel who is 100 years old, she had me up on my feet following along with exercises that she does every day. She was correcting my form, 'Chin in, don't stick your chin out,' and when I complained the exercises hurt my shoulders, she tells me, 'Well, do more exercises!'

She never married. 'I was lucky. I think so. Early on, I wanted to, well I met about three men that I could have, but things happen. But you know if I had married any of the men I fell in love with they would have been utter disasters. Looking back at it they would not have worked. And then you break up and all the mess you get into. I have no complications like that. Isobel has no children although she has taught many children all over the world. In her working life she was a teacher and established schools in third world countries. She has lived and taught in many countries including Africa, West Indies and Papua New Guinea. But today we are here to learn how she has stayed independent at the age of 100.

'I do yoga every day on the floor. Down here,' she points to the floor in front of her chair. 'I learned it from Giovanni in Italy when we went for the retreats for the meditation when I was 70. In the morning we'd meditate and then after breakfast we'd do the yoga. I love physical training, sport - perhaps that is why I am healthy. I used to teach sport as well as English and geography. ***Exercise is very important, walking and or yoga every day, even now I'm 100.*** If I haven't walked, I try very hard to do the yoga, at least I can come and do that. I don't keep to the rule every single day, something might happen and I just can't do it, but then you don't give up, you go on doing it the next day.

'Another thing that is very important is meditation. My close friend Frances, who I lived and travelled the world with, died when I was 70. Soon after that I came to know of WCCM -World Community for Christian Meditation. It's very important, because I wouldn't be here at 100 without it, I don't think. It changed my life and still is [changing my life]. Daily meditation, twice a day, early in the morning and between 5 and 6 in the evening, 20 minutes. I find the morning meditation sets me for the day and the evening one is a nice folding up of the day. Meditation is simple as ABC, but not easy. Because the minute you sit to meditate, anybody will tell you, you mean to just sit quietly, immediately your ego, your false self, starts thinking, "Where did I put the keys?", "Where did I do this?", "Do you remember when you were in Italy doing this?", "Do you remember when you were doing ...?" you know. All those diversions.

'I run a meditation group you see. I've had it for 25 years. People leave, quite a few drop out, they can't cope with it, but always some have gone on. Brother Laurence says, "Don't read about it, just launch in." It's not a tool to be narrow minded about it, having to

be Christian, he says there are many roads up the mountain, and there are. You don't have to talk about religion, you don't necessarily have to be religious. I belong to the World Community which is a very big wonderful community. They have retreats in Italy. So I would go to Italy for a week retreat and I met very interesting people there. I am still in touch with some of them. And Father Laurence Freeman who's the head of it, he would run the retreats.

'My aim is always to walk somewhere every day, unless it's pouring rain. I have to have more stops than I did, you get tired. So I sit on people's walls, that's how you get to know people. We always had a dog when Frances was alive. So I'd go on long walks every day up the mountain. It's quite a climb, loved it. I love mountains and mountain climbing. You can't do what you used to do. I couldn't climb up the mountain now. I try to walk, it's getting less, but try to walk about ½ a mile a day. I will try every day to go. I take my stick and I go slowly, take breaks and talk with people I meet on the way. Walking is very important I think. I always have the stick, everywhere I go when I walk I use it. I can walk without it, but it's far better to have it and most women are so proud they won't have a stick, it makes them look old. But that stick is wonderful.'

Hearing about Isobel's yoga and walking you might think she has no health problems. But super agers are as tough as they come and Isobel explains what it is like to live in a body that is 100 years old. 'I kept saying in the year before I turned 100, "I don't want to live to be 100," and I literally meant it. I did not want to live to be 100, but there I am. It gets harder. ***Your body breaks up and every morning when I wake up I wonder which part of me won't work today.*** I have permanent dizziness, for 2 and a half years I have been permanently dizzy, nobody can find a cure. I went to the hospital in Sydney, I was there a day and they turned me upside down and did this and that and the other. They didn't find a cure. So when I get up I have to look up and open my eyes wide. I stand up, I hold my head up high, and I open my eyes wide and then get going. I still get dizzy but it's not as bad, you learn to live with it. I taught myself that, it's the only thing that gets me going. I suppose it is to do with age.

'You see with my body, there is this shoulder, there's this dizziness, my eyes are deteriorating, I broke this ankle in 2004 and it has acute arthritis in it. I have a pin in my leg, I broke my wrist, some of my fingers are contracted. So physically you are not as strong, and you deteriorate.' You see I am not bent over, I am very upright. The best exercise I've found to get you going, that I knew from long ago, is to say:

"Perhaps" - stand up, be very firm, arms by your side, put your chin in, hold your head up, pull your tummy in and lift your shoulders up, right up;

"Who knows" - now put your elbows right into your waist and lift your hand up by your shoulders;

"Maybe" - relax and slump forward slightly, let your hands and arms dangle loosely down.'

Another reason that Isobel is still alive at 100 is because she will get a second opinion if she doesn't think her doctor or specialist is helping. 'I nearly died, about 5 years ago. I had mesenteric ischemia, which you've probably never heard of, nor had anybody here. I couldn't eat solids, I could drink, but if I tried to eat any solid I just wanted to be sick. This went on and I saw a specialist from Sydney, and he kept saying, "It's just gastric that you've got," did nothing. A friend of mine goes to another doctor, I said, **"I think I'm going to get a second opinion from him."** This doctor has two sons who are doctors in America. One of them got in touch with the Mayo clinic. Straight away they sent back and said this person has mesenteric ischemia, which is a blockage of the artery feeding the gut. Because the artery was almost blocked, no food could go down. By sheer good fortune I was able to see another specialist from Sydney. He looked me up and down and said, "If I don't do something with you very quickly you'll die." He said, "I did treat a person before who had a severe stroke as a result." I said, "I'll risk the stroke - go ahead." So he put me into hospital and I was operated on that same day. He came in that night, my arm was black and blue because he'd had to do the surgery through there and he laughed and said, "Well Isobel, we made it, just. If I hadn't done that, I don't know that you'd be sitting up here smiling at me."

Although Isobel lives alone and has no family in Australia, you could not say she is isolated. She says, 'I have far more friends overseas than I have here, because I have lived and worked overseas so much,' and she phones them frequently. She makes friends easily wherever she goes, whether it's walking down her street, or taking a class. She collects friends from her many interests and is good at staying in contact. Isobel also says she often writes to authors of books she enjoys and even TV shows she has enjoyed and keeps in touch with these people. 'I think some people are extroverts and talk easily to strangers, others are very reticent and won't talk. **You see, I know everybody down that road. They all know me, because we talk. You meet new people every day.** I met a woman a few months ago when we could only go out and walk during this lockdown thing. She was Dutch, a lovely person and oh we got on like a house on fire. I find it very easy to talk to people. I keep in touch by phone with a great many people.'

Isobel has great help from many of her neighbours. She mentions three couples and two men in their 70s who are her friends and very supportive. She sees it like this: 'Well, you live with the people around you. You see, I am so fortunate in that I have got wonderful neighbours. I've had various physical ailments, accidents and illness but I've survived it all. When I was getting better from mesenteric ischemia the doctor said, "Oh good Isobel, you're putting on weight, what you need is a boyfriend," and I said to him, **"Oh don't worry doctor, I have two boyfriends."** I am very grateful for them helping. Getting food and occasional doctors' visits, [I have] marvellous neighbours.

'That's where I am so blessed. There is one who does all my shopping. But when Covid started my friends said I wasn't to go down to the supermarket. Being old, they said, you could pick it up, so I don't go.' (*You don't mind that, not going to the shop?*) 'Oh I hate it [shopping], I didn't like shopping anyhow. I mean I did it as a necessity but it was no pleasure. One friend always keeps a list and then he brings it in every so often. I'm very

lucky you see. We go out two or three times a week in the afternoon. He'll go buy a take away cappuccino and some little thing, I sit in the car. At the beginning we all wore masks, but we don't now up here. We drive to a lovely spot, above the lake here, and we park the car, and look down over the lake, and drink our cappuccino and eat our stuff and then we talk, and sometimes argue. As I said in my book, we have to agree to differ. He accepts what I think but he doesn't agree with everything. Wait until you see my book that I wrote. My friend got me to write it when I was 99. He's a very good photographer. He says I need to add another chapter because I am now 100. It's about where I have travelled and everything I ever did. I have a lending copy but it's out. I write down who has got it. It has gone everywhere. It went to America and went to Canada and England, of course.' Isobel is originally from England.

Regarding Covid 19, Isobel says, 'This Covid thing, I think somehow there may be a reason behind it. I think it's to wake people up. Because honestly, the present generation's love of money, the love of money is the root of all evil. And it is never satisfied. People who have [money] are always spiralling up. We need to keep the rules and consider other people and avoid unnecessary mixing. You've got to. That's where it's all spreading. Keep the rule and the rules are, keep this much distance from a person. I said when Covid came I was going to do two things. An hour of reading poetry and an hour of doing Italian every day. I'm afraid I haven't kept it up. But I'll go back to it. I'm very good at quoting. I just love poetry and I am always quoting bits of poetry. I have done Italian language classes here and made some good friends doing that as well.'

One philosophy Isobel lives by is to '***Live a day at a time. Don't worry about a future that may never happen.*** You worry about things that are going to happen and then they don't happen, so what's the point of worrying about them. Live a day at a time and don't worry about a hypothetical future, or overplan in detail what you are going to do. Just live a day at a time. Get up in the morning - this is the day - and I am living a day at a time and I don't know what is going to happen. I might be dead by tomorrow. You plan ultimately, but you don't stand up and think, oh I've got to do this, oh I should be doing this. No, get up, this is the day which the Lord hath made, let us be glad and rejoice in it. Well, that's what I do. Memories of the good old days are good, remembering back what I did, but ***don't try to live in the past too much or you won't live your present time.*** Don't keep saying I used to do this, oh it was wonderful when I went somewhere. No, today. You've got to live in the present. Yesterday is history, most of it was wonderful, I'd like to have some of it back again but I can't have it, it's history. Tomorrow is a mystery, well you don't know what is going to happen, it might be good, it might be bad, but you just take it. Today, that's why I say get up in the morning and say, "Live a day at a time". Today is a gift, that's why we call it the present. You see the gift in the present.'

