

Obituary

Valerie Margaret Ferguson: a lifetime of commitment to the community (Formerly McGillivray, nee Watson, 14 10 1942 – 08 03 2024)

Valerie Margaret Watson (Val) was the first born to William (Bill) and Eileen (nee Partridge) Watson on October 14, 1942, in Huntly. Around 1946 the family shifted to Auckland. Val's only sibling, Carol Maree, was born on October 4, 1945, a year prior to the move to Auckland.

It was while her mother was in hospital after the birth of Carol that Val remembers 'helping' her father on the farm. Although only three years' old, she steered the tractor while her father fed out hay or silage from the trailer.

School life

Val started school at Edendale Primary School, before moving to Titirangi Primary School, then New Lynn Primary. From there it was to Avondale Intermediate and finally Kelston Girls High.

Although capable but not academically enthusiastic, Val was a diligent student who excelled in the subjects she enjoyed – especially home-craft subjects and French.

Roller skating was a passion for both sisters, and the Tui Glen Skating Club became their second home. The family had a strong interest in speedway and most Saturday nights were spent at Western Springs.

Early days at work

From the age of 13 Val had a job at the local Farmers grocery store, working after school and in the holidays. She left school two days before her 15th birthday and commenced work in the store office, later promoted to take charge of that while also assisting in the shop itself. She was paid the princely sum of £3/2/6 (\$6.25) per week. She spent about six months in Auckland central working for Wiseman's (a sports good store) as the credit control person before she was coaxed her back to her old job at the Farmers.

Married life

While walking with friends in downtown Taupo, Val met Brian McGillivray, a qualified watchmaker who was living in Waiouru. The couple became engaged and were married at New Lynn Methodist Church on August 4, 1962. Sister Carol was Val's bridesmaid.

The newly married couple moved to Auckland, and rented a house on Don Buck Road, Henderson, before building their first home at 49 Richardson Road. This was a three-bedroom, weatherboard house on a section of about one quarter of an acre (1012 sq.m.)

As the family grew, the house was raised and a basement, second bathroom and bedroom added. The first of their five children, Russell, was born on March 4, 1963, followed by Cameron Louise, Bradley, and Elizabeth (Libby.)

Committee involvement

It was as a member of Henderson Plunket where Val commenced her lifetime of community involvement. She progressed through to hold various positions on the committee, including that of president.

Her committee was successful in recruiting Alma Johnson, the first female continuity announcer on New Zealand television, to be a guest at a charity breakfast along with popular entertainer of the time, Ray Columbus.

Brian had joined New Lynn Jaycees and Val took an interest in this organisation which was in its New Zealand prime at that time. She became the first female member of Jaycees in New Zealand. Val was a member of Henderson North Primary School Parent-Teachers' Association.

With a friend, she enrolled at night classes for cake decorating at Rutherford High School. Val was invited to take on the teaching role in the third term, which she did, and continued to teach cake decorating for more than 40 years.

Another life-long interest has been catering – both fundraising and on a commercial basis. This started from small beginnings and almost by accident, when Val was asked to assist a friend to cater for a birthday party. This led to the formation of Coronet Caterers.

Val has always been a sewer, learning the basics at intermediate school. As a 15-year-old she made uniforms for an entire marching girls' team complete with pleated skirts. She also made shirts for well-known guitarist Peter Posa and members of his band, as well as costumes for sisters Suzanne and Judy Donaldson, a singing duo known as 'The Chicks.' Wedding dresses were among her many creations.

Val's husband Brian was working as a watchmaker, repairing watches and clocks for local jewellers, when he was offered a position at Austin Pattison's shop in Morrinsville.

The couple rented a small house on the corner of Studholme Street and Pickett Place, a tight squeeze when Brian's father, Jim, came to live with the family. Val had a part-time job helping John and Nadia Shuttleworth at their busy grocery/dairy shop across the road from the MacGillivray home. She occasionally assisted in Austin Pattison's jewellery shop and, with Brian, accepted a number of catering jobs.

The Little Theatre

In the mid-1970s Val was introduced to the Morrinsville Drama Society, and for the best part of the last 45 years she was the go-to-person for make-up, hair, set design and in particular costumes.

She was honoured with life membership of the renamed Morrinsville Theatre in 2004.

The theatre is where she discovered a talent for acting. Her first significant role was as Nausea Snodgrass in an adaption of 'Cinderella.' Her stage skills became really evident when she played the lead role in the intense American drama 'The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man in the Moon Marigolds,' directed by Cal Lovell.

But it was as a director she really excelled. She particularly enjoyed directing large-cast, scripted musicals with 'Oklahoma!' 'My Fair Lady' and 'Hello Dolly' among them. The intense drama 'Twelve Angry Men,' which she directed for Morrinsville Theatre in 2017, was acknowledged by the Northern Regional Arts Council with Zony Awards for the best drama and best director.

Meanwhile she and Brian opened a café in Morrinsville's Thames Street, the Rendezvous Coffee Lounge, from which they continued to do catering and cake decorating. They also opened a small cake shop.

