

## **BOB FERGUSSON: The Benevolent Society's oldest volunteer**

The Benevolent Society is extremely lucky. We have employees and volunteers who stay with us for decades.

Meet Bob Fergusson. For 16 years he has hopped on the bus from his home at Mirabooka in Little Bay and travels to The Benevolent Society. He has been coming in to The Benevolent Society's headquarters in Paddington every Thursday to help out wherever he is needed.

He comes in, waters the plants, and proceeds to have a chat with various members of staff. He is extremely sociable and friendly. He always remembers and cares about people's lives. He bakes dampers and biscuits on Australia Day and often brings in chocolate.

It is this genuine interest and compassion for people which has kept Bob socially connected and engaged with society. Sharp as ever, Bob turns 90 on 19 March. As St Patricks Day is 17 March, he'll probably come to head office with green dampers!

Bob was born in Moree, in the north west of New South Wales. Moree sits atop an artesian bore and is known for its hot climate and mineral springs. Bob's father was a plumber, and his mother looked after him, his three brothers and two sisters.

As a schoolboy at Moree Public, Bob worked a couple of hours a day for Mr Dash, the chemist, delivering medications and equipment to Moree Public Hospital and the town's two private hospitals.

'Mr Dash would have liked to take me on full time,' Bob said, 'but I didn't have the qualifications.' And he couldn't afford to get them. Instead, at 16, Bob took a job behind the counter of Mansours, the haberdashery empire, with 43 drapery shops around New South Wales. He was there nine years.

He relocated to Sydney around the time of WWII where he has lived and worked since.

'I left Moree 67 years ago,' Bob said. 'My first job in Sydney was at Mark Foy's, selling neckties and scarves. In that lovely building in Liverpool Street. I was there for five years.' After working behind the counter at Nock and Kirby's in George Street, Bob moved to Waverly, to Traversi and Jones's hardware store, where he remained for 24 years. 'Bunnings bought them out,' Bob recalled.

Bob never married and he has no children of his own, but he is very close to his nieces and nephews and many other friends and relatives.

He retired at 67. A friend told him about The Benevolent Society's retirement villages, and he found a place at Rotary Court in Alexandria, which housed 33 people.

When the facility closed down 10 years later, The Benevolent Society again did all they could to assist Bob in finding a new home at Mirabooka, their subsidised assisted living aged care facility in Sydney's Little Bay, where Bob has lived for the past 14 years.

Volunteering plays a pivotal part in helping Bob to stay connected to society, something many ageing Australians, are living without. It gives him a sense of belonging and allows him to keep giving back to his community.

What prompted Bob to become a volunteer? 'One of the executives was running a program called Sonny's Day in 2002. I heard about it and came and helped with different things for three years.'

Since then Bob has spent a day a week working for The Benevolent Society doing 'whatever is available for me to do.'

Bob believes he's lucky to be a volunteer. 'It has given me a lot of pleasure, and it gives me a better outlook on life. And I love meeting all the different people.'

The Benevolent Society asked Bob what he would like as a token of gratitude after his first 15 years of service. 'I told them I would like to climb the Harbour Bridge,' said Bob. And his wish was granted. Other perks attending a morning tea and an evening function presided over by Dame Mary Bashir at Government House.

Small, stooped and grey, with fair Scottish skin, Bob is a familiar sight in the corridors of The Benevolent Society's Paddington office. He knows everybody and they all know him. He's part of the place.

For his birthday in March, Bob is holding a party for 45 to 50 people at Mirrabooka Village; unfortunately, he can only fit in 10 of his colleagues from The Benevolent Society.

Will Bob keep going? 'Maybe I'll semi retire,' he said, smiling.