3. Jeanette, 85



Jeanette has 25 years of experience in being retired. She is 85 years of age and, 'Just starting on this 85 year old bit, but my entry into it is how I intend to go [on]. I don't want to change it until it just gradually happens.' Jeanette is cheerful and positive which I learn is partly due to the way she has turned fund raising for causes that are close to her heart into a lifestyle. She says she was told, 'Don't look at the big picture because it's too big and you'll be turned off but look for what one person can do for another and multiply it by all those who are interested and that's how we help the world.' She explains, 'This is why older folk, if they haven't got an interest, don't have that joy in their life. They sit and they think of themselves rather than somebody else. **What can you do for somebody?** We've been involved in it for years. All the things that you can do for somebody else. It's lovely. You do it too darling. Do it. **Get out and do something for somebody.** I couldn't go to Ethiopia and help over there. But if I can make some jam here and sell it, it makes me able to use my talents to do things that I can't go and do.'

The two causes Jeanette and her husband of 60 years, Ron (who passed away early in 2020) support are the Catherine Hamlin Foundation and World Vision. The Catherine Hamlin Foundation helps women in Ethiopia who have suffered childbirth injury - obstetric fistula. Jeanette had a difficult child birth with her first son and recognises that without having had excellent treatment in Australia at the time, she would not have done as well. Her other beloved cause is World Vision and the various programs they provide such as sponsoring children, preschool in the West Kimberley region for indigenous children and World Food Aid. **'I just feel that I am here to tell people about the things that I support. And it makes me happy to be able to spread the word.** There's a lot of World Vision stuff goes on in Australia and we don't know about it. I raise funds to do it. I make jam, about 16 varieties. \$11 000 I made last year with jam and things. Ron and I used to have market stalls but now I have jam in 4 different places. They just put [out] a box of my jam and one of those flyers. One place has raised \$12 000 or \$13 000 over the time they have been doing it. Half [goes] to the [Catherine Hamlin] Fistula Hospital and half to World Vision. Once a year, the World Food Aid program through World Vision multiplies what you can give. Last year it was 18 x what you were [able to give] and I was able to give \$3 000 for that. Once you get involved in those aid agencies the work is just amazing.'

Jeanette also supports other initiatives in her community and around the world. 'I've got a little knitting group and we've got two [kids] in our little knitting group that we sponsor. We knit squares for rugs and we send rugs to the nursing homes. I've got ladies that crochet hats with a little flower on the side, instead of a beanie. They're a little bit more upmarket and I knit men's beanies with cables in them. Others knit mittens and scarves and I knit collar scarves that you tuck in just the neck. The BDCU bank put my craft and things in [to sell].

Tea cosies and my hand towels and the hats and bits and pieces as well as a box with all the jams in it. Did you ever hear of fish and chips jumpers? Twenty odd years ago in Africa the babies were being taken home from hospital in newspaper because they're so poor. And all over the world, people were suddenly aware of this and they started to knit little jumpers to take the babies home in. So these little jumpers have been knitted by the thousands all over the world. They're just a little jumper, and you see, on a new born baby they just go on and you can change the nappy at the bottom. I'll come home and there will be a little bag on the door knob from ladies here that have knitted me a little bag full.

'The benefit you get out of it is the joy of doing it. I get joy in getting to pick the colours for the tea cosies. If you put a price on them that people will buy, then it multiplies doesn't it? If you've got it sitting on a shelf and it doesn't sell, why did you do it? And people say, "Oh, it's slave labour." I said, "No it's not, I enjoy it". This is another one of the crocheted rugs I do. This is for people in the nursing home. They can sit in a wheelchair and it doesn't dangle around under the wheels. So there is always something to do. You see, I have that second bedroom in there absolutely full of stuff; rugs to take to nursing homes that the ladies have done, little jumpers that we knit for Fiji. If we all think of how blessed we are, when you look at other countries, think of your blessings, and think of how we can share that joy that we've got with others. ***Just to do it. Because we are not just here on our own in this world. We are here to share, to make it for everybody.***

'Every morning when you wake up, you've got the whole day ahead of you to do the best you can with it. It's up to you. You wake up in the morning, it's your day. You're the one that's in charge. Nobody can make that day for you. You're the one who has to do it. That's what life's about. If you don't make it and you get to the end of the day and think, "Well, I really didn't make much of that day," well, you've got another one tomorrow. What you do with it is up to you. There's nobody else. A lot of them just sit around and wait for the world to come to them, well it doesn't. You've got to get out there into it. And I've done it for years. Get up in the morning and think, "What have I got to do today?" That day is not touched yet. By the end of the day if I haven't got it done well, there's another day, I'll put it into the next one or whenever. And if it doesn't get done it doesn't get done. Sorry. I mean you can't eat off the floor in my place, I vacuum when I can.'

In her early retirement years Jeanette and Ron had leadership roles in different community associations. 'We'd had an interest in the Community Association in Colo Vale where he was the President and I was the Treasurer. We'd been involved in Church activities all our lives so we understood organisations and the structures. And that is why organisations are failing, because people don't know [about the constitution rules for associations]. You see, I grew up in those girl's groups that were structured and you had a treasurer and you had a secretary and all those things. Well now, Probus Clubs are closing because they can't get people to do the committee work. We've always been part of making sure what we were in worked. And if you're not prepared to make it work you are not as committed as you should be to what you are involved in.

'Ron and I started two Probus Clubs. We started one here in the Highlands, after he retired. There was a notice in the paper. There was a men's group in Bowral who wanted to start up a combined group so they could take their wives. So off we went to the interest group. When he walked in the door somebody said, "Oh I am glad you're here, you can be the first President." You've got to have people in an organisation to start it that does that. Well then, I was the first Treasurer wasn't I? So, we started that and that happened for about 9 years. We got 120 [members] and more and there were waiting lists so we said, "Hey, we could drop off the twig with people on the waiting list before that happens." So, 9 of us started, had another group meeting, so we formed Nattai and Nattai's been going since 2003. And we've got around about 70 to 80 [members]. **Interconnection is what it is all about.**

'I wrote three little books about Colo Vale when we lived there. I went there and I said, "I want to know the history of the place." Well, people start these little places, little villages, and how did it all come about and what struggles did they have? I did one [book] on 10 years of the Probus Club [we started] so they knew what we had done, so that new people knew what the background was. **Be interested in what's out there. Interest yourself.** I just love history and I loved social history of where I live, and I need to know. You don't just live in a house and that's all it is. You live in an area. You live in a country. You live in the places that make the place where you live. **You've got to be interested in things.** The facilities are there, we've got libraries that have got massive amounts of social history. Make the time to go and look. Be interested in knowing what is made [there] and what is around. If you see a little old building or something, go to the library, if you've got a minute, and see if you can find out about it.'

It has been 16 months since Ron has passed away and I am curious how Jeanette is not upset when she talks about him, after they were married for so long. I ask Jeanette how she has coped. 'You have your days. I've just kept on doing the things that we both always did together. And I've been so busy. I've been busier because I've had to do what he did as well. See, we shared everything and that's what I miss so much, because he was under my elbow and screwed the lids on the jams and he washed up. And I can see him sitting there saying, "I don't know, you always make a batch of jam that I haven't got the labels cut up for." And it was true because when I sit down now I've made a batch of jam and the labels aren't cut up and I have to cut it up. **Don't change your life, don't change your life because your partner's gone, just continue it.** Do the things you did together so that you can remember them. He's still with me. **He's still with me in the things I do, because we did them for so long.** But I'm still a couple, he is part of me, we were a partnership for 61 years. You can't forget that, can you? It's just part of you, it's just your life. That's the way I've looked at it. I know others don't do it that way.

'I find the hardest thing probably [is] I don't drive and have never driven. So it means that I have to arrange transport to anything I need to do through Community Transport or a taxi or ask a friend. You've got Community Transport, which is a blessing. They're lovely people. Some of the drivers are delightful and they're so caring. I can use that and I can use

the taxi service. All you have to do is make the very most of them and be thankful for them because some places don't have them. ***You don't have to stay home.*** Although I did find that Covid was wonderful for me because I could do things at home. The lockdown part of Covid was good for me at that time. I think I'd been flat out.

'During covid I was blessed again with lovely people who wanted to shop for me. In my knitting group I've got a younger woman, about 41 or 42, she works and she used to cook things for my stalls when I had them. She sent out an email and she said, "In covid, if you want somebody to do your shopping for you, I'd be prepared to do it, let me know." Well, she's a lovely friend, she pops in once a week. "Mother Hubbard," she calls me, because I've got a cupboard [full of home made jams]. One of the ladies who is a receptionist at a place that sells my jam calls in on her way home from work and she'll get me things at the shops. She gets me to look up all the specials and if there is anything I want her to get for me she says, "I'll have some of that too.'" *(So you're helping her too?)* 'Yes, so she's helping me and she can talk to me on her way home, and that helps her too.'

(So this is how it's done? From the different interests and groups you meet connections that then can help you with different things. You don't sit at home feeling lonely, angry at your family because they haven't visited you?) 'Oh no, no. You know they've got their lives. They know as long as you're healthy and you're happy, they're happy. "Mrs Have-A-Chat," they call me. Life is wonderful, it truly is wonderful, if you look for the best, that's what it is.'

