

Valmai Dennis

Retirement village manager, 61, Toowoomba

Interview **LEANNE EDMISTONE**

I'm very proud of my Blue Star. It is an award given by Blue Care in recognition of extraordinary commitment and dedication to Blue Care, its clients and residents. I got it on my anniversary of 40 years with the organisation. A lot of people say it's unusual for someone to stay in one workplace for such a long time but I haven't done the same job for 40 years – I've had a variety of roles, in a variety of places, so it's like having lots of different jobs with the same employer.

I was always going to be a teacher – I just hadn't decided if it was in home economics or accounting. I was born in Brisbane, due to possible complications, but grew up on a mixed dairy farm at Quinalow, 73km north of Toowoomba, with my late Mum Gladys, late Dad Charlie, older brothers Barry, 71, and (late) Jeff, younger sister Elva, 59, and younger brother Kel, 57. I had a great life growing up on the farm.

I applied for the position of junior office assistant with Toowoomba Garden Settlement, as it was called then, before I graduated from Oakey State High School and I got it, but they were good enough to let me finish my exams before I started. The plan was to work 12 months to earn money to go to teachers' college. My first jobs were delivering mail to residents and collecting their fortnightly rent. It was all done in cash those days. I loved working with the residents so much, I never left.

When I fell pregnant with my twin boys, Matthew and Simon, 32, I did resign but after six months, the general manager asked if I would come back on a part-time basis. They set up a home office for me, which was fantastic, and gradually the hours went back to full time in the office. In 2001, I transferred from Blue Care Toowoomba to the southeast regional office where I looked after accounts receivable and government funding acquittal for the region. Since September

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2009, I have managed four retirement villages across Toowoomba, Stanthorpe and Ipswich.

Growing up without grandparents, I guess when I first started that was part of the connection, knowing that something had been missing. Now they're more like my mothers, than grandmothers! But I think I have an affinity with the residents. I'm a very hands-on manager. I like being able to play a small part in their lives, trying to improve their quality of life.

I don't regret not going into teaching at all; working with the elderly has made me more caring and compassionate. I get as much from the residents as they might get from me. It's a feeling that's hard to put into words. They're

all like family to me. I had tears writing my resignation letter. I'll miss them so much.

My husband Russell (60, retired Toowoomba Mail Centre manager) and I met in 1978, driving up

the main street of Toowoomba. I had a green Mini minor and he had a white Datsun. That's what young people did in those days: they got together of a night-time in their cars in the main street. Some of the girls I lived with knew some of the boys Russell was in a group with. He was cute, active and we were both interested in sports. He's played everything but mainly cricket and golf, and we played night tennis together. I wasn't to his standard but, anyway, he put up with it!

Retirement (in October) is really going to be about doing things together. Russell worked shift work, I had long hours and we

LUCKY STAR: Blue Care's Valmai Dennis has loved working with the elderly and received the Blue Star (inset) in recognition of her dedication. Picture: Mark Cranitch

used to just pass like ships in the night, so it will be nice to spend some time together. We love to travel; to just get in the car and take off. Wherever we go Russell will play golf, while I just want to relax and read books. Apart from my gardening, I haven't taken up any other hobbies yet. I can knit, sew and crochet but they're not passions. We've also talked about volunteering together down the track.

Our grandson Liam – Simon and wife Reegan's son – has just turned two. Russell – he's Pop and I'm Nan – has been doing a bit of babysitting since he retired earlier this year, and I miss out. I'm looking forward to being part of Liam's growing up, to taking him to the park. He's a very active little boy, who's just starting to speak in sentences. It's amazing how clever he is. Liam's such a delight.

