

Members Life Stories

Members life stories is a collection of the personal stories presented by our own members at our annual general meetings early in each year.

Further stories will be added to the collection as they become available.

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Vivienne Allan

Having an OE at 59

Talk to the members of U3A Pegasus at the meeting on 15th March 2021

Every adventure has to start somewhere. Mine began when I suggested to my husband John that I would like to take a gap year. He thought I was joking but made the mistake of saying if I could find a job overseas, we would go.

There's nothing like a challenge especially when it is issued with some humour as if to say, you won't be able to find a job, therefore we won't be going.

It was about September 2005 and I was working for the Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) as their communications manager. The CEO Jean O'Callaghan had recently resigned to take up a position as CEO of Bedford Hospital in England. I was writing the DHB's annual report and needed to ask her what she wanted to say about the past year. I rang Bedford hospital and spoke with Jean's PA who mentioned in passing that the hospital was looking for a communications manager. I might consider applying, she said.

When Jean came to the phone I asked what she thought – she said she would have to step back from the appointment process because she knew me, however, I should submit an application. I did, was interviewed via video link – zoom hadn't been invented then – and within a few days offered the job.

John, my ever helpful husband, was a bit taken aback, but we swung into action and in less than a month our son and his wife agreed to live in our home for the three years we would be away. We had sorted out some household things that we wanted to ship ahead, why, in hindsight I have no idea, but that was our thinking at the time. And, most importantly we had encouraged our daughter to see the good side of our plan. As a new mother, she thought we were a bit mad, taking off overseas when we had a beautiful new grand-daughter to enjoy.

A few English expats who live in NZ were doubtful about Bedford and regaled us with what to expect, none of it cheerful, and of course the London bombings that had occurred in July 2005 were also uppermost in the minds of family and friends. Undaunted, I spent a few weeks organising my patriality (paternal grandfather) which required getting a special stamp on my passport. We packed, and on Boxing Day we flew to London. It was the start of an extended adventure that definitely eclipsed any OE that Kiwis in their early 20s tend to take and definitely mine.

We didn't know whether to rent or buy, but soon worked out that with interest rates relatively low, we would be better buying a flat. That became John's first job while I settled into the routines of the hospital. We were incredibly lucky in that we made friends very easily, one of them was one of the Hospital's Board members, herself a PhD in health science, of English/Indian background with a wealth of knowledge and many friends and neighbours many of whom, we soon found out, needed house renovations. Suddenly John was very busy. Our friend, her name was Vina, lived in Flitwick (pronounced Fli-ick) which is mid-way between Bedford and Luton and while John was flat hunting, he was also working and getting to know the neighbouring counties.

We needed a car, and then we found a flat. It was tiny, and needed a lot of renovation work. That was John's job while I was coming to grips with the differences between the NHS and the NZ health sector, and also the hierarchy within a hospital that I hadn't encountered before. Bedford being some

distance from London was third in the defence circle if another terrorist attack occurred. As a result, I was involved in the detailed planning required and was hugely impressed with the strategic and operational plans put in place by London police, regional police, fire and ambulance services. Everyone had their roles and everyone knew what to do in an emergency.

John and I decided we would explore the UK every weekend. We wanted to make the most of our time. We learned about bank holidays – even Good Friday is a bank holiday although Easter Sunday and Easter Monday are given their proper names. On Anzac Day we went up to London – we learned that it didn't matter whether you are north, south, east or west of London, you go 'up' not down or across. We booked for concerts and plays, going to St Martins-in-the-Fields for a Bach concert, and finding the volunteer lunch bar underneath the Church, going regularly to the V&A, shopping at John Lewis, and generally feeling like we were locals.

We went to Oxford and Cambridge and loved them both equally. We discovered gastro pubs with great food, drove to Hay-on-Wye, the famous book town where the annual writers' festival is held. We went south to Devon and on to the Cornish coast, finding the home of Daphne du Maurier. We went to Padstow, aka Padstein because Rick Stein owned a restaurant and a chippie there. We couldn't afford to eat in the restaurant but the fish and chips were delicious.