4. Freda, 87



Freda, who is 87, lives in a small village called Hill Top in NSW. If you are a 'Hill Topian' there is a good chance you already know Freda. Her family has lived here for a long time. Her Grandfather, who immigrated from Lebanon, owned the local grocery shop back in the day. She describes herself as, 'An honorary Aboriginal naturalised Australian Lebanese. I was born in Lebanon. I left Lebanon when I was 4 years of age in 1938.' She still speaks Arabic and can cook up a feast. Her hands have the shakes but this didn't stop her chopping up beautiful salads for us to share with another friend of hers who joined us for lunch. When I first arrived, Freda told me to make myself at home. She showed me where the tea, coffee, cups and plates were and told me to help myself. There was various types of coffee, teas and sugar. Here is a lady who is used to entertaining. It wasn't easy to make a time to meet with Freda, she's busy most of the time. She has a weekly routine which keeps her socialising and active and she shared the practical details of what she thinks and does that has helped her to stay independent at the age of 87.

Freda is an expert at the retired life, having been retired for over 40 years. She worked very hard with her husband, when he was alive, and they owned a grocery shop in Sydney for 28 years. They raised 5 sons and a couple of nieces as well. Family is very important to her and she counted over 200 members of her clan. Weekends are reserved for family who visit when they are not working. I asked how she can remember their names. She answers, 'I put them on my calendar and every year, I write out all the important dates on my [new] calendar.' I ask if her sons try to boss her around and she says, 'They wouldn't dare. I've had a lovely, lovely family, one that understood me.'

She has been volunteering for different causes since the age of 15 and still volunteers today. She volunteers with the Rural Fire Service and helps in the canteen each fortnight. She says, 'My Mum and Dad both belonged to the bush fire brigade. I'm still in it now, we're doing catering now. I wouldn't be able to get up on those trucks anymore. ***Just because you got your OBE [Over Bloody Eighty], it doesn't mean you've got to ferment. Why should you ferment when you've got so much life to give and so much help to give?*** So we keep ourselves busy don't we? There's people out there like me, all our volunteers. I can name 20 people that do the same thing.'

The other fortnight Freda goes to the Aboriginal Centre in Mittagong. 'I've been going to the Aboriginal [centre] since '96 or something. But before that I had connections with the Aboriginal people down in Sydney. How stupid can people be? Just because their skin is a different colour. They've still got the same blood and the same everything as everyone else has. You'd be surprised how they have mistreated the Aboriginals in this country. You'd be surprised. You think America is bad. So, Australia is just as bad, truly, I have witnessed it myself. ***Why stay at home and ferment?*** This is what I keep telling you, ***why stay at***

home when there are so many people that need your help. They're helping you and you're helping them.'

On another day of the week Freda goes to a Social Support Group. 'The Community Transport picks you up from your home and takes you down to the centre where you have morning tea. You'll do your thing, like we had trivia last week, next week they're going to teach us how to use the mobile phones and get the best out of mobile phones. You might get the Red Cross coming out to talk to you about different things. You might get the Fire Brigade coming out to tell you to be prepared with this and that. Every now and again you get to make your own jewellery over there, a bit of craft and a bit of this that and everything else. They get your brains going with the trivia and other things like that. Then they give you a lunch, a two course lunch and then they bring you home again. **The socialising part is the best part, because if you stay at home all you see is blank walls.** It's a very costly thing though,' she says with a cheeky smile, 'Yes it costs money, it costs you \$10 for the day. Now if you can't pay \$10 for the day what's wrong with you? You meet the group, you meet people. You get out of your own section. "Oh, I've got a headache, I've got an ache or whatever it is." You stay at home and concentrate on that. **When you go out, if it's social, you forget all your troubles and everything else.'**

Freda is good at connecting people in her community. On another day each week, 'I stay at home but I get people coming in for lunch....I host lunch. Live your life. Why ferment? As I keep telling you, you're not a wine or anything like that, truly.' Freda has a creative system to let some of her neighbours know that she wants to speak with them. They don't have a phone so she ties a specific coloured ribbon to her balcony which signals a particular person that she wants to speak with them. But Freda definitely has a phone. 'Sometimes I get over 20 phone calls in the day which is not unusual... I love it.' She also has a creative way of getting her hair done. Every six weeks we have the hairdresser comes and cuts our hair. Not only me but five or six other people come here and then we have morning tea, then we have lunch, making a day of it and then they all go home.'

Freda was also talking about a new community bathroom and laundry facility for people who are homeless that had recently opened in Bowral. 'I did not realise how many homeless people there were in this district. Not only Bowral, the Wingecarribee Shire, but Bowral is their drop off point. That's where they have put in the laundry and food and clothing. They can take their old clothes off and put them through the laundry and put new clothes on. They [the facility] want all clothes, it doesn't matter for men, women or children. So I am sure everybody has something that they can give out to them, which is what you should do to help the people around. All I'm doing is getting the Hill Topians to bring the clothes here. I've told our friends, and the ones that belong to the groups here, when the bus picks them up from their house and picks me up, bring them on the bus with them and then they can drop them off at my house. Then I'll ring up, tell them to come and pick them up from here. I don't know what they're going to do in the winter time. It's going to be so bad. It's freezing cold and there's so many homeless.'

On another day, 'I go on the shopping bus to Bowral. That's [with] Community Transport. I go every week, some go every 2 weeks, some go every month, it all depends. They pick me up from home here, they pick everyone else up. They drop people off at the Marketplace, then they drop you off at Bowral, you can choose whichever one you want to. If you want to go to Aldi they'll take you, wait for you and bring you back to Coles again. It's very good. We get there between 10:00 and 10:30 depending on how many people we have on the bus and then we leave there at 1:00 o'clock. They're fantastic, it's there for you to use. Usually, one of the helpers might go and get me a trolley. ***If you can do it on your own, why not do it on your own? Be very independent, you have to be.*** I gave up my license about 5 years ago.' (But that doesn't stop you?) 'No, well you've got Community Transport. You go down to Sydney, well they wait for you. Even a couple of years ago my sister-in-law passed away down at Wollongong. I got Community Transport to take me down there, they waited till after the funeral and after the wake. I said I'd be 3 or 4 hours, they were there waiting for me to pick me up and bring me home again. They're fantastic. ***There's things out there that you can use, use them or lose them.***'

Another day of the week Freda has help with her housework. 'I can't clean much anymore.' She also has help to mow the lawn and trim and tidy her garden. 'Well, they're there to help you so why don't you get the help?' Freda's health is not 100% but you wouldn't realise this when you hear how active she is. I was very interested to learn how she manages her health, both in her attitude and the practical things she does. 'I've had rheumatic fever twice. The rheumatic fever is a fever that cripples you all up. With the rheumatic fever they said that I would never be able to walk again. Thank God I can walk again and I could look after my family which was great. I didn't want anything else other than to be able to look after my family. And I got my wish. As you can see ***I eat very well, lots of fruit and vegetables.*** Tea and coffee, water. ***I have at least 8 glasses of water a day.***' (How do you fit in 8 glasses of water a day?) 'Well, you go and brush your teeth don't you? Why don't you have a glass of water after you brush your teeth? I'm taking my tablets, so you have one sip of water and have another tablet. By the time you've finished five tablets you've finished a bottle of water. Then you're coming from being outside, have a glass of water. I know I have tea and coffee as well but in between times I have water. I've got a bottle of water there. If I feel thirsty when I'm having lunch I'll have a drink of water. If you've got it next to you, as you can see this is the second bottle I'm onto today.'

I ask Freda about pain and how she manages that. '***Everyone has got aches and pains. Why let it rule you?*** By gosh I've got too much things to do haven't I? This is what I mean, why stay at home and say, "Oh I think I've got a headache, oh yeah I better lay down," what for? That's the way I feel. So what? Good God, I know my back aches, I do my exercises nearly every day. Trying to get up off the chair is like you need a crane to pick you up but you do it. Now, I am sorry to say, but a couple of weeks ago, I tried to get up off the toilet and I couldn't manage it. After that I got a chair for my toilet so that I can get up. I've got the sides on this [chair]. If I can't get up I use my arms to push me up. Why complain

about it? Oh yeah my heads sore, my back is sore. (*And you just don't let it stop you?*) 'No, why should it? I've got a massager there that I do that three times a day.'

I asked Freda about how she managed during COVID restrictions. 'I found it alright. No one was allowed to come near my place because I was too scared for them to get it, because I'm allergic to so many things. I crocheted, I did a lot of handiwork. I read and I tried to sort out some of the photos. I made these things for the glasses and made beads. I raised over \$200 for the Fire Brigade. I found stuff to do. The phone never stopped. You see, I am very lucky, I've got David [Freda's son] next door where I just tell him what I want and he'd get it for me so that was good.'

(*What advice would you give to people just retiring?*) '***Well live a life, don't ferment in your own house. Take things daily.*** Look in the mirror in the morning, "Hey, you're still here aren't you?", so this is it. What are you going to do today?' Freda also suggests phoning your local council to find out what your local area has to offer.

5. Eileen, 85



Eileen has around 30 years experience in being retired and enjoys living independently in her home at the age of 85. There is a lot of planning and thought that has gone into her ability to remain independent in her home. She has help from the Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP), privately paid services and family support. The help is not the whole story, Eileen's attitudes and practices have a lot to do with the way she gets the most out of her situation.

Eileen gives us the details so that we can learn how to do the same as she does. You don't have to be retired to take on some of the attitudes and strategies Eileen uses to stay independent. Her daughter, aged in her fifties, wrote in Eileen's 85th birthday card, 'Mum, you're an inspiration to us all,' and as Eileen says, ***'You've just got to have the will. You've just got to have the will to do it.'***

Walking is a big part of how Eileen stays healthy. 'I'm pretty steadfast on the walking because I've got the app on my phone that tells me how far I've walked and if I haven't walked and all the rest of it. [The app tells me] "You haven't done too much this week. You did more two weeks before." I do take notice of it. I'd say I'd walk 5 out of 7 [days]. In the morning I get up about 6:30 and I walk from about 7:00. ***You get up and think, "Ohhh, will I?" and I think, "Yes" and just go, and when I go I love it.*** It takes me about 50 minutes I suppose. By the time you come back and have a shower and have your breakfast I suppose it's about an hour and half out of your life. It's not good walking here, there is no footpath, but I do it, it's the only place to walk.' Eileen walks on the side of a very busy road. 'I've got horrible places to walk, but it's only determination. I am sensible enough to get right over on the side, and in the grass even, I have got to watch it. But no, I do, I love walking. But if I go shopping in Liverpool, I don't walk that morning. I walk right down to Westfields and walk around and come back and I've done more than I would have done walking that morning.'

