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Charles Riddle • 05:00, Aug 03 2019



SUPPLIED

Peter Ramsay's love of daffodils started at age five.

### **Peter Douglas Kenneth Ramsay PhD QSM September 30, 1939 – July 21, 2019**

It is entirely apposite timing that Peter Ramsay's life story should appear in the month of August.

Peter, a University of Waikato education professor, excelled both as an academic and as a floriculturist.

While as a young man in a rugby-driven culture he tended to keep his interest in flower growing private, Peter ended at the top of his game in 2013 when he was awarded Britain's Royal Horticultural Society Peter Barr Cup for his daffodils.

And his participation in the 1988 Picot Report on education helped lead to a systematic overhaul of school education in this country.

Talking to Waikato Times journalist Gill Davis in 2007, Peter said he was just five years old when he created his first daffodil cross.

The breeding and growing process fascinated him throughout his life. He nurtured the bulbs, admired their flowers, and revelled in the sense of discovery they offered.

Peter inherited his love of the flower from his father, Jim, who had been weaned off dahlias and on to daffs when redundancy forced a move to a smaller property in the 1940s.

There were years, however, when the subject was one Peter did not flaunt as he felt it lacked the right blokey image for his beer-drinking, rugby-playing mates at university.

"Men grew vegetables in those days, not flowers – but then I've always been a bit different."

Peter, who retired to his award-winning Matangi garden with more than 30,000 daffodil bulbs, said he was always interested in the genetics of the flower.

"I've never been much of a dab hand at painting or drawing," he told reporter Aaron Leaman in 2007, "but I really enjoy the creative side to growing daffodils.

"They give me a tremendous amount of pleasure."

Such was Peter's daffodil fame it occasionally threatened to overshadow his strong academic career in Waikato University's School of Education.

immediately after he stopped talking and asked: "Can you tell me about that Peter Ramsay on your staff; how does he grow those beautiful daffodils?"

Peter was born in Hawera, the third child for Jim and Grace Ramsay. Jim was a dairy factory worker with a love of growing dahlias and, later, daffodils.

Peter completed his schooling at New Plymouth Boys High School and started work for the Bank of New Zealand. He met the second great love of his life, Lesley, in 1956 at a dance. He was 17 and Lesley just 15. As a sign of his undying affection Peter presented Lesley with a box of daffodil bulbs for her 16th birthday. So started a 62-year love affair.

Peter realised banking was not for him and enrolled in Palmerston North Teachers College in 1960. That same year he became engaged to Lesley on his 21st birthday.

They married in 1962 and moved to Wellington as Peter had won a rare award allowing him to convert his teaching diploma into a Victoria University degree.

The newly graduated Peter started teaching at South Wellington Intermediate School before returning to university to complete his master's degree, for which he received first class honours. In 1967 he became the inaugural curriculum officer for the New Zealand Educational Institute.

In 1969 he took up a position at the University of Waikato as a junior lecturer – the start of an illustrious career in academia culminating in his appointment as a university Fellow.

Perhaps Peter's academic legacy is his participation in 1988 on the five-member team that produced the Picot Report that completely changed the structure and administration of the school education sector through the Tomorrow's Schools programme. The report ushered in the new Ministry of Education, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, and the Education Review Office under Prime Minister David Lange, who appointed himself Minister of Education to ensure implementation of the team's recommendations.

Chief executive of the Task Force on Education Administration, Maurice Gianotti, responsible for the Picot Report, said Peter was a very solid contributor.

He was a very practical kind of person, he would get his hands dirty working in classrooms with teachers. He wasn't a typical academic, and he identified that it was the quality of leadership, particularly that of the principals, that made the difference in schools."

For nigh on 50 years Peter maintained a careful balance between daffodils and education.

A founding member of the Northern Daffodil Club in 1971, Peter shared his first love with many, encouraging and inspiring future daffodil growers and breeders.

Daughter Tracey said her father was a showman at heart. "This culminated with Springworld in 1984, followed by Gardenworld in 1989, and again in 1991. The final feat for the greatest showman was the Gardens Festival in 1994, a show spread across many properties in the Waikato district."

And when Bill Featherstone of Hamilton City Council mooted the idea of a purpose-built horticultural complex in Hamilton Gardens, he approached Gerard Williams of the Waikato Rose Society and Peter for support. The Hamilton Gardens Pavilion Building Trust was formed, and the resultant building has proven a tremendous asset.

Tracey said her childhood, and that of her brother John's, was full of "daffodils, dirt, and not going on holiday when everyone else did".

"The bulbs had to be lifted during Christmas holidays and planted at Easter. However, we were incredibly lucky that Dad took the family overseas for two sabbaticals.

"Dad timed his sabbaticals to perfection, spending the winter months working, then finishing the trips off with a brief holiday in the springtime. While this might not sound like the best time of year to travel, for Dad it was – it meant that he got to go to the daffodil shows in the northern hemisphere."

In 1985, Peter and Lesley formed Koanga Daffodils with sheep farmer Max Hamilton, and his wife Kath. The partnership was formidable and lasted for 22 years.

Tracey said the growers' success on the show bench is unrivalled in this country. "For several years they were not only taking the top prizes in New Zealand, but they were also Australasian champions."

Rest Home in Hamilton when his condition declined.

Peter was an NZEI Honorary Fellow, a Rotary Paul Harris Fellow, and was awarded the Hamilton City Council Civic Honour Medal. He held the New Zealand 1990 Commemoration Medal, the David Bell Gold Medal, and the American Daffodil Society Gold Medal. He was a vice-president of the Daffodil Society of Great Britain, and a life member of the Northern Daffodil Club and the New Zealand National Daffodil Society.

• *A Life Story tells of a New Zealander who helped to shape the Waikato community. If you know of someone whose life story should be told, please email [Charles.riddle@wintec.ac.nz](mailto:Charles.riddle@wintec.ac.nz)*

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