Everything was an adventure.

The fun came to a sudden crashing halt in late August when the UK Health Secretary decided to visit Bedford hospital. The protocols ahead of an official visit are similar to here, so I wasn't too concerned, except Jean, the CEO, had planned to go to Italy on holiday. 'I could cope' she told me. Of course nothing ever goes smoothly when you want it to.

The hospital union decided to create a media fuss while the Minister was there. I had a communications assistant, a young man who was usually very good – not long after the Minister had gone, he came to me in a fluster to say the hospital union rep was being interviewed on the hospital grounds. This was a no-no. Instead of saying, it doesn't matter, I went off to see what was happening.

It was very windy, and I have hair that tends to have a mind of its own. I approached the cameraman and asked him to turn the camera off while I talked with the interviewer. Of course he didn't. I asked the interviewer to go across the road and do the interview, in other words, not on hospital grounds. The union man shouted that I was stopping him talking. You can imagine the scene. It wasn't pretty.

That night, there I was on the BBC news, hair awry, looking cross, explaining that they couldn't film on site. You can imagine the fallout. Jean came back from Italy to find the hospital board Chair very unhappy. What did I do? I went to the hairdresser and had my hair cut.

Things returned to normal and we continued as before. Bedford hospital had an excellent catering facility including a public café where members of the public would go for a meal, even if they weren't visiting a patient. The cook became a friend and I persuaded him to make Afghans, Belgian biscuits and Shrewsbury biscuits. I had assumed they had originated from the old country and was astonished we couldn't get them in England. He made them and sold them for a pound each and called them 'biscuits from New Zealand made to an original recipe.' Much later, we discovered that Shrewsbury biscuits are called Jammy Dodgers. They aren't the same.

Unlike NZ, smoking was still permitted on hospital premises and in public places – bans didn't come into effect until a year after we arrived in the UK. I had a fine time when the CEO suggested we try and educate the public not to smoke in the hospital grounds. I asked the maintenance man to paint

no smoking signs on the pavement at the entrances to the hospital grounds. They should be like the no smoking signs e.g. a red circle with a red line diagonally across the centre and the words 'butt out' inside the circle. Everyone got the message except the specialists. The hospital dermatologist burst into my office in a fury, his bow tie askew and told me that 'butt' was American slang for 'bottom.'

In late October 2006, so 10 months after we had arrived, I had a phone call out of the blue from a London recruiter, who asked me whether I was happy in my job. I was very surprised, and said I hadn't thought about it. She said I sounded like a Kiwi – she was – and would I like to come up to London to see her? Why not, I thought. It was one of those things that happen to other people rather than to me. Off I went, and within two weeks I had a job offer with the NHS's National Patient Safety Agency based in London. Leaving Bedford wasn't a hardship, although my CEO was less than happy.

For the first month I commuted from Bedford to London, but then my cousin who lives on the Welsh/English border, offered us a flat in Notting Hill for nominal rent on the condition that when her husband came to London he would have a bed. Michael, her husband, was a recently retired EU Ambassador. Their flat was a spacious 3-bedroomed apartment in Notting Hill, five minutes from Portabello Road. We moved on Waitangi Day when Kiwis traditionally go on a pub crawl around London, so the trains and underground were full of them.

We settled into a lovely routine whereby John would walk with me to the office, through Hyde Park, a coffee on the way, and he would then walk back. My job quickly expanded from managing external relations for the NPSA to acting Communications Director because of a staff realignment. The CEO, Martin Fletcher was an Australian, the Medical Director Kevin Cleary was an ex-pat Kiwi, there were several NZders on the staff and we were tasked with determining the major factors relating to patient safety and what could be done to prevent hospital acquired infections, wrong-side surgery, and everything in between. It was fascinating.

I had a team of professional communications personnel from all over the world, who managed marketing, publications, events, media and so on. At the same time, our prime focus was hand hygiene. It was my main task and we launched the England/Wales hand hygiene initiative with great success at St Thomas' hospital. I was surprised to see that the hospital's intended venue was a replica of the Art Centre's great hall in Christchurch, except, the Art Centre's was the replica of course.