Eileen's home is something that means a lot to her and maintaining her home is an enjoyable activity for her. Her husband of 50 years passed away 12 years ago and she has become an expert at maintaining her large family home. 'If I wanted to stay here, I had to do it, and there's only me that could do it. Everybody could do something for me, but on the whole, I had to do it. I'm not frightened here one bit, ***I'm not a bit nervous on my own because I know I've got lovely neighbours.*** I'm the oldest in the street, I know most of them in this street. My husband would help everybody to do everything, that's how we started with them. We've been here 41 years, they've all grown up with me. I'm their "Third Nanna", they call me. I go to all their birthday parties, it's special. That's why I don't want to leave here. We've got a really great neighbourhood, we all get on.'

Good neighbours are one of a few factors that have made it wise to stay in her family home and not downsize, as many do. 'My priority is my family and my house. I need this house because when they all come over from New Zealand I can accommodate. I love having that, that I've got that space for them. You know, I love the people around me and I get on so well with my daughter and son in law, I don't want to have to live with them. I don't mean I wouldn't live with them, I get on really well with them, but I like to have my own independence. I mean they lived here for two years and I've never had a bad word with my son in law to this day. ***I just want to have my own independence as long as I can.*** And I think that they appreciate that as well.'

Taking care of her home is something Eileen enjoys doing and she has figured out ways to keep her home well maintained. She does what she can and has a mix of privately paid and subsidised services, a small team, to help with the things she finds difficult. She has help to mow her lawn and someone who helps to trim the plants she can't while she does the rest of the garden that she can manage. She has help to clean the windows she can't reach and help with any painting if it's needed. 'If I want to stay here you've just got to afford it [the help] which I can. I haven't got a lot of money, but I can afford to do it'. If she needs more help, she is prepared to get more help, but she does pace herself these days. ***'I just do one little thing at a time now and it works. Everything is a little bit at a time.'*** For example, she tells herself, "'I'm going to do the nandina's today'", and I go round and do the littler shrubs. It's how I feel, like when I am out there I think, "Oh, I think I've done enough."

Wesley Mission helps with her housework each fortnight. 'Wesley Mission is just wonderful.' But Eileen doesn't sit around while they clean for her. 'So, what I do is I dust all the blinds and I do all the dusting and I do under the mats because she can just go over the top. I'll do downstairs and she does the bathroom and the kitchen and the vacuuming upstairs because that is a big job. She's wonderful, absolutely wonderful. ***I can still do the same that I was doing 5 years ago downstairs while she is doing upstairs.*** But I find the big things – like if you polish furniture – I do that another day. I don't try to do any of that on the day that she's coming. ***I just do one little thing at a time now, I spread it out and it works.'*** Wesley Mission also take Eileen to do her grocery shopping each fortnight. Having this help supports Eileen's relationships with her family who are available to help with things she can not get help with. 'That's why I've got somebody to go with me to shopping because she'd [her daughter] come over and we'd go grocery shopping. I didn't want that. I wanted us to be able to go out or her to come here and have lunch or talk here, that's what I wanted.' (*You didn't want to put her to work.*) 'No, but she does, I've always got something lined up for her. But I don't take advantage, no. No, I get help.'

Eileen has two other superpowers that have helped her to stay independent. One is her love of socialising. ***'I've always been a great socialiser, I love that.'*** The other is her ability to use transport services, whether it be Public Transport, Community Transport or friends and family. The two skills go together and we all can learn something from the way Eileen manages her social life. Getting older doesn't have to lead to social isolation and Eileen shares what she thinks and does that keeps her socially active. 'My sister in law says,

"I don't know how you can do it, I can't make friends". I just do, I suppose I talk a lot. I just like going out and enjoying myself and to meet new friends and give them credit for what they're doing too. Because they're on walkers and walking sticks and they're good. They're getting on and having a go too. I think it's because they're having a go that I like mixing with them. ***I am interested in what they do and what their life is.*** I'm really interested in other people. My daughter and all the young ones, they get all the nice up to date things in the home, I *love* going to see them. They say, "You're so positive Eileen and so enthusiastic, we feel good, we can't wait to get you over to have a look at something." If you're interested in other people's things as well, and what they're doing, I think they're interested in what you're doing as well.

'I spend my time meeting friends. I used to be in Cabra Vale Diggers Club and we'd go every month down there, they had a concert. That all closed down with the virus, so I've got friends from there that come up from Fairfield and we meet in Liverpool. Sometimes we go to the pictures, or I go on my own to the pictures. I've got another friend, I went to school with her, we've been friends for 73 years and we meet every month. We make it every month, a lot of things. If I'm meeting friends and that we make a date. We keep up to it because once you go astray from it you don't get back to it. Maybe one month, maybe three months or something like that. I've got a couple of friends that I was very good friends with their Mums and the daughters are now in their sixties. One of them rang me this morning, she's going to come here and we have lunch together. I appreciate that because they're only in their sixties and they still come and see me.

'And these bus trips you go on with South West [Community Transport] you can go on different groups every time. They've got a little book they send every three months and you pick out which ones you want to go on. On the South West [social bus trips] there's a couple of us now that live in this area and we meet. They've come here a couple of times. They're younger than me, they are in their seventies. ***I like to plan what days I go on those trips because I've got a varied life and I want to be able to do them when I want to do them and that's sort of how it all works.*** Going to Liverpool, my daughter coming over, going out on the South West buses, doing everything around here, I find my days are full. I find that I am well and truly on the go most of the time, all the time really.

'I can catch the [public] buses still. I catch them across the road down here into Liverpool and meet friends in there. All my life I have gone by public transport to work. I never drove much and then after a while, when he [Eileen's husband] passed away, I just said no. The traffic was just getting too much and I've always done public transport, it doesn't worry me one little bit. South West Community Transport will take you to - when I had my knees done - physio in Liverpool. My husband had passed away then, they'd come and pick you up, you'd go there and have physio, you'd give them a time, so you know your physio appointment is 11:00, so you allow time, 12:00, and they'd come back and pick you up. I used them quite a bit then. I did when I did my shoulder in as well. ***So, transport doesn't worry me, I know I can do it.*** It's very mixed.'

Eileen tore tendons in her shoulder 8 months ago. She tells us how she has recovered so well. 'I went straight to my doctor, I have got faith in my doctor. I've got the best, he's just absolutely marvellous. He doesn't treat you as though you're an old person. He doesn't say, "Oh, you'll get better". So, I went to him and he recommended x-rays straight away. He suggested the physio, and I did the physio from then on. I still do the exercises at home because it has got to strengthen, but I'm good with it now. I don't feel any pain or anything like that, but I got onto it straight away. The physio is only there to do half an hour's work aren't they? And you've got to come home and do the rest yourself, and if you don't, well, you don't improve. That was good, I did it well. ***It's only you that can do things isn't it. They can't do your physio for you, they can't.*** That's logical isn't it?' Eileen has a chronic health condition, a blood disorder, but she takes her medication, has regular testing and sees her specialist every 4 months and it is well under control.

The key to it all is best summed up by Eileen when she says, 'We always had an outlook that was positive, my husband and I.' So, get out your diaries, phone your friends and plan some catch ups with your favourite people, just like Eileen.

6. Grahame, 85



Grahame has almost 30 years of experience in being retired and he is a good example of the evolution of retirement activities as your health changes with age. Grahame and Lynne, his wife of 62 years, spent their early retirement years on their hobby farm in the Southern Highlands. More recently, they moved to a smaller home that was easier for them to manage. ***'You've got to get involved'***, is Grahame's advice to anyone not working anymore. 'You hear about it all the time, someone's got made redundant or he retires today and you're going to his funeral in 3 months time. They think, "What am I going to do?", and he sits in a chair all day. When we come down here to the farm, the local Fire Brigade was up the street, you know, bush fireys. I ended up being [volunteer] equipment officer there for over 15 years and then I was president.' (*What's 'equipment officer'?*) 'Well, looking after all the gear in the trucks and that.' After the trucks come back from a fire it has to be cleaned and all the equipment set up again. 'With the equipment, well it was just a case of checking it out, does it still work?' Local friendships were formed and Grahame's skills were put to good use.

There came a time when he had to give driving the fire trucks away. He joined the local Community Transport service as a volunteer driver. 'They'd only just started up here. There was only one woman in the office and they had this crappy old bus, we used our own cars. I was with them for 15 years. I'd pick up a bus load and we'd go down the coast and have a barbecue, other times we'd go into the city or I'd take a bus load down to Goulburn. I was the Secretary of the Management Committee for six years as well. I used to take notes and use a tape recorder to record the meetings and then I'd write a report for our next meeting. But sometimes it was a case of liaising with the council over something.' After Grahame's most recent knee replacement he doesn't drive for community transport anymore but he still uses the service now to attend any medical appointments he can't get to by himself.

