

Geoff Harrison – strike a pose



Geoff in a San Chi Kai karate pose, c. 1999



Sue and Geoff, c. 2015

Sue Dowl met her partner Geoff Harrison later in life, but she had known about him from a young age. They both grew up in Campbell Town, which is a small enough place for everyone to either know each other or know of each other. When the couple finally met in Launceston in 2015 their future together looked rosy. Neither were prepared for the dark days that were to follow a few short years later when Geoff was diagnosed with Lewy Body Dementia, a progressive degenerative brain disorder that can manifest in a range of debilitating ways, including paranoia, hallucinations and delusions.

How the disease affects people can vary greatly. For actor comedian Robin Williams, it is widely believed that the deep depression it caused him triggered his suicide, even though his illness was not identified and named until after his death. For Geoff, as his fear and confusion grew with the disease, it triggered aggressive and violent behaviour, before treatment and disease progression reduced his ability to walk and talk.

Geoff was no stranger to violence. As a child he was beaten by his father. He told Sue that he began boxing under the instruction of local boxer Billy Jackman as a means of defending himself from any further beatings. He then took up Olympic weightlifting and went on to compete and win several second and third places. To bulk up, he then became a body builder, but his most enduring sport was karate.

From the get-go Geoff was passionate about karate. His karate of choice was San Chi Kai, an adaptable modern karate style prominent in Tasmania that offers a freestyle approach to self-defence and street-use. In an interview made before his illness, Geoff explained his switch to martial arts was because, 'I could punch hard, kick hard, [and] although I didn't have the jumping capabilities of the more flexible students I more than held my own'. He more than proved his capabilities when, under the guidance of San Chi Kai founder and grandmaster, Kaicho Mal Lomax, he competed at the Goodwill Games in Brisbane in 1995, winning a silver medal against a five times American World Champion. His exceptional martial arts achievements were recognised in 2014 when he received the Budoka of the Year – San Chi Kai

award and inducted into the Australian Martial Arts Hall of Fame (AMAHOF). Along with running his own karate dojo in Launceston, this was one of Geoff's proudest achievements.



Geoff Harrison: Budoka of the Year – San Chi Kai award and induction into the Australian Martial Arts Hall of Fame (AMAHOF), 2014

While his love and commitment to karate remained constant through much of his life, Geoff made a number of career changes in his working life. Unlike the steadfast discipline he maintained to excel in his sport, jobwise he got restless and moved on to something different. His first job as a motor mechanic apprentice, undertaken at his father's instigation, lasted a year. For a short time, he worked as a stonemason restoring churches around Tasmania and at the UNESCO World Heritage-listed historic site of Port Arthur. In Tassie and Sydney's Kings Cross, he worked as a pub bouncer, which utilised his bodybuilding and karate skills, but he was not proud of how he handled many of the fights that came his way when he thought about them as he got older.

Geoff also had an aptitude for and enjoyed working with computers. He studied to become an Electronics Technician and worked as an audio engineer/sound technician at 7LA and Southern Cross Television. His longest job was working in real estate property maintenance, first with a company in Melbourne and later in a business he established in Launceston.

When Sue met Geoff in 2015, he was working in security. In hindsight she thinks his illness was already beginning to impact when they got together, but at the time 'he was so much fun,' she says, and he changed her life. She was very conservative, she says, but his 'charismatic, confident and didn't care what others thought' personality helped her become more confident and to say what she thought. Learning how to stick up for herself became a skill she needed and relied upon to survive the terrible journey his dementia wreaked on their lives.

Although they had grown up in Campbell Town and are only a year apart in age, Sue says the year age gap was enough for them not to have crossed paths with each other when they were younger. In part this was also because she lived on a property on the outskirts of the town where

she spent most of her spare time with horses. If in town, her free time was spent at the local swimming pool, but as Geoff couldn't swim, he was never present when she met up with friends. Later, when they became a couple, they would go kayaking at Greens Beach because it was shallow and it didn't matter if he fell into the water.

The man Sue knew and fell in love with was a light-hearted man. Nothing worried him and he had a great sense of humour and loved to tell jokes. While Sue thinks Geoff was probably hot-headed when he was younger, the older Geoff she knew was great at talking people around situations, rather than fighting them. This may have been a life skill he learnt, but he was a great reader and read biographies and anything about his sport, karate. Sue also thinks he had every cookbook ever printed as he loved to cook. As a dedicated sportsman, he was very careful about his diet and health and never added salt or sugar to his food. His taste, like everything else, changed after his diagnosis. He began to crave sweet things- cakes and biscuits, and from only ever drinking strong black coffee, since going into care, he has it white with sugar.

Geoff's illness progressed very quickly. With none of his three adult children living in the state, Sue was on her own. There was nobody else to help him, or care for him, and she didn't know how to deal with the aggressive and violent man he had become. She felt trapped, but she felt looking after him was the right thing to do, and she followed her heart taking care of Geoff the best that she could for as long as she could.

Looking back 'it was just awful,' she says, and she doesn't really know how she got through it all. With Geoff's children absent and her family strongly opposed to her caring for him, she had little support until she contacted Ben at adaptCARE for help. Sue is forever grateful for that help and support. It changed her life, as it did Geoff's.