At the end of the year, John and I moved to St John's Wood, just down the road from Lords Cricket Ground and very close to Regents Park. This time, another cousin had been left a flat after a relative died, and it needed substantial renovation. We could live in the flat rent-free while John did the renovations. It was on the 6th floor and again it was an easy walk to work – closer than Notting Hill.

Part way through our stay, John decided he would like to work the summer season at Lords. He applied and was successful, working with mainly Kiwis, Aussies, Indians and Pakistanis who were all dedicated cricket fans. He was tasked with stewarding the members' stand where the men come in their bacon and egg ties and panama hats and drink Veuve Cliquot and eat cucumber sandwiches. He met all the famous cricket fans, Boris Johnson, David Cameron and so on.

The year passed with all our work achieved and we started to plan to return to Christchurch. Every now and again, I would fly to Geneva to discuss patient safety issues with the WHO's Patient Safety Secretariat. Sir Liam Donaldson who was the UK Medical Officer of Health was also the champion for the WHO Secretariat. After one of my visits, I had a phone call from the Secretariat asking whether I would like to go to Geneva on a year's contract. I would. I asked John and he said why not!

My first job was to manage the announcement of the results of an international surgery study. This was a study led by Professor Atul Gawande, an eminent US physician who worked for Harvard as well as WHO and was a surgeon at the Brigham & Women's Hospital in Boston as well as a staff writer for the New Yorker. The study demonstrated that with improved and very focused communication, morbidity and mortality following surgery would be reduced by as much as 40-60 per cent.

It was a global communications event which became front page news in the UK, the US, Canada, Australia – most places except in New Zealand. It was a bit odd given that Auckland hospital was one of the hospitals involved in the study and Professor Alan Merry (Auckland) was one of the contributors to the study.

Geneva was another amazing experience. We were familiar with Switzerland. Our daughter-in-law is Swiss and we have friends whose parents knew my parents in Cairo during WW2. John and I stayed first in an auberge that had seen better days, then moved into an apartment that was within a UN compound with Swiss military as its guards. We were there with the German and Iranian embassies and a few others which I can't remember. When the owner of the apartment returned to Geneva, we moved into another apartment, slightly bigger, with a view over the lake, and very close to the main railway station.

My main task at WHO was to lead and organise a global hand hygiene programme which was to be launched on 5 May, so we didn't have much time. It so happened that in the midst of the planning, the H1N1 global pandemic burst upon us, so in addition to my main job, I was also involved in working the phones to respond to global media, everyone wanting to know what was happening where. If nothing else, it was a lesson in the importance of hand hygiene. We noticed that in western countries the incidence of H1N1 was greater than in developing countries.

My first task was to recruit an international company that was expert across the gamut of communications including advertising. The outcome was Ogilvie Healthworld, an international company that manages enormous global programmes. The health division was very influential and the staff expert in their field.

In Geneva, we needed a high profile person to officially open the global campaign with H1N1 still a real issue around the world. It would need to be a webinar with links to different countries and a huge profile on the WHO Patient Safety website. By good fortune, Richard Branson's daughter was a GP working for the NHS in the UK. It was a relatively easy step from her to his PA and I asked whether he would be prepared to champion the launch of the hand hygiene programme. He said he would. He organised for a video shoot on his island and we were up and running.

I spent the rest of the year working on the many different WHO patient safety initiatives including starting an initiative for developing countries where they don't have pulse oximeters even in many hospitals let alone medical practices. When time permitted, John and I took weekend train trips to France and Italy, flying long weekends to Turkey and Greece, Israel and Scandinavia.

At the end of 2009, we thought it was time we returned to NZ. It wasn't the first time we had been back because our daughter had produced another baby while we were away and we had returned to Christchurch once a year during our 4-year OE. To begin with I continued working remotely on what was now called the Lifebox project which included not only the pulse oximeters but also training options for medical staff. But then 4 September happened. It was the start of the earthquakes and I was called on to work first for Civil Defence and then for CERA. It was like going from one adventure to another, except the first was such fun, and the second was, at least initially, borderline chaos.