'It gets back to the same thing, you've got to get yourself involved a bit, providing you're fit enough to do it of course. Well it's better than vegetating, I suppose, sitting in a chair.' Grahame is no stranger to health troubles. 'With the polio, I was 18, I lost the use of my left leg below the knee, I had what they called full foot drop. But I used to walk all over the area, I could walk anywhere. We lived in Hurstville Grove and we got off the train at Allawah because we never had a ticket. There was no staff on Allawah station and then we'd walk cross country, it didn't worry me then. Years later I eventually went into business and I used to clamber around all the big prime movers and all that sort of caper. Now, I've been going to this medical centre for years, I think I'm the only bloke on their computer that's actually had it [polio], because there is not that many of us around anymore.' Grahame's mobility has deteriorated over time. He was taking the wrong cholesterol medication for years which caused further muscle deterioration. 'If you've had polio you should never take these types of statins and I'd been on them for ages. And as far

as the doctors were concerned, it was panic stations when they found out.’ Grahame has a good GP now and he shares a story how she called him late one night after she had received Grahame’s urgent blood test results to tell him what he needed to do immediately.

Grahame has been able to adapt his interests throughout his life and he encourages us all to have interests, whatever they may be. He does most of his hobbies at home now because of his health. An example is Grahame’s life long interest in cars and car racing. ‘We’ve been involved with motor vehicles all my life and the kids are the same.’ He took Lynne to the speedway on their first date and he owned a smash repair business during his working life. He tells a story about his son-in-law nicknamed *Starsky*. ‘Do you remember *Starsky and Hutch*? It was a TV series. Well, he had his car painted the same way. Every time he went out the front gate the coppas would pull him up. Stood out like a dunny on a desert. I said, “Look, you’re not going to get anywhere until you repaint the car,” so he brought it into the factory, we let him get it all ready and then we painted it dark blue. He never saw a coppa again.’ His early retirement saw him volunteer for the Rural Fire Service, then Community Transport and now Grahame enjoys his model car collections. He has over 400 hundred model cars and other vehicles.

An activity Grahame still enjoys is reading. ‘***I read a lot, a hell of a lot. I have three books on the go at once.*** I’ve got my own library in there. Mostly books on car racing, politics and war history. There’s a lot of books about Vietnam and the Second World War. I could show you books in there that would screw your head up. Oh yeah, I’m a bit of a reader. I subscribe to one magazine which a lot of people wouldn’t like because it’s a bit political, *The Spectator*. Some of the articles are about England or other countries, and some about Australia. My son says, “God no, its too political for me”. It shows up different things like you never see it on the TV or in the papers.’ (*Do you get involved in politics now?*) ‘No, no, not anymore.’ (Lynne dubs him in that he used to write a lot of letters to politicians.) Grahame’s keen interest in politics comes from a time when government policy had a huge impact on his life. Interest rates were over 17% and repayments on his business became impossible. He lost his business and had to let go of his employees. He keeps a keen eye on politicians and knows a lot of detailed information about the history of Australian politicians and politics.

Another activity Grahame and Lynne do at home is *Wasgij*. That’s jigsaw backwards. These are complicated jigsaw puzzles where you are not piecing together the picture on the box, but the scene that comes after the picture. You have to find clues in the picture on the box to figure out the scene that you’ll be piecing together. Grahame uses the skills that he has to do what he can. He is not into computers but he can still write and there is nothing wrong with his memory. He used these skills to write his life story. He says that writing his memoirs has been a good exercise for his memory in a few different ways. ‘***As you read back over what you’ve written, more things come to you.*** I would put an asterisk next to the section where it should go and at the end I’d add the new memory. In the end I ended up with quite a few extra memories of things I hadn’t thought about in a long time.’

Grahame is lucky to be getting older with Lynne. They have a daughter and two sons although officially, one of their sons is their nephew who has lived with them since he was 12. Grahame and Lynne are a team and both help each other as they are able to. Lynne, who is 84 years of age, loves to shop. Groceries, antiques or browsing the shopping district, she doesn't mind. Grahame likes to drive and read books, so between them they do the grocery shopping together. Grahame drives her to the supermarket and he happily reads one of his books until she gets back with the shopping. They also have some help from their kids and extended family. Their son helps with small home repairs and their grandson and his girlfriend vacuum and mop the kitchen floors. Lynne has also been involved with many things in her life such as the Salvation Army and the Berrima Museum.

Grahame's main advice for us all is to get involved and have interests, whatever they might be. ***'Don't sit around doing nothing'***. He is a living example of how we can stay independent and keep using what skills we have as we get older and our health changes.

7. Barbara, 87



We are lucky to meet with Barbara today. She was supposed to be at a Ladies Auxiliary meeting at the hospital and she has plans for every other day this week. Her daughter says, 'Mum we only ring you of a night time because you're never home through the day.' This lady is a master at keeping herself meaningfully occupied and she has been honing this skill most of her life, but especially the past 29 years since her husband died. Barbara says she didn't know what to do when her husband first passed away and she remembers her husband's professor telling her, "You can always go and sit in a corner, vegetate, die within a few years or you can get out, do things for yourself and have a life." 'And that's what I did. People say to me, "How do you do all these things?", like with my husband passing away early [he was 60], my Dad died of Alzheimer's and I had to look after my Mum, then when my son passed away and his wife as well, people have said to me, "How do you cope with it all?", I said, "I just do it." ***It's a choice. You either sit there, vegetate, die or you get out and do things and that's why I do things.***'

With that philosophy in mind and 29 years of practice Barbara has tried many activities. Pottery, landscape painting, folk art, teddy bear making and darts are some examples. You don't have to stick with the same hobbies forever. You can try things and do them as long as you enjoy them. She has travelled the world and enjoyed cruising. 'We used to have fun on those cruise ships. I went with my friend who was 95 and other people. If they had hat making or flower making or painting or if they had something else, we'd go to all those classes, we used to have a ball, we used to love it.' Barbara's experience teaches us how one thing leads to another and while the activity might not last, the friendships and connections made often do. 'I still keep in contact with the ladies that I played darts with. We go out about once every couple of months.'

Some activities have stood the test of time. One activity that Barbara did for 20 years was volunteer at the Nursing Home where her Mum lived. 'It wasn't as though I put her [Mum] there, she wanted to go there because she was by herself in a big house out at Revesby. I started while I was still working and I used to go over sometimes of a night.' When her Mum passed away and Barbara retired she kept volunteering there. 'We did craft with the old ladies and then we worked in the coffee shop there as well.' Barbara also took minutes for the Residents and Relatives Meetings for a few years. She worked with the Director of Nursing to get the suggestions from the meeting put into practice. Sounds like a lot of work for a volunteer but Barbara comments, 'I love doing things like that.' Covid restrictions have stopped her volunteering there for now but she goes out every week with the other volunteers she used to volunteer with at the Nursing Home. 'We've all kept friends. There's about six to eight of us that go to *Bankstown Trotting Club*. We go for morning tea but we never come home until about half past one. We go there and see each other and exchange books and do all sorts of things.'

Barbara's experience volunteering in the nursing home has given her valuable skills which has allowed her to help her peers. She is not afraid of nursing homes and says, 'See, I know what it's like. A lot of people say, "I wouldn't go there, they don't look after you." I said, "It all depends on the nursing home."' Barbara has been able to support friends when they visit their spouses who live in residential care and she encourages them to speak up when things aren't right. She is also trained and experienced with working with people who have dementia. She is not afraid to socialise with peers who have memory problems. One of her friends who has Alzheimer's disease is being cared for by her husband. 'I have morning tea with them and it just gives him a break as well, to talk to somebody. I keep saying to him, "That's not the way to talk to her." It's just the way you say it. You've got to treat them softly. My friend won't do what he says but I can get her to do things, like have her cup of tea.'

Barbara's nursing home volunteering experience also led her to *Open Door*. 'My best friend, who I met at the nursing home, we used to go to *Open Door* at Fairfield. The group has been going for over 30 years. Don't ask me how it started. It was just a couple of ladies thought that they wanted company and they just set it up and word got around, we've never advertised. Word gets around that these ladies teach knitting or crocheting and you're welcome. It's for people, lonely, haven't got anything to do. If they didn't know how to crochet or knit we would teach them how to do it. We used to have about 40 people come. It was all nationalities, we have Vietnamese ladies come, anybody could come. We used to meet at a hall but it closed at the end of last year because of Covid. We've all nearly gone mental because we haven't been together but we have just found another group at Bonnyrigg library. We went out to see them to ask if it would be ok for us to join them and they said, "Yes, it'd be lovely." You ought to see us, we've got this big circle in the library now. They've made us so welcome and the people are so lovely.'

Another one of Barbara's strengths is that she drives. 'I got my license last year again, that's twice I've been for it [the driving test]. I get unrestricted. I go to Bankstown and a friend of mine lives over Blacktown, I go over there. I go down Sussex Inlet. Why would I get a restricted one?' Barbara drove her son all over Brisbane when she stayed with him as his carer before he passed away from cancer. She drives her friends who don't drive anymore, 'I always have. I'm the driver and I take everybody shopping.' One of her neighbours also drives and they share the driving and shop for groceries together with another neighbour who doesn't drive. Shopping with her neighbours has worked out well for Barbara. She has problems with her heart and finds it difficult to breathe at times. 'I get puffed out now but I've only got to sit down for about 5 minutes and then I'm fine. That's how I manage it. The other ladies are always there [when shopping] and they'll say to me, "You're a bit breathless", and we'll sit down and have a cup of coffee. So that's what we do.'

It would be easy to think Barbara must not have many health problems being as active as she is. This is not the case. She has survived breast cancer and had a mastectomy when she was 80. She has recovered from a severe infection in her spine in 2019 that left her barely able to walk. Barbara's attitude keeps her going. 'I still went everywhere, I still drove. I went shopping and everything like it, with the chord hanging out. Well, what was I going to do, sit

at home?’ Not being one to sit at home, Covid restrictions were a challenge for Barbara. ‘Oh, I nearly went mental. I knitted so many beanies, so many scarves, I crocheted so many rugs. I just sat there and did all that. So a lot of people got beanies and scarves. We gave them to the elderly and the homeless.’ Barbara used to be involved with a local organisation who helped hand out the beanies and scarves but Barbara says the funding was cut and she is not involved with them anymore. ‘It used to be for the elderly, it’s only now for families and children and they’ve cut us out.’ This funding cut, excluding older people, has made the risk of isolation higher for many older people. One of Barbara’s neighbours helped her during Covid restrictions. ‘If I wanted anything I’d only have to ring her and she’d just go and get me milk or bread or if I ran out of anything. If I wanted anything at the chemist or that, she used to just do that for me.’

