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Genevieve Becroft

A happy, fulfilling life led Genevieve and her late husband, David, to give generously through their foundation to many organisations across New Zealand. A long-time resident of Takapuna, Genevieve has been a great supporter of the arts. She has also been at the forefront, and very hands on, when it came to saving some of the North Shore's heritage buildings. Hers has been a life full of colour, political activism, fun and adventure. Great satisfaction, too, has come from knowing that hers and David's contributions have made the community a richer place to live.

Born in 1935, Genevieve had a happy life in Hamilton on the far end of her Grandfather Jolly's farm at Frankton. Her father, Rupert Worley, was the Hamilton Council Engineer. She remembers watching the big shovels dig the last hole to create the Garden Place Square that he designed. Late in his life, at the age of 90, Rupert told his family the story of how he received the Military Cross in the First World War delivering ammunition to the front on a movable rail-line at night.

Rupert and his family moved to Auckland in 1946 to restore the aging Auckland Gas Works and settled in Epsom, where Genevieve and her sister, Elizabeth, attended Diocesan School for Girls. Genevieve attended Nga Tawa in Marton for her last year of school. She describes herself as being a *happy child*, wandering over Mt Eden, with Miss Owen, who was a teacher at Epsom Girls Grammar and the two families dogs, Tim the Foxy and Tammy the Scotty. *Wonderful conversations as we walked!* These were great

times, with Genevieve always looking for adventure, but sometimes getting into trouble instead.

With early dreams of becoming a ballerina, Genevieve was sent to classes with the 'The Nettleton Edwards School of Ballet' at the old Toc H building, in downtown Auckland. She had the pleasure of being a fairy in Swan Lake, *stroking the fairy Queen* [Rowena Jackson, revered New Zealand ballerina] *as she lay dying*.

Every school holiday, Genevieve took the bus into town and the ferry over to Devonport, and then another bus, to visit her aunt Olga Oliphant who lived in Milford. *I would walk the beach, swim, dig up a few pennies where people had been sitting, have a dip in the swimming pool at the end, and once managed to put a penny in the slot to see what the 'Butler Saw In The Pirate Ship'.* The building was gone the next time I visited. Once she was married she enjoyed the company of her husband David's aunts on the



Genevieve, circa 1980

O'Neill side of the family and by the time she stood for Takapuna City Council she had plenty of support in the local area.

She married Dr David Becroft in 1956. *I attended all the dances that were the fashion at that time in various halls. I met David at friends' weddings and we recognised each other from family days at Kawau. He was then best man for another of our friends. Our families were delighted as we had lots of North Shore aunts in common.* The couple first rented, and then settled into an upstairs apartment with a huge deck in Grafton Rd opposite the hospital. *We had great parties and then two children!* Genevieve had trained as a kindergarten teacher and David was a paediatric pathologist. David

took on the dilapidated children's wing in the old America Base Barracks and turned it into the efficient Princess Mary Hospital for Children from 1959. With no support from the Government or the hospital administration, *Betsy Elliot, wife of Professor Bob Elliot, and I started a campaign, producing thousands of pictures of children in bed with a bunch of flowers or an amazing visitor. With a few prizes and a statement 'We Need A Children's Hospital Now'. These were delivered to every school in Auckland by Rotary wives, who picked them all up again to be judged thousands!! I threatened to drop the sheets over Wellington. That did it, as well as huge support from Bob Harvey.* Eventually, in 1992, the new Starship Hospital was opened.

By 1960 the opportunity arose for the Becrofts to travel to the United States, with David offered work at the Jimmy Fund Children's Hospital in Boston. In their three years there, Genevieve volunteered with the YMCA, working with migrant families. Her kindergarten teaching was helpful, as she helped the children learn a few words of English. The YMCA gifted her pottery classes for her work as she could not accept any payment without a Green Card. *I have continued my interest in pottery making at Lake House.* Her garden is adorned by many 'funny and strange' sculptures of her design.

During a five-month visit to Cincinnati Children's Hospital, Genevieve was impressed by the work of the community, who had saved, and then renovated a historic home into a theatre. This memory provided the impetus for saving the historic PumpHouse in Takapuna, which today is an active theatre. Genevieve and David and their children travelled to Japan, Russia and England before returning home to New Zealand. They eventually settled in Takapuna, building their modern home on the edge of Lake Pupuke. David continued researching from home, publishing articles about rare and obscure diseases from his upstairs office, for which he received the prestigious Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit (ONZM) medal in 2001.



The Becroft home and garden became a venue for NZ Sculpture OnShore.



