

At 100, June Dence reflects on life

Although June Dence is unsure of the ‘secret’ to living to a great age, it may have something to do with her life dedication to serving the community and remaining active in mind, body and spirit.

From delivering soldiers’ canteen goods throughout the war to volunteering at Meals on Wheels for over 40 years, helping others less fortunate than herself seems to have served her well.

Her fierce independence and great love for family, travel and adventure is inspiring. June is bubbly, bright and remains very socially active at her residence in Evermore, Forster.

Born in Manly and spending her early months in Braidwood then Sydney, June was one of three girls, along with Shirley and Lyn, born to John (Jack) and Ella Street.

The family migrated to Gloucester to work in her grandfather’s family legacy of grocery stores, Street and Parish, before moving to Cundletown to run their own business. June attended Taree High School where she was a student from 1935-1938.

After the tragic drowning of her father whilst he was fishing in 1939, June’s mother took the family back to the city where she had family support. They arrived the year World War Two (WWII) was declared and spent their teenage years living in Concord, which was a big change from their country childhood. Sadly, her sister Shirley, passed away from peritonitis at age 19.

Reflecting on her life as a teenager, June says she loved to play tennis and daringly used to ride her bike to Strathfield to play. She’d work in the city, get the train service home or walk home alone from Strathfield – she felt it was very safe. “I shudder now to think what I did,” she said.

As the Headmistress of Taree High school was the secretary

of the Tennis Club, June was allowed to play midweek ladies tennis competition, rather than participate in ordinary sport. She fondly remembers catching the bus out to Forster Bullring for Taree High School swimming carnivals.

During her later teenage years and throughout the war, June volunteered at Women’s



Australian National Service. Her main role was looking after the canteen at the Concord Hospital and delivering items to the wounded patients. She says she got to know a lot of soldiers during this time. She also joined the Women's Fire Auxiliary in response to the mounting possibility of invasion. She answered the phone in the Watch Room and was taught how to use the pumps on the fire engine. Socially, they organised a lot of gymkhana camps that were "quite fun really," she said with a slight glint in her eye.

In 1946 June began working at Timbrol Chemicals at Rhodes, where she met her husband, Ian. He was in the transport section and June paid the wages.

Ian shared her love of the outdoors, adventure and volunteering; Rotary was a big part of their lives. They married in 1952 and together had two daughters, Robyn and Jan.

Sharing the story of her honeymoon like it was yesterday, June says they borrowed a caravan and a car belonging to Ian's father and set off on the coastal road towards Adelaide. She remembers cutting up squares of newspaper for toilet paper, cutting a sheet of newspaper with a hole to put over the long drop, the cold water showers and big open skies. "Well it's more comfortable now, but when you don't know anything else, you don't know anything else," she said of the experience. June said she and Ian were married at 7pm and didn't leave Epping until 10pm. By the time they stopped it was getting late, so she asked where they were staying for the night. "I think we're in a tip," he said. "Well we can't stay here because when people ask where we spent our first night, we can't say in a tip! So, we continued on to Helensburgh," she laughed.

The family moved three times in Epping, but only shifted up the street about six houses in total, all within 100 metres. They bought a general carrying business and their truck carried the first roll of Gladwrap manufactured by Timbrol, which was four miles long. It was delivered to organisations that packaged it up into the small rolls you buy today. "My word it would have packed a lot of sandwiches!" June said.

Ian's parents purchased three blocks of land in the bush, right on the beach at Terrigal; one for themselves, and one each for Ian and his sister. During the 1950 and early 1960's the home they built became their holiday weekender where the families loved to escape from the city. They spent their days on the beach, the kids played in the bush and they would host different friends every

weekend. "The house was not lived in permanently, but it was never empty," she said.

Together, June and Ian became worldly travellers, but they mostly loved to free-camp. They owned a caravan and travelled all over Australia, then travelled overseas and hired a motorhome for seven months. They explored Europe and England then flew to America and Canada. This trip gave them their first taste of motorhoming. In 1992 they bought their first motorhome which became one of their greatest joys.

June, Ian and four other couples formed the local chapter of the Manning Valley CMCA Motorhome group in 1994, which is still operating today. June is invited to cut their anniversary cake each year as she's the only remaining founding member of the chapter. They made her a life member of the chapter five years ago, "which means I get to go to the front of the queue for meals," she said with a grin.

With other Rotarians, friends or the Manning Valley motorhoming group June and Ian loved to go on "safari". They enjoyed the 'apple run', free camping along the Murray or Murrumbidgee Rivers and travelling to all states of Australia with six to ten other vehicles at a time.

A favourite holiday of June's was with five Rotarians and their wives. The group hired a houseboat and travelled down the Murray, through the Lochs. "It was a great holiday, I'll always remember that one," she said.

When Ian retired in 1987, they moved to Forster and built at the Keys. They already had one daughter, Robyn, and family living in town and within a few years their second daughter, Jan, had moved up too. June loves the climate and the town's proximity to Sydney.

Ian acquired dementia and had to stop driving in 2010, so at the age of 88 June started driving the motorhome full-time. She only gave up at 94 years old.

She has always valued her independence and reluctantly handed in her driver's license at age 98 at the suggestion of her ex-policeman son-in-law. "You've got to drive the other car as well as your own, be aware of what they're doing," she said. "It was a big decision as I lost my independence, which was hard."

When asked the recipe to reaching a ripe age, June's daughter, Robyn, shares that she likes a



Baileys (but not every day) and remains active and independent. She spends her time doing water aerobics (hydrotherapy), playing bingo, mah-jong and goes to craft sessions at Evermore. "She's never home, basically," laughs Robyn, who was visiting her mother for her birthday.

June loves the social life and chatting (Robyn suggests that craft group is perhaps just an excuse for a chat), but June then brings out the trauma bears she's knitted for the ambulance, fire brigade, police and domestic violence services. She also cooked biscuits for the fire brigade during the 2020 bushfires when she was 98 years old. Again, I'm left thinking that giving to others may be the secret?!

June maintains she made two good decisions in her life – married the man she did, and moved into her residence at Evermore, two years after Ian's passing.

She doesn't know how many more birthdays she will have but shared that her great grandson, aged seven, believed that when you turn 100, you die. He insisted on the family visiting early on the day of her birthday in case she died before their arrival from Sydney. This made her laugh.

Last year her granddaughter, Kelly, bought her a star and said, "of all the bright stars, the brightest one is Puppa." June says this is a nice way to remember Ian as not all of her eight great grandchildren were lucky enough to meet him. Ian is still a great presence in his five grandchildren's lives and conversations which June loves.

Evermore recently hosted a party for June as she was the first resident to reach 100 – she could invite 100 guests, one for every year of her life. "They organised the food and decorations. They did a fantastic job; I couldn't fault it," she said.

June has no regrets and despite experiencing some trauma and loss she remains in good spirits and happy with her life. "I've had a good life, caravanned and had lots of holidays motor-homing," she said.

June laughed when asked if there was any secret she'd like to share that her daughter might not know - but she did not divulge. She does hope that the children of today learn to respect their elders and authority. "Policemen were friends in my day, and we had great respect for them," she said.

Happy Birthday June! We are glad that you received your letter from the Queen and that she was able to sign it for you.