Heather Fear

Picking up the pieces – preserving the memories

Talk to the members of U3A Pegasus at the meeting on 15th March 2021

Mine is unashamedly an earthquake story which 10 years after the earthquakes changed the lives for many people in Christchurch, will resonate with many of you.

How many of you had kitchens that looked like this after the earthquake on 22nd February in 2011?



Our kitchen at 24 Glendever Terrace 22 February 2011

Although we could never live in our house again, there followed the tedious task of retrieving and sorting the pieces that could be salvaged as proof of ownership to make an insurance claim.

We had many lovely things with few left intact and the trouble is I could not part with the pieces.

And through this experience I learnt a lot about myself.

We ended up with crates of broken china, and over the next 5 years lived in 7 places - and the china came too.

Robin would say “when are you going to get rid of all this stuff”? And I would reply - “I will do something with it one day – the stories and memories are important and need to be passed on.



My inspiration came from a number of sources, including Crack'd for Christchurch. This is a group of talented women, who very soon after the earthquakes put out a call for people to donate their broken china which they collected with the intention of creating some kind of mosaic for the city. I donated boxes of my everyday china and am sure I can find pieces in their wonderful masterpiece “Flora and Otto” which can be seen in the Christchurch Botanic Gardens.

I am also inspired by the wonderful creativity of Josie Martin which can be seen in her Garden of International Significance at the Giants House in Akaroa.

After nearly 5 years living in Blenheim, we moved back to Christchurch to live in 2016, once settled in our home, the time felt right to do something with the crates of broken pieces.

I decided I would like to try my hand at mosaics, attending a one-day workshop run by Crack'd for Christchurch where I made this gate stop.



Then I went to night school at Papanui High School for a term where I made this number for our house out of a plate my Father gave my Mother on their wedding day. Now we're away.

My mother had a coffee set that had belonged to her mother, made of the very finest paragon china. Parts of this coffee set were used to create a godwit that now stands in our garden.



Like many of you I had a collection of fine bone china tea cups and saucers – many owned by our grandparents.

Not one has survived. But the memories have been preserved in the form of garden spheres, created on polystyrene balls.

These ones are inset with broken mirrors and mounted on fibre glass rods where they sway in my sister's garden.



Other spheres made from the broken tea cups and saucers grace the outdoor table of our daughter Jenny in Adelaide.



Jenny also has a house number and paper weight created from some of her broken china.

And our oldest daughter Cathy has a house number created from a plate belonging to her grandmother (Robin's Mother).



Jenny's paper weight



Jenny's house number



Cathy's house number

And then came the fairy doors.

Inspired by the fairy doors dotted through some of the forests and along the Southshore walkway, Robin created fairy door cut-outs which the grandchildren painted. Their works of art are now in our garden and their garden, as well as along public walkways.

A niece suggested I mosaic fairy doors, using the china handles as fairy door handles, and including where possible the special mark designating the maker of the china.

This began a new way of preserving many memories, with mosaiced fairy doors now found in gardens in Brisbane, Sheffield (UK) and many places in NZ.

My mother owned a 68-piece Royal Doulton Princess dinner set, complete with egg cups, meat platters, gravy boat and vegetable dishes with lids.

Growing up, we used it often and when she went into care around 2005, it was passed onto me – the whole 68 pieces intact!

My mother died in December 2010 – just 2 months before the disastrous earthquake that shattered much of her precious dinner set.

The grief from my mother's death followed so soon after by the disastrous earthquake almost overwhelmed me with guilt – I felt as though I had personally smashed the china with sledge hammer.

Picking up these pieces and creating this fairy door for my brother has been a very healing process



Robin's Dad was an importer of fine china and crystal. Over a period of about 15 years, he gave each of his 4 children a Royal Copenhagen Year mug. I really enjoyed having this lovely collection of mugs and still have some.