Barbara shares the practical details about how she thinks and what she does to stay living independently in her home at the age of 87. She does her own housework although quite a few people have suggested she should have help with the vacuuming. ***‘While I can still do it, I’ll do it and then when I can’t, that’s when I’ll get somebody to help me.’***

Barbara’s daughter and granddaughter live nearly three hours away and Barbara gets them to help when they visit. ‘They do things for me if I need it done. Bigger jobs like curtains. I’m waiting for them to come and take the curtains down to wash them. So I’ll do that next. I’m not proud to ask anybody, if I know I can’t do it, for them to do it. Why struggle?’ She mowed her own lawn until she was 84. Now she pays a local person to do it for her. ‘He works for himself and I’d rather give it to local people and give him the money than go through the Government. If I can afford it, so I do it. If you can do for somebody that’s local then that’s good.’

She did have help from the Government to put rails in her home for safety. ‘I got one [rail] out the front and back steps and they put one beside the toilet in the bathroom and in the shower. Now they’re good, but I didn’t want them at the time. That’s what I said to them, “Do you think I’m old?” Now it’s good because I do need help sometimes. If I’m a bit wobbly I’ll just hang on to the rail and then I’m fine. They’ve put one beside the toilet, at the moment I can still get up, but there are times when you can’t get up.’

Barbara says she’s lucky to have friends, many have now passed away. But we have just learned it’s not luck at all. It’s her willingness to help others and stay active and involved. ‘I like doing it anyway, it keeps me going.’ Barbara is interested in the lives of her family and the people around her. She likes hearing what they are doing and how they are going. ‘I’ve got Facebook, that’s how they all communicate with me on Facebook. She [granddaughter] puts all the pictures of the baby on Facebook for me, so I see the baby that way.’ The children of Barbara’s friends also stay in contact with her. Barbara’s close friend passed away last year but her friend’s daughter calls in to visit on her way home from work sometimes.

According to Barbara, there is no excuse for being bored. ‘I’m always going crook every time I see somebody on the TV and they say, “Oh, I haven’t got anything to do” and they sit and they look so miserable. I think, “Get out, get off your *** and go and do something. There’s so many volunteer things to do.”’ So, let Barbara be your inspiration to make an

effort to get out and do something. You might enjoy it, you might learn something new, you might make a new friend.

8. Irene, 94



Meet Irene, who is 94 years of age and lives at home by herself independently. Being 94 years of age is not easy and only the most determined will succeed. When asked how she manages she says, ***'Will power I suppose, being determined. I'm not going to give in. Just being able to do things and if I find I can't do things I leave it alone.'*** Welcome to the masterclass in ageing independently. It's not all sunshine and flowers, there are many challenges to be navigated. Losing your partner, your friends and all of your siblings is bad enough but add to that the loss of your health and in Irene's case the loss of her vision. There is enough loss here to sink anyone, but not Irene. 'It's not as good as what it's cracked up to be [being 94]. I thought when you got old and you retired you were able to do this and that and everything else. Never give a thought to the fact that you've got to stop and take all these pills. It's not that bad once you've got yourself organised.' Don't be fooled by her tiny stature (4 ft 6) or her advanced years, this is one of the toughest ladies you may ever meet.

'You don't let yourself get depressed because if you get depressed you go down. ***If I start to get depressed I try to pull myself out of it.*** I think about the kids, maybe put some music on and listen to it, ring the kids up, ring somebody up, talk to them. The eldest sister she died at Christmas time. I got fairly depressed when Rita went at Christmas time because she was the last one in the family other than me. She was the last one who if I was feeling really depressed, I'd ring her up and we'd stay and chat. Rita's daughter rings me up all the time now and the other sister, Kathleen, one of her daughters keeps in touch with me and she comes over and sees me. I think that's the main thing with depression, people get depressed and they let it get hold of them and they don't try to pull themselves out of it and they go down quicker. As soon as I feel like as if I'm getting depressed I do something.' Irene also has strategies for insomnia. 'If I wake up through the night and start thinking about things, I get up and I make a cup of tea or I get on the computer and turn that on and have a game of cards. There's nothing worse than laying in bed and trying to go to sleep and not being able to go to sleep. I get up and do things and go back to bed and then go to sleep.'

Irene talks about her vision loss, 'Well I've just had to get used to it but it has gone gradually. It is getting worse. I'm completely blind in this eye. I had a stroke a while back, 24 years ago, a slight stroke, I didn't even know I'd had a stroke and I just started seeing purple sort of patches. I finally went to the hospital and they done tests on it and they told me I'd had a stroke and it had burst all the blood vessels at the back of my eye and they said unfortunately, there's nothing that can be done about it and they just sort of left it at that.' Irene ended up seeing an eye specialist a few years later for migraines. 'He said he probably would have saved the sight if I'd gone to him straight away. Then I got a cataract and they kept saying we're not going to touch the cataract in the good eye until it's absolutely

necessary.’ About 5 years ago the necessary time came to remove the cataract and Irene says her surgeon said it was the biggest cataract he’d ever taken out of anyone’s eye. Her vision was good for a while then she got macular degeneration. ‘I was going up the road to vote one Saturday morning and all the fences look crooked and the white lines on the road looked crooked.’ Irene went to her eye doctor first thing Monday where he told her she had macular degeneration. She got the first injection into her eye the next day and, ‘Now I have one every three months. It will never cure it, it just stops it from bleeding again. They are working on stem cells to try to find a cure for it but unfortunately it won’t be in my time.

‘It’s been about 2 years since the macular degeneration. I just try and arrange things so as I know where everything is. I don’t know what’s going to happen when I go completely blind cause my daughter has asked me to move in to her granny flat but I’d rather be on my own. You’ve got nowhere to walk around or anything [in a granny flat]. There’s plenty of space here.’ Irene doesn’t use a walking aid when she’s in her home. ‘Around the house I know where I am going and what I am doing. I make sure I keep my place locked and don’t open the door to strangers. I talk to them through the fly screen door. So, what’s going to happen when I lose my sight completely? I don’t know. I just live day by day. If I find I can’t do something, I don’t do it, I leave it alone. ***Oh I’m hanging on to staying here, that’s for sure.*** One of the grandsons lives close by, he comes around and mows the lawn for me. The neighbour calls in and brings bins in and out. If I haven’t got them out when he’s putting his bins out, he puts mine out. That helps a lot when you’ve got good neighbours that check on you and help you.’

Irene doesn’t go out much anymore. ‘Sometimes I feel like going out, I was (going out) up until that Covid started and that sort of stopped me doing anything. I like going out to the shops, that’s one thing I do miss - is being able to go down and walk around the shops.’ She has a Government subsidised service that used to take her shopping. ‘Before the Covid thing she used to just come and pick me up and she’d take me to whatever shop I wanted to go to. But then when the Covid started, well, they weren’t allowed to. Now she just comes and picks up the list and the money and goes and does the shopping for me and brings it back. I go out with a group on Friday, an aged care group [Focus Connect]. The group’s only been meeting again for about 5 or 6 months now, since we’ve got back together [after Covid restrictions]. It’s someone different to be with, talk to. I’m the oldest there.’ Irene doesn’t go out by herself, ‘It depends if one of the daughters come up and take me out, I go out with them. When I go out anywhere I take the wheelie walker, because sometimes you’re walking and the pavers are up and you don’t see them or you don’t see a gutter.’

Maybe Irene’s earlier life prepared her for the challenges she faces now in her 90’s. ‘To wash a floor we used to get down on our hands and knees with a bucket of water and a cake of soap and a scrubbing brush. We’d scrub the floor with the scrubbing brush and wipe it over with the cloth. And then you’d have to polish it. You’d get down on your hands and knees and put the polish on and rubbed it off.’ (*Surely you only had to do this once a year?*) ‘No, you’d do that once a week. We used to wash on a Monday, do the ironing on a Tuesday, clean the house on the Wednesday and on the Thursday and the Friday do the shopping. Everything was done to a timetable sort of thing. It was a lot of hard work.’ Her husband left

when their four kids were little. This was at a time when married women weren't allowed to work so she cleaned a barber shop once a week and took in ironing to make ends meet. 'There was none of this Government help. Then one of the daughters fell pregnant and I raised her baby as my own daughter.' When the kids were older Irene rediscovered an old friend Alec who she had known since childhood. He had four kids of his own and they spent over 40 years together until he passed away from cancer. With nine children between them she was always busy.

Irene's attitude has helped her to accept the changes caused by her vision loss. 'I used to crochet, I used to knit, I used to sew. I used to make a lot of my own clothes. When the kids were little, I used to make their little clothes and knit their jumpers and cardigans. Well, you just keep going. I don't think about it, things that are gone. It's no good dwelling on them, it doesn't help you. No, I just take things as they come, as they happen. ***I don't get upset about things I can't help, I can't do anything about.*** I used to worry about things once and Mum used to say to me, "Why worry? Its gonna end up one way or another and all the worrying in the world isn't going to change the outcome of it." ***I just go about the day doing whatever comes up.***' Irene gets on Facebook to look at photos of the family. 'Alec bought the computer one Christmas and it sat in the box for about six months before I even took it out of the box. I said to him, "I don't want a computer" but when I learnt how to use it, it was good. I get on the computer and play patience. I used to do a lot of work on the computer with different photos of all the grandchildren. I made all sorts of separate albums. But I can't do the things that I used to do because I can't see what I am doing with it. What's the good of complaining? Doesn't get you anywhere. You just take life as it comes.' Irene is also very good at using her electronic magnifier to read letters and her daughter helps her to read her emails and things she can't see to read.