David and Genevieve loved the site in Lake View Road and had input into the design of their home by architects Peter Middleton and Harry Turbott. The house won an architectural award in 1966, repeated in 1994 with a '25-year award' from the New Zealand Institute of Architects. Turbott also designed the garden that divided the steep section into a series of terraces, a courtyard and boardwalks. Genevieve has always taken pride in her garden, which is an interesting mix of native plants, papyrus grass on floating islands, spring bulbs, and perennials, gracing the edge of Lake Pupuke.

Genevieve supported local community initiatives, including the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), school committees and taking the role of citizen advisor to the Auckland Regional Council Parks Committee. She was a founding member of the Northbridge Community Arts Council, and has been a supporter of North Shore Hospice, Riding for the Disabled, Forest and Bird, the Tree Society and Awataha Marae.

In the early 1970s, she attended several community meetings with local residents who wanted to save the old PumpHouse from demolition. The PumpHouse had been a functioning water pump station from 1905 to 1941, when it was abandoned, and by the 1970s it was in a state of disrepair. The Council, under Mayor Fred Thomas, wanted to demolish the building and turn the land into a reserve. Through petitions and public submissions, the PumpHouse was saved by the community. Genevieve remembers Peg Escott, Maureen and Dick Williams, Angela Antony, and Anna Blackwood at the forefront of the campaign, along with many others including Jan O'Connor and Wyn Hoadley. In 1973 Takapuna City Council declared the PumpHouse to be a preserved public amenity.

It was then that the real work began to turn it into a theatre. Genevieve help organise annual fairs on the grounds of the PumpHouse, known as the 'PumpHouse Picnics', to raise funds for its refurbishment. It has been a very successful community resource.

There were annual Shakespeare festivals organised by Lois Painter, and Genevieve performed in a number of productions, taking on 'Richard the Third' with actor/director Michael Hurst. There was opera, the New Zealand Trio and the annual Kaleidoscope art events in the grounds. All these events were successful and highly anticipated. A community vision had become a reality. In 1983 the PumpHouse was listed as a Category Two Historic Building under the protection of The New Zealand Historic Places Trust.

David's family, the Becrofts, had owned land in Wairau Valley since 1926, and supplied milk to the Takapuna area. In 1958, Becroft Park was purchased by the Council. As farming was no longer an option, the land was designated as a community sports field. Money from the sale of the land to Council was put into a trust and gave rise to the Becroft Foundation. Genevieve and David have supported various organisations through the family's foundation, donating to local New Zealand needs, as well as many overseas disaster funds.

David was a pacifist and didn't join in any protests; Genevieve did. She got involved in the anti-Springbok tour protests and the nuclear-free movement of the 1980s. At one point, in the early 1980s, David was to attend a conference in Bordeaux when the mayor there was also the president of France. Carrying a letter of protest signed by Takapuna Mayor Fred Thomas, Genevieve and her French-speaking niece, Penny Field, visited the deputy mayor of Bordeaux. *I asked why the Pacific people were having their many islands ravaged by nuclear testing? He replied that one bomb would knock down all the church spires in Europe!*

On another occasion Genevieve joined the Peace Squadron protests and remembers sailing out to confront an American nuclear warship on Waitemata Harbour with friends; Liz Patel at the helm, Gill Hanly and Mayor Cath Tizard on board and, *myself, dressed as a skeleton standing at the prow!*

During this period, Wyn Hoadley was also running courses for women interested in standing for local government, and encour-

aged both Genevieve and Jan O'Connor to attend. Then, in 1986, Wyn was elected mayor of Takapuna City Council, and Genevieve and Jan also stood and won seats on Council. Genevieve served six terms as a councillor, one term with Takapuna City Council and then five with North Shore City Council. She was involved with establishing a number of community facilities, including the Takapuna City Information Centre in 1989.

Genevieve became the chair of North Shore City's Parks and Recreation Committee. This was a new challenge, and another period when the activist in Genevieve came to the fore. She got to know all the parks and reserves on the North Shore, as well as the indigenous trees under threat because of increased land development on the Shore. Many beautiful pohutukawa trees in Takapuna were being removed, and at one time she sat in a lovely old tree all day, instead of attending the scheduled Council meeting. These days subtle pruning allows many trees to remain.

While on the Parks and Recreation Committee, Genevieve signed off the development of Albany stadium and heard submissions on the proposed development at Long Bay. It was during this time, too, that she was involved in saving another building in Takapuna, the Lake House Arts Centre on Fred Thomas Drive. A developer wanted to remove a double storey Edwardian home that stood at the north end of Takapuna Beach. It had originally been the home of the Sheppard family. By the 1970s, Lake House Flats had been divided into flats, and then bed-sits, and euphemistically christened the 'Coach House' by the 1980s' residents, who included artist Tony Ogle.