After a couple of years in a rather cramped, rented home, Val and Brian moved into a new four-bedroom house they had built at 19 Kowhai Avenue.

Road accident

Val's life changed dramatically on the morning of August 7, 1980. She was travelling to Hamilton in the family's Holden station wagon. Another car crossed the centre line and crashed into her near the Motumaoho bridge.

Val's injuries were substantial and would have a lasting effect on her life, as she was unable to play sport following the crash, she could not run or ride a bicycle, could not kneel and had great difficulty climbing stairs. She needed to use her arms to push up when getting out of a chair.

Meeting Keith

When her marriage to Brian ended, Val married Keith Ferguson. They purchased the land and buildings of the Morrinsville Hire Centre and later Morrinsville Party Hire, which was based in part of the building, and they operated the party hire business.

They also started Classique Caterers from a commercial kitchen in Lorne Street.

Val and Keith moved to Pio Shores, Waihi, in 2004, where she became fully involved in that town's amateur theatre group and also the Mellowtones choir.

She was made a life member of Waihi Drama Society in 2015. She was president of both theatre groups – elected on two occasions in Morrinsville.

While theatre was Val's main focus, she still found time for other things.

She played badminton for 12 years while living in West Auckland and continued with the sport in Morrinsville, including a period as club captain, until such activity had to be curtailed as the result of the motor vehicle accident.

She was a member of the Morrinsville College Board of Trustees for seven years, the last two as chairman.

Video business

When these businesses were sold, they purchased United Videos in Morrinsville, in 1999. It was a boom time for the video industry, and they also purchased the Cambridge franchise.

Their success was acknowledged in the industry and especially by the United Video franchisees who endowed several awards on the operators.

They sold the Morrinsville store and opened a branch of the franchise in Waihi. They then sold the Cambridge store and moved to Waihi. In 2015 they closed the Waihi business and moved back to Morrinsville.

Val became more involved in the local theatre and took up new interests, including playing 500 at the RSA, learning to play bridge and as a member of the Morrinsville Art Gallery finance committee, later becoming a board member.

The artist

Val was a talented artist with landscapes her speciality. One painting project now that remains on prominent display is 'Lydia Kow,' the Morrinsville Golf Club's life-size cow that is part of the Morrinsville 'Herd of Cows' streetscape project.

One side of the cow depicts scenes from the golf club's course while the other side shows the layout of the 18 holes.

Travel

Val and Keith travelled extensively, to Fiji and Rarotonga, and went on river cruises in Europe and sea cruises in Asia.

Val's diagnosis

On December 22, 2023, Val was diagnosed with Stage IV Adenocarcinoma, a type of cancer that starts in mucus-producing (glandular) cells – in Val's case, in her lungs. About 85% of lung cancers are non-small cell lung cancers of which (NSCL) Adenocarcinoma is the most common type.

She and Keith were advised just before Christmas that it was 'aggressive,' and she had a life expectancy of only nine months. Because of the wide-spread nature of the cancer cells, radiation was not considered an option and while chemotherapy could prolong her life by 2-3 months, it would be unpleasant. She decided not to have the chemo.

Celebration of Life

Val was determined not to have a funeral, but a celebration of her life. A congregation of about 200 family members and friends were at Morrinsville Theatre on Saturday, March 16.

The Mellowtones sang two songs, both favourites of Val when she was a member of the Waihi group.

Stephen Silcock spoke on behalf of Morrinsville Theatre, reiterating Val's range of skills and everything she had done for the group.

"For the best part of the last 45 years, Val has been the go-to-person for make-up, hair, set design and in particular costumes," he said.

"She seemed to love the challenge of it all – there have been some wonderful shows where she and her band of willing helpers have created some lavish and precise wardrobes, My Fair Lady being one of the standouts."

"She will be sadly and greatly missed," he said. "Val's has been the most astonishing contribution that any one person could ever make."

Representatives of the Morrinsville Gallery and Waihi Drama Society also paid their respects and acknowledged her contribution to their organisations.

Morrinsville Gallery director Gina Barreto said "The Morrinsville Gallery family is deeply saddened by Valerie's passing. She was a remarkable person, whose calm guidance and practical generosity have touched the hearts of so many of us over the years."

The Gallery family acknowledged Val's immense talent as a board member, a professional chef, a gifted artist, and an event organiser which was only surpassed by her wonderful energy and creativity.

"We mourn the loss of such an inspirational person and extend our deepest sympathies to her family and friends. Val's memory will always be cherished, and we will forever be grateful for the love, kindness, and dedication she brought into our lives."

Gina added, "At the Gallery Christmas celebration dinner last year, we celebrated the valuable contributions of the fantastic volunteers from Morrinsville Gallery and Morrinsville Museum.

"It was a special occasion as we honoured Valerie, who was retiring from her position as a Morrinsville Gallery board member, and publicly recognized her passionate dedication to our community. We reflect on Valerie's final public appearance and truly cherish that moment in our hearts."

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