Irene has designed a system to manage her medications independently. There are a lot of medications, pre breakfast pills, post breakfast pills, inhalers and eye drops. She has different baskets for all of them and knows what is what. 'So long as I keep my sight enough to see what I'm doing, it's easy for me. My daughter says, "It's easy for you, you know what you're doing but we don't know what you're doing."'" Irene's family worry for her safety, but to their credit they allow her to keep control of her life and manage the risks of living alone being legally blind. 'They all go crook on me because I still get in the bath. They say, "You're not supposed to get in the bath, you're supposed to have a shower." I like a bath. You can relax in the bath. You can't relax in the shower. I have a bath every morning. I feel good after I've had a bath, I don't think I'll miss out on a bath.' She has another trick for her milk. 'When you don't get to the shop every day, I get milk and I put it in the smaller bottles and freeze it. It freezes good. I take one out every morning and thaw it out for the next day. I do the same with the margarine.'

Irene gets around her kitchen independently. She has a special device that beeps when her cup is filled with hot water for her tea. Her family live with the fear of Irene having a mishap in the kitchen. Her daughter comes over each week to prepare a weeks' worth of meals which are then plated and frozen for Irene to heat up each night. 'She's just frightened that I'm either going to burn myself or I'm going to set fire to something.' Irene also chopped

up some tomato for her lunch. She has had a lifetime of doing this and had no problem but Irene mentioned her daughter is afraid she will cut her fingers off. Irene's family doesn't take away her independence to calm their own fears for her safety. This allows Irene to keep her skills and stay independent. She recently spent a week with family and said she was spoilt by them. (*Isn't this good?*) No, Irene says being spoilt makes her less motivated to do things for herself when she comes home again. She gets satisfaction from being able to do what she can.

Although Irene has learnt not to push it too far. ***'If you find something is too hard to do, don't do it. If you need help ask for it, yes definitely.'*** Not that I do it very often. One time I'd do something and I'd find it a bit hard to do and I'd be determined that I was going to do it and I'd do it. But now, weeding the garden and a weed is too hard to pull out, I leave it. I'll get somebody when they come to dig it out for me. If it's hard, if it's going to cause me aches and pains, I leave it alone. It's like the vacuum. I can't pull the vacuum cleaner around. If I try to vacuum the room I've got to keep sitting down. I lose my breath so I don't touch the vacuum cleaner. If I spill something on the floor, there's a carpet sweeper there, I use that. Irene has inherited services from Veteran Affairs from Alec and they help with housework but she still does her own laundry. Veteran Affairs also helps with transport to medical appointments. 'It would be harder if I didn't have help from the family and the neighbours. Especially if I need anything I've just got to ask.' Her daughters will usually go with her when she has medical appointments. 'They reckon I won't tell them the truth, which I probably wouldn't if he told me a thing nasty. Probably not, not until I was ready.'

You may have heard the proverb that it takes a whole village to raise a child. Well, it can take a whole village to keep an older person living independently at home. Irene has help from Veteran Affairs, Government subsidised services (CHSP), neighbours and lots of family. Irene is far from a passive recipient of help, she tries her best to do what she is still able to do. ***'Well just do the best you can.'*** She keeps good relations with her family. 'Well I don't argue the point with them. If they want to argue I might have an argument with one of them and after the argument that's it. Forget it. Don't stew on it. You just forget it. ***It's no good you have an argument. Just have your say and forget it. Don't hold a grudge. Makes life a lot easier.'*** It doesn't sound easy but Irene says, 'Well I don't suppose it is really but it's life and what you make of it.'

9. Aunty Val (OAM), 86



Aunty Val has a uniquely Aboriginal perspective on ageing and her life as an 86 year old. It's like she has an eagle eye view of where she sits within the timeline of her life. When asked about her life now she starts with the stories of her Great Grandmother, who was poisoned with flour during an Aboriginal massacre in the 1800's. Her Grandmother and Grandfather were Gandangara people from Coolangatta and Meroo near Nowra. They brought their family, including Aunty Val's Mum, to the Aboriginal Mission at La Perouse. Her Mum married her Dad there but he spoke up against the Aboriginal Protection Board and, 'They expelled my Dad, the [Aboriginal] Protection Board. They expelled people for life. If he came

back to our home in La Perouse to see us, he was arrested by the Police and jailed. Taken to court and jailed for six months. He came through the Bomaderry Homes and he didn't want us to go to the homes.' When I ask Aunty Val about her current life she patiently explains, 'When I look at me and my life, I think what I grew up in and what I grew up under, and understood, has given me the backbone to lead my life now. ***I think your past life keeps you going as an older person. I think your life puts backbone into you and that's me.***

She's not looking for sympathy in sharing the history of her family, 'I'm not interested in them saying, you know, poor little me. No, no, no. I'm not interested in that. I want people to know. I was bred and born on the Aboriginal Mission at La Perouse in 1935. I was brought up under Aboriginal Protection Laws, I was handed to my Grandmother. We could only go from La Perouse to Wreck Bay. She got a letter of permission [from the Aboriginal Protection Board] to buy her a ticket to get on a train. She spoke her language fluently. She spoke Tharawal, Dharawal, Gandangara language. She was multi skilled. Devoutly religious. Prayed for everything and I tell you what, if there was a Lord above he was black and he must have lived next door because whatever she prayed for we got. She prayed for bread we got it, she prayed for food we got it. I really had a good life. I can't say I haven't been loved and looked after. I can't say that. My aunts, my uncles were fishermen at Wreck Bay. I had people that loved me and cared about me. My family's still at La Perouse, they still live there.

'My mother never had electricity, we never had a wireless[radio], we never had a bathroom. There were 17 of us in our three bedroom home in La Perouse. You're talking about a house with one chair, a ten gallon drum you sat on. Aboriginal kids weren't allowed in schools by the Aboriginal Protection Board but we all went to school. The Head Master in La Perouse he asked for all Aboriginal kids to come to school. He wanted to educate the Aboriginal kids because we were all on the mission and there was no school on the mission. I loved it, I loved to go to school. I never had any shoes and that, but I still went to school. But

everybody else was the same because it was in the depression days and that was everywhere, the War was on.'

Aunty Val fell in love and eventually married an Irish artist named Allen and she remembers the time her Mum invited him over for tea. 'We had nothing. The newspaper was on the table for tablecloth and she sat him down on the chair, the only chair. I was too upset to come out and eat. She made nice rissoles, "There's salad there Allen, get what you like." And he sat down and had a good feed. Nobody else sat at the table, only him on his own. Here's this gubb [white boy] sitting on his own. We're going up the street later and he said, "Val, why wouldn't you come out and sit down and have a meal with me?" I said, "Allen you had the only plate, knife, fork and spoon that my Mother owned and the only chair to bloody sit on." I said, "We eat with our bloody fingers when we eat, you know." I was about 18 and I thought, "That's it, this bloke won't come back. He's been in an Aboriginal home, seen we got nothing." About a week later my Mother said, "Oh here comes Allen, he's coming back you know." She said, "Hello Allen." He said, "I brought you a present." Guess what he brought her? Knives, forks and spoons. He said, "And next week I'm going to bring you some plates." And do you know what, that man never changed to my Mother.'

Aunty Val has used her background and upbringing to help others her whole life. 'I've worked in the schools for nearly 40 years and I've got the Order of Australia for my work.' I've done every school here in the Southern Highlands', where she lives now. 'That's 29 schools, and we've taught the whole lot, and the preschools. We've done it all. I'm recognised for my work in the community. My Dad would turn over in his grave.' Earlier in her career she joined the Aboriginal Unit in the 1980's as one of the first Aboriginal health workers in the state. She was an instrumental bridge between Aboriginal people and the white Australian medical system, 'Mixing with the hospitals, mixing with people and all that. I worked in Sydney teaching the nurses and TAFE colleges. I was teaching Aboriginal history, they'd never heard of it. They'd never heard that Aboriginal people were deprived and could only see the doctor on Thursday. That's how I grew up. So, my job was to go in and say to the people, "You can go to the hospital any day of the week," and so I had to educate for that, that was my job. I went to University at the age of 51 and I have a Diploma in Aboriginal Health and Community Development. I graduated in 1992 from University at Sydney, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

'But in the mean time I'd lost my husband and my only son. They both died. I was only 43 when Allen died. But I was 51 when I lost my son. Shaun was only 19 when he died. He caught a hospital germ and that killed him. He had the operation on the 10th of January and he was dead on the 24th of February. I was in the [hospital] system and there was no answer to it. There was nothing I can do but I could stand there and look at him dying, and he never woke again. It took me 11 months to get back to Uni. I'm not crying, I've done my crying. Crying healing tears, your sad tears are healing tears.

'It's not that I don't think about them. Never a day goes by that I don't think of them both and it's true. I say good night to 'em of a night, and you should. It doesn't mean it's coz' somebody's died you forget them. A night never goes by that I don't say good night to 'em and hello and thank them for the day. All my family. I had five brothers, all of 'em, I'll

say good night to 'em and all, I miss 'em. You've got to live with that. ***If you don't live with your heartaches, it stops you constantly. It can't be your crutch to lean on.*** Age is a state of mind, like loneliness. I'm not a lonely person, I don't get lonely. They're with me. When things go wrong I just say, "Shaun I'm up to shit today. I can't find this, I can't find that." And he helps me, he's there, I know he's there. And I was loved. My husband loved me and I knew it. He loved me because I was an Aboriginal kid who came off a mission who had no hang ups. I lived a happy life, I was loved. I had family around me that cared about me and loved me, my family in La Perouse and my friends. And I think that's what helped me get on my feet when I lost my husband and son.