The 1972 Royal Copenhagen Year mug was made to commemorate the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich and was used to make a fairy door for a niece who lives in Sheffield England.



Robin's Dad also served in Italy during the war and brought back an ornate tea set from Italy for his wife who was at home with their first born (Robin). It was overlaid with silver, and made in Florence by Richard Ginori - a prolific ceramic artist during the 1930s-1950s.

Along with the many other beautiful things they owned it was always prominently displayed in the homes they lived in, although I can't recall it ever being used! Robin's mother gave it to me around 2008 when she went into care and I loved it because of the story of where it came from.



From the tea set came another fairy door which is now letting the fairies into the garden of my sister-in-law in Brisbane.

I have enough china left from the tea set to make fairy doors for Robin's other two sisters as well.

My journey in mosaics has enabled the memories to be passed on from those pieces we picked up a decade ago, in a way that is very therapeutic for me, and brings much joy to others.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share this journey with you.

Paul Hammonds

A slice of Rev'd Paul Hammonds' life

Talk to the members of U₃A Pegasus at the meeting on 15th March 2021

Here's a question for you – with a hand up answer;

- **Have any of you ever held or fired a revolver – a six shooter? Hands up**

Today let me share with you 3 revolver incidents which impacted on my life:

- The first was a foolish and in a sense a humorous incident which 'killed' a clock
- The 2nd was when I had to walk up Hereford St many years ago – with a loaded revolver in my trouser pocket – with the words of my Manager ringing in my ears, "Hammonds, don't put your hand in your pocket or you might shoot yourself in the foot"
- The 3rd revolver incident took place many years later when my wife Heather and I were working in Tanzania. Those were heady days when Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda relatively recently had gained their independence. But it was also at a cost, when Idi Amin in a coup took over Uganda and began a regime of terror, cruelty and beheadings, killing over 3000,000 Ugandans. When our Anglican Archbishop Janini Luwum was shot when he confronted Idi Amin about the way he was leading Uganda, Idi Amin's response, in anger, was to pull out his revolver and shoot him dead.

The first two revolver incidents happened during my working life as a banker. When I left Secondary School in Timaru, I joined the staff of the ANZ bank – and thinking ahead for my career, I started studying for a Bachelor of Commerce degree, extra murally, from Canterbury University.

After 3 years in Timaru, I asked for as transfer to Christchurch, so that I could work and also do part time study at the University in subjects where it was better to be lectured, like Economics and Auditing. So I joined the ANZ staff at Hereford St branch. Those were the days before Internet banking and when the bank doors were opened at 10am and shut at 3pm – so customers had to line up then to deposit or withdraw their cash.

I was one of six tellers – Hereford St was a big branch. Each of us had our own 'grilled' space, our own cash box and I was issued with a revolver. Interestingly, we were never given any instruction on **how** or **when** to use our revolvers. It was presumed that we would know how to pull the trigger if threatened!

Each day after the doors were shut at 3pm, it was time to balance the cash transactions, empty one's revolver of its bullets and put one's box in the strong room.

Two years before I joined the Hereford Street branch, an incident happened after the doors were shut at 3pm. One of the youngest tellers balanced his cash, emptied his revolver – so he thought – and in a foolish act, pointed his revolver at the big clock high on the wall behind the tellers and shouted out: 'I hate that clock' – and pulled the trigger! Unfortunately, he'd left a bullet in the breach and the clock was 'killed'!!!! So, when I joined the Hereford St Branch, I was firmly told 'Don't fool with your revolver!'

One of the jobs of a teller was not only to serve the customers, but also to sort out the 'stink' notes. What is a 'stink' note you may well ask? A 'stink' note is one that is mutilated in different ways during its working life, eg. worn out, or the corners torn off, or torn in half, or joined with sellotape and also written on. And every few weeks, the Head Teller would get us to count and bundle up our stink notes, then the following day, two of us would put them in our briefcases, put our revolvers in our pockets – and trying to look casual, would wander along a crowded Hereford Street to deliver the 'stink' notes to the Reserve Bank for a credit with the words of the Accountant ringing in my ears, "Hammonds, don't put your hand in your pocket, you might shoot yourself in the foot!" Nowadays, banks and other places use Armourguard for moving cash around!