Tony was devastated to hear that this Category A historic building was destined to be relocated somewhere else in the Takapuna ward by the land developer. The Council had no interest in saving it, nor stopping the developer from selling it for

re-location. Tony organised an exhibition with local artists at the house called 'End Of An Era'.

People in the community, including Tony Ogle, Ken Pianta, Dave Pearson, Fiona Downes, Ruth Ell, Helen Woodhouse, Michelle Piper and Genevieve, rallied together to save the historic house. They formed the Coach House Trust Inc. and together made submissions to the Council, seeking a new home for the building. Newly elected Mayor George Gair was supportive of the initiative, but not all councillors were. Genevieve has fond memories of Gair. *He was a very well-grounded, even-handed mayor.* Eventually a site was granted at the old landfill at Barry's Point Reserve, which was in the process of being reclaimed and transformed into sports fields. The house was given one corner of the land, but it was up to the community to safely reconstruct the building on the site. There

were issues with escaping gas, toxic waste disposal and land subsidence.

The building was divided into seven sections. Some of its features, including eight brick chimneys, were lost. The sections stood on the roadside

for 18 months until the land was ready for use. For a while the villa was uncovered, and exposed to all weather conditions. It took years of work by the community to transform the old coach house into the Lake House Arts Centre. George Gair was the only patron until his death. Genevieve and David became generous benefactors of the Lake House and, in the early 2000s, the main gallery was named in their honour.

The Becroft Foundation has supported many charities, community groups and services on the Shore, including the North Shore Performing Arts Centre, the Michael King Writers' Centre, Home and Family Counselling, Yes Disability, Plunket and Takapuna's Bruce Mason Events Centre, which opened in 1996. *We'd sit down once a year and write a Christmas list of who we wanted to donate to.*

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One organisation that has been dear to Genevieve's heart is the Friends of Women's Refuge Trust (FoWRT). The Trust was founded in 1994 to support the North Shore Women's Refuge and Camellia House, a refuge for women and children with disabilities. Genevieve joined the Trust in 1995, and immersed herself in fundraising. The first fundraiser was an art and sculpture exhibition held at the Mairangi Arts Centre, which raised \$23,000. Then, Genevieve offered her home and garden as a venue for further exhibitions. From there the biennial event, NZ Sculpture OnShore, was born. Genevieve became a patron of the Trust, along with local resident and friend Lenore Sumpter, and television news presenter Judy Bailey.

The first event attracted 1,800 people. Numbers climbed to a staggering 5,000 in subsequent years, all of whom passed through the Becroft home to admire the work of local artists. 'It's a win-win situation for all involved, even if the Becrofts' lawn takes a bit of hammering', reported the *Sunday Star* in 2002. 'The charities get much needed cash and the public gets the opportunity to admire contemporary sculpture in a residential garden setting and the artists get exposure as well as sales. The red sold stickers spread like measles!' *Who knows why I wanted to do it, but it just started and took off so fast, it was like BOOM!* says Genevieve.

Over the years the event has raised in the vicinity of \$1.5 million for Women's Refuge and over 18,000 people have attended. 'The strength of FoWRT lies in the commitment of this group of women and their capacity to get stuck in and work for what they believe in. It succeeds because, through all the difficulties and difference, the group has always upheld the principles of inclusion, respect, and consensus, and because of this, strong friendships have formed.'¹

The family's kitchen was taken over by committee volunteers to prepare Devonshire teas and the garage became a makeshift café and shop. Genevieve thanks her neighbours for putting up with

the hordes of people passing through their little street. The Becrofts hosted this event four times before it moved to Fort Takapuna, where the exhibition continues today. NZ Sculpture OnShore celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2014.

David and Genevieve have both been recognised for their respective careers and service to the community. Genevieve received the Queen's Service Medal (QSM) in 2002 in recognition of her public service. In 2010, she and David were both awarded a Companion of the North Shore from North Shore City Council. Genevieve has never looked for accolades, keenly aware of the teamwork that goes into any event or campaign.

Genevieve is now in her eighties, and still enjoys listening to the peaceful lapping of Lake Pupuke at her garden's edge. David Becroft passed away in 2015. The couple's children continue the good work of the Becroft Foundation. Life has been good to Genevieve and she in turn has been an asset to the North Shore community.

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¹ 'International Women's Day: A good time to celebrate an extraordinary group of women', by Sue Leslie. *Sculpture*, 6 March 2014.



Genevieve outside her home, which was designed by architects Peter Middleton and Harry Turbott. The house won an architectural award in 1966, repeated in 1994 with a '25-year award' from the New Zealand Institute of Architects.