'I play my music of a night. I love my music, I knit, I crochet, I macrame, I paint. I love my footy, I love TV, I love to watch the news. I got my certain films I watch. I'm not a lonely person, I get into another world. They're my memories, they're there. My strength, you know. But I think you've got to be interested in what's around you, I've always been interested. ***And I think as you're getting older you've got to be interested in everything around you.*** You know what? You still fall in love and there's nothing you can do about it. I never want to be that old that I can't look at a fella and think, "Oh, he's lovely, I like him." You know what I mean? I like people to think that I've got a brain and I can use it. So that's the deal. ***Sometimes when you get older, with your families, they think you can't think for yourself. And that's what the people have got to put up with that.*** They'll know when they've got to change, won't they? Let 'em have their say.

'Don't stay up at home thinking you're the only one that's ever...that's wrong. Everybody's got problems. But the people can't stay at home thinking they're the only ones. Come out. ***Come out and meet with other people. Come out and tell us your stories.*** Tell us how you cope with your lot. You've got problems and lots of other people have got problems too you know. ***I think that if you've got something to do, and a skill, use it. Tell 'em, get off your backside, get out there and help.*** You've all got skills and that's what we've got to do is teach them and pass them on. It's like the lads who drive us in the community bus, they're helping, you know. And that's what we gotta do. That's to help our community and that's what I do. ***Get out - don't give up, get out and do the things that make you happy.*** Be involved in your community.

'But when it comes to dealing with your life, you've got to deal with your life. ***I don't stress, anything happens, I have my say and then I'm happy.*** We believe - have our say. It's not to insult the people, I'm not insulting. I don't bring it up all the time but I'll bring it up if I have to. If I think they're doing the wrong thing by the Aboriginal community, I will say it. That's my right as 86 years old. I don't get stressed out, I've got no hang ups. And if something happens to me in my life, I deal with it straight away. Well, I don't let it fester. I don't let it get into my life and really knock the shit out of me, no I don't believe in that. If something's wrong, it's wrong. If somebody dies, they die. My turn will come I know, and when it comes, I'll be ready. I'm too green to burn at the moment. I've got too much to do. We've got to believe in what we do. Make our community better for all of us. Hey, I'm

Aboriginal, I can't be anything else. I think Aboriginal. I'm not on the Constitution for Australia and I'm 86 years old, but I've got to make it better.'

Aunty Val's expanded timeline perspective is not just about her past but also about her future. Aunty Val continues to work to this day, teaching Aboriginal culture and history in schools and at the local Aboriginal Centre. 'We did it, we still do. They still come in, they learn language, their parents come in. We teach Aboriginal history, culture, art, didgeridoos, they paint them. We have guys to come in to teach the didge coz' that's men's work, so we stick to culture. Men's work and women's work, we stick to all that. I've got to teach the children the culture and all that. This is to do, we've got to teach. What they do with their culture is their problem, they've got to learn it, they've got to know it's there. ***But I have no intention of taking all the language and all that with me when I die. I'm leaving it, I'm doing it.*** I'm not taking my language or my dreamtime, none of that. I say to 'em you come in, black or white, and learn it. And I'm handing it down. Anybody can come in and learn it and that's the deal. What they want to do with it, it's their problem.'

10. Graham, 90



To be 90 and living a good life is not just luck. It is an art form and takes careful consideration and practice. Lucky for us we can learn how it's done from those who are doing it now. Meet Graham who is 90. He shares his thoughts and the steps he has taken that have helped him to remain independent. It starts with your vision for your future. ***'Well, one of the things that is important is that you've got to have a vision of what you want to do, if you do retire, so you don't sit at***

home and vegetate, you can't do that.' How do you get that vision? 'Think about it.' Spend some time thinking about the life you want. 'I remember in my younger working days there were older guys who used to retire at 60 or 65 and they'd nearly all drop off the perch within three or four years because they had nothing to look forward to.'

Graham's first career was as a civil engineer but when he retired in his 60s he started his second career in real estate. Most people think of winding down when they retire. 'Oh no! No, no, that's when I went into real estate. That wasn't a wind down, it was a wind up. I had a friend and we used to talk about real estate. They said, "Well, if you're interested in real estate, why don't you go and do the course at the TAFE?" So I enrolled while I was still working. It was really hard work. Of course, the moment I started in real estate there was a great slump. So I really had to work hard to even get my first sale but things got better and better. I'm a Christian, I've gone to Sunday school since I was a kid so it was difficult working in that real estate environment because quite a few were not ethical, I can assure you. I had a couple of very unpleasant experiences, but you live through those.'

Part of Graham's success is thanks to his wife of 53 years, Sue, who is in her early 80s. 'We work very well together, we look after each other, it's terribly important. I think that's one of the joys of our married life really,' says Graham. Sue is a good cook but Graham is very good at ironing and housework. Graham is happy to help around the house and he says, 'It was the way I was brought up when I was growing up, to help around the house. I had two sisters, one of them died when she was 5. We used to help, my sister and I. We used to share the washing up at night and talk to each other and find out what was going on.' Sue says, 'I think it's because we married later in life. We didn't marry each other to change each other, just to grow. I always said that it was for both of us to reach our potential supported by the other. That's what it was all about.' Graham and Sue share activities but they also do their own thing. Sue disappeared from our chat to get ready to go to her bridge game.

They have two sons and daughters-in-law and 6 grandkids. They don't live close by but, 'I will say this, we are very fortunate we have good relationships with our grandchildren as well as with our daughters-in-law and our sons. They're all very busy so we don't see a lot of them but Sue makes a particular point we get them all together here, for lunches or whatever, whenever we can.' These good relationships are partly thanks to Graham's

efforts. 'We'd be getting up at 5 o'clock to go up there to watch them at sport at 7.30 in the morning. They all use phones now so they message us and they ring us up as well. We've always been interested in what our family has been doing.' Graham uses WhatsApp and text messages to stay in contact. 'I don't say I'm the whizz kid on the computer, but I can do most things. ***I like to learn, if I can. I suppose you've got to go with the flow.***'

Graham's early retirement years were very busy. He had his second career in real estate and he also built and landscaped his home in the Southern Highlands. This was a labour of love and physically demanding to maintain the gardens and the home. They lived there for 19 years and then the wise decision was made to move. 'We were getting to the stage where looking after the property was getting to be a little bit difficult. We could get somebody to probably come and do the housework and look after the garden but we decided we'd make a move. Every time we went out of the house you had to walk uphill or downhill. We were on a slope. We thought when we move we'll try and find an area where it's fairly flat. So we came here and the minute we walked into this house I thought, "This is it." I thought that I'd never be as happy living anywhere else after living on the mountain. But it's flat, and so easy to walk around here with the dog. There's some lovely spots you can go to and we take her down to the lake and walk around.'

Graham hasn't given away the activities he enjoys although he has adapted over time. He used to belong to a walking group and go on 15 km walks every week. 'I certainly can't work in the garden as heavily as I used to and we're still walking but we don't do the 15 km walks.' He still works in his garden although it's smaller than his former garden. He has collected friends throughout his life including from his days of being involved with his son's activities. He was manager of their soccer team and he was Scout leader when they did Scouts. 'We have quite a good social life, we have quite a few friends. Covid did knock it. We used to meet regularly with a group of people. We'd have dinner at our different homes. It still happens but not as much as it did before Covid came.'

'We're involved down here with U3A [University of the Third Age]. I don't teach but I help out in administration and things like that. They do all sorts of things, like art and if you're interested in music, going to the pictures, films, they have lunch outs. I'm doing a very interesting course on fact finding in court cases. I have downloaded about 90 pages of these laws and the statutes that are used in court cases and we've been following different very important court cases. It's being taught by a retired university lecturer who was an advisor to the Commonwealth Government. It has been really hard going because we've had to do homework. And I've just done one [a course] on the types of renewable energy and what the future is, for Australia particularly, and the world. I play cribbage, of course we can't play now because of the Covid but it's a U3A thing and there's a group of about 20 odd people that used to play. It's very good exercise for your brain. I play [cribbage] with a friend now, he comes here every two weeks.'

'My main routine is walking the dog twice a day. I don't do it always twice a day but we [Sue] usually go together and if she's busy I'll do it and if I'm busy she'll do it. And then one of us will do it in the afternoon. Since we've got her it's been very regular, I mean

she never misses out on a walk. I am so attached to her now, I can't tell you. You can feel that you've known her for a long long time and she's only been here three and a half years. I walk in rain but I won't go out in pouring rain but Sue will, she'll take her for a walk in pouring rain.'

Having some help is part of staying independent and Graham talks about how he ended up with some help with housework. 'Friends said to us, "You know, you really should have help at your age. You're getting on and you should have help." So I suppose we thought we'll try it anyway. We tried it and it works. I think it's good. A lady comes once every two weeks to help do the bathrooms and does the vacuuming and that does make a difference. I used to do all the vacuuming. I help with the washing, put the washing out. I'm happy, she's a good lady that comes, she's a younger woman and she's very personable. I think it's very good actually. I think it was a wise move.'

Graham actively manages his health issues. He has had both hips replaced and he has a good doctor. His doctor is so good that Graham waits for almost two hours to see him but he has learned to phone the surgery and check how late he is running so he waits at home instead of the doctors office. 'The health care is very very good. I get eye injections once every 16 weeks now for macular degeneration locally, I don't have to go anywhere else. It's all local.' Graham drives independently and is probably safer than many other road users because he has had three driving tests since he was 85 and he is soon due for his fourth driving test when he turns 91. 'You can decide not to have that test and have a restricted license which allows you to drive for 15 km radius but I drive up to Sydney and down to Canberra.'

We are privileged to be able to learn about staying in control of your life when you get to be in your 90's from someone who is doing it now. A lot of thought has gone into the strategies Graham uses and the ways he has managed challenges in his life. ***'I get concerned about things but I don't let them overwhelm me. I just think it through whatever's the problem.'*** If there's a problem try and think it through and solve it.' This is great advice for life in general and can be used by anyone who has life experiences to draw from. Following in Graham's footsteps, is there a second career you'd like to try when you retire? What is your vision for your future?

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