I was a banker for 5 years, then I made a change. I was very active in church life and felt that God was calling me to train for the Anglican ministry, which I did for the next four years. And at the end of those 4 years on November 7th I got married, then on November 30th I was ordained.

I served in two parishes in Christchurch – 3 years in Burwood and then one year in Hornby. Normally after those 4 years of 'apprenticeship ministry', one would be appointed to be a Vicar in a Parish. But God had other ideas, because Heather and I felt called to serve overseas as missionaries with the NZ Church Missionary Society. That meant another year of training – in Melbourne. At the end of that year, we were sent to out to East Africa, first to Nairobi (Kenya) to learn Swahili, then down in Mwanza (Tanzania).

I thought I'd be teaching in a Bible School and doing pastoral work, but my Bishop had found out that I had a Commerce degree and as the Diocese was engaged in developmental work with the help of overseas aid in the area of teaching and medicine, that was what he wanted me to do.

So, for the next four years, I was responsible on the financial side to applying that Aid money in building a Teacher Training College, a 120-bed hospital and a large Rural Aid Centre, as well as other smaller projects. I was usually away on safari up to 3 weeks a month to different corners of Tanzania, leaving my wife Heather at home with now a third child, who was born in Tanzania. They were interesting, exciting and challenging days.

But after two years, dark clouds came on the horizon. The first President of Tanzania was Julius Nyrere – a great man and a good leader. The President of Kenya was Jomo Kenyatta. He had been head of the Mau Mau in Kenya and was regarded as a terrorist by the British. He regarded himself as a freedom fighter. The President of Uganda was Milton Obote, but when we were there, he and other leaders were ousted in a coup by Idi Amin. People said of Amin that he was a mad man, but in my view, he was just plain evil and corrupt. He ruled by terror with many killings.

So, the three countries (Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda) which surrounded Lake Victoria – countries which showed so much promise and hope - began to go into decline really because of Idi Amin.

As I said at the beginning, when the Anglican Archbishop, Janine Luwum, went and confronted Amin, saying that the killings and cruelties must stop, Idi Amin pulled out his revolver in anger and shot him dead. And then Amin continued to threaten Tanzania that he would invade us and do the same as he had done in Uganda.

Although war as such was not declared, effectively we were living in a war situation. In our city of Mwanza, armed soldiers were stationed at the airport, the Lake port, the railway station and at all petrol pumps. And everyone got ready for war.

Q: what would you do in that situation?

Our children were aged 5, 4 and the youngest was a toddler. There was no escape route, as Mwanza was in the centre of what used to be called 'the Darkest Africa'. And the rule for all missionaries in the NZCMS was that all missionaries should stay at their posts and identify with the local people. We were happy with that.

But Heather and I had our own plan. Heather bought five small shoulder satchels into which we planned to put our passports, some food and a few clothes and medicines. I went down to the market and bought a lion spear and a stick of bananas. Heather and I were fortunate in that we could speak the local language and at the end of the road where we lived, the jungle started so the plan was that if an invasion started, we would flee into the jungle, hoping not to meet any wild animals and to live with the locals.

Fortunately, President Nyrere in an act of bravery and boldness – for a poor and developing country – invaded Uganda with his army and Idi Amin, with his wives, fled to Libya under the protection of Gaddafi.

After 5 years away from NZ, we felt it was right to come home and so I became an Anglican Vicar, serving in different parishes around Canterbury, finally landing up in Sumner-Redcliffs. The Bishop didn't issue his clergy with revolvers – and I left my lion spear in Tanzania!! So now I lead a quiet, but active life in Sumner-Redcliffs.

Thank you.

