

Daphne Lewis, 92 years old



“Up till then no-one realised we were alive,” laughs Daphne, reflecting on Rotorua’s highly successful first ‘Gathering of the 90s’, back in April 2010.

Daphne’s happy to share her memories and tells her story with humour.

“I was born in Wellington – by accident. My parents were from Dunedin. It was 1918. Dad was away at camp in Wellington waiting to be sent overseas and Mum came up to Wellington too but was on her own in Vivian Street lodgings. She was ill with the flu – the epidemic that the soldiers had brought back from the war of 1914-1918. So she got my elder sister, aged two, to stand in the window so she could be seen from the street. A passer-by on her way to work in the morning noticed the child – and again noticed she was still there in the evening after work. She called in the Salvation Army, who arranged for father to come out of camp and for my mother to be taken to hospital.”

Soon after that Daphne was delivered into the world.

“As it happened, the war ended and my father didn’t go away. But my mother died six months later. My sister Marie and I were sent to live with his three sisters in Ashburton. They were planning to set up a tea rooms business and first moved to Christchurch to learn the trade, then to Timaru, Palmerston North and Auckland, opening tea rooms as they went.”

Meanwhile her father, Richard John Jary, stayed in Ashburton before settling in Nelson near his family, remarrying nine years later.

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“The Jary family were flour millers. They emigrated from Norfolk England, but earlier they’d been Huguenot exiles from France. When they arrived in Nelson they had their millstones with them but there was no wharf and the captain didn’t have time to wait while the family worked out how to unload the stones. So they were simply dropped overboard. We always reckon they were the beginnings of Nelson’s Boulder Bank!”

The millers established Richmond Flour Mills and some of the Jary family are still there.

Daphne’s schooling was mainly in Auckland, at Epsom Primary and Auckland Grammar. The sisters were operating tea rooms in that area but Daphne was never involved in their business. Instead, she worked at the Power Board in Queen Street. At 21, she married ‘the boy next door’.

“Evan was a school teacher. We lived in Thames for 14 years. He’s well remembered as a football coach, with a five-year unbeaten record and a reputation for standing up for what he believed in. An Auckland Rugby Union official called him ‘that stormy petrel from Thames’!

“Then we moved to St Stephen’s at Bombay, south Auckland where Evan was appointed principal.” St Stephen’s was administered by the Auckland Anglican Diocese. On the clock tower of the main building is written: *This school is for both races of NZ and boys from the Pacific Islands*. “However, we later also had boys from America, China, Singapore and Hong Kong.”

She remembers Evan’s phone call to tell her of his appointment: “I’ve got the job,” he’d announced. “And you’re going to be matron!”

“I remember I was so shocked I hung up the phone.”

And so matron she was, for the next 21 years.

“We were just getting out of the car on our arrival when a staff member told us there was a phone call waiting. ‘Not for you,’ she said to Evan. ‘It’s for your wife’.”

Daphne remembers thinking how nice it was for someone to be phoning so soon to welcome them.

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“But it was Polly the cook, demanding to know what we’d have for dinner that night! That night’s corned beef and salad was memorable. I insisted on salad dressing, knowing Polly wouldn’t know how to make it. That way I established right from the start that I was boss – and that I knew what I was doing.”

Polly didn’t last. As well as many other matronly duties like managing the staff, Daphne did much of the cooking. “I had only one row in 20 years,” she says with pride. “I had to tell one woman who was having a temper tantrum to get out of my kitchen and never come back.”

Between them, the husband and wife team built up the school from a role of 16 pupils in 1954 to well over 300 in 1974. “There was no senior school to start with but Evan persuaded the family of our head boy, Awi Riddell, to send him back for a 6th form year, and other boys came back too. Soon we had established a 7th form and then the school took off.” She recalls the first European pupil to enrol was an American boy – who’d spent time in Hong Kong before coming to St Stephen’s.

In that 20-year span a science laboratory, library and dormitory wing, more classrooms and of course more homes for extra staff were added.

Travel and mixing with other people was part of the general education that ‘The Boss’ felt was necessary for these boys. Over the years Evan took busloads of students on trips all over this country.

“These were in part recruitment trips. We took a concert party and were billeted through the churches. The boys played football against local teams and entertained their hosts with song and action.”

As time went by Evan expanded his horizons and was taking boys by the planeload! He made eight trips with them to Australia.

Daphne was also a great one for doing things: besides her matron’s duties, she kept bees, grew orchids, dabbled in artwork. The family enjoyed rock-hounding and on one visit to Bluff, when her four children were aged six to 12, they collected a lot of attractive stones which they brought back to Bombay without realising how laden the car was.

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“Before we unloaded, Evan measured it and found the rear axle had less than six inches’ clearance.” Years later, Daphne built a fireplace of these stones.

“No one day was the same at St Stephen’s. Those days were the best part of our lives,” Daphne reminisces: “We’d bought a section at Big Bay on the Manukau Peninsula and had a bach made in Papakura and transported on to the site. It literally ‘fell off the back of a truck’ on a corner on its way up the windy peninsula road. The company retrieved it eventually and when it was on-site a week later we found the only damage was a broken window where the stove had slid across the floor as the bach came off the truck.”

From St Stephen’s Evan retired from teaching and bought 26 acres on Discombe Road, between Hamilton and Cambridge. By then they felt ready for a change. Daphne brought her bees, and her stones, and her orchid collection – and the couple built two glass houses to accommodate the plants.

“It all started with Evan’s family who were orchid growers. When they visited us at St Stephen’s they always brought a plant in a pot. We started with five and the collection grew from there. St Stephen’s maintenance man built a glass house for me and then a shade house. In the end I had 3,000 pots and was exporting orchid stems to Hong Kong and Singapore.”

On their lifestyle property they also ‘farmed’ sheep, horses and kept a house cow, Bidy, which Daphne milked. Then they moved again, this time to Waerenga, near Te Kauwhata, at which point Daphne sold her bees. She was keeping 12 hives at this stage.

Eventually the couple settled in Rotorua. Three years ago, aged 88 and widowed, Daphne decided it was time to sell up and, as she puts it, ‘get out the family’s way’. Her home is now a comfortable independent-living unit in Cantabria.

“On the very first day I was here someone knocked on my door and bade me welcome saying she hoped I’d be happy here. I replied that I would be happy because it was up to me and that was what I intended to be. And I am indeed very happy.”

She enjoys mixing in with other residents and is involved in many of the activities including word games.

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“I have been very fortunate over a long life and have enjoyed helping my husband achieve what he wanted to achieve. My family have given us much joy and pleasure over the years and I am grateful for family and friends who have assisted in making my life as rewarding as it is.”