Glen Metcalf

My First 90 Years

Talk to the members of U3A Pegasus at the meeting on 17th February 2020

A 90th birthday is a reminder that it's time to check one's affairs are in order. I for example had never dealt with the letters I'd written to my mother after I married and left home in 1948. She returned them before she died. There were boxes and boxes of tatty old aerogrammes, some of them over 70 years old. And that wasn't all. My daughter also kept my letters after she left home in 1973. Altogether there were hundreds of the things. What was I to do with them? Should they all go to the dump?

OXFORD

So I began to read them, starting with the oldest ones which were written in the 2 years when I lived in England. There were lots of descriptions of the eccentric goings on at Oxford University and even more about the meat ration – still as severe as during the war. 15c worth of meat a week each was all we got and it didn't buy much. I learned to cook sausage meat but not much else. I remember the day I saw a long queue outside the local butcher. "What are you queuing for?" I asked. It turned out it was half a sheep's head (frozen), complete with one eye, half a tongue and blood-stained wool. The women next to me in the queue told me what to do and I managed to use all of it except for the eye and the wool. These letters were fun for me to read, but I doubted whether they were worth preserving.

WALTHAM

In 1955 we moved to Christchurch. By now I was a typical Kiwi housewife with a couple of toddlers. My letters were full of funny stories about the children but there was more than that. We lived in Waltham, a working class suburb with a low decile school. I became secretary of the school committee and the PTA and soon realised that this was no slum but a community of people who owned their own houses and were proud of their suburb; many had been born in the neighbourhood.

I also realised how successful low decile school's could be in the days before David Lange's Tomorrows' Schools. Waltham School had 2 houses (one for the caretaker and one for the head teacher), a 25 yard swimming pool, a large hall and kitchen, a library big enough for a whole class to use and a dental clinic. But, best of all, we had the Canterbury Education Board. A single letter to the Board got us a new administration block – no need for us to get estimates, resource consent, draw up plans, supervise construction; the Education Board did it all. Compare this with today when low decile schools, such as Waltham as it then was, are penalised because of their lack of professionally qualified parents to serve as Trustees. It seemed to me that the letters dealing with these issues should be kept.

Little did I know that 5 years later my life would be transformed. It began on an ordinary domestic day; I read The Press instead of washing the kitchen floor and noted there was a job for a science graduate at Christchurch Hospital. Well, I had a B.Sc – old and unused it is true. In a mad moment I phoned. "Would you consider someone who could only work school hours"? "Of course not" was the reply, "but you could try Dr Donald Beaven at The Princess Margaret Hospital; he's looking for a science graduate". So I phoned, and at the age of 35 years, metamorphosed into a scientist.

MEDICAL UNIT

I remember that first meeting with Don. He asked no questions, merely confining himself to the wonders I was to perform in five hours a day, school terms only. What flair and style he had – thin face alight with excitement, his whole demeanour expressing his vision for scientific medicine in Christchurch. It seemed he saw me as the scientific underpinning of this vision!

A major interest for Don was cortisol, a steroid secreted by the adrenal gland which in healthy people is controlled within close limits. Faults in the system lead to a variety of illnesses – too much for example, being associated with central obesity, thin bones and high blood pressure, symptoms also found in other conditions. Don needed a reliable way of diagnosing the disorder. I was to develop a method for measuring cortisol in blood.

Appointing me was ridiculous of course – I was a housewife with a chemistry degree which I had never used and the substance of which I did not remember. I had never heard of a steroid and knew no biochemistry. Why did he choose me that day? I still don't know.

Don had been given permission to set up a laboratory in the newly opened PMH. The problem was that everything in that building down to the last cupboard had been allocated to others. There was no space for his laboratory. The omission meant constant battles with management. Those early years setting up his Medical Unit were administratively stormy.

I started work in February 1961 in an empty surgical theatre complete with operating light. For laboratory work a 2m long bench had been installed. In my first week I was taught how to cope with 24h urine specimens (gallons of it) and to measure the steroids in urine which are related to cortisol. After that I was on my own. It was a desperate learning curve, and it was many many months before I managed to measure cortisol in blood. The method I finally developed was fearsomely dangerous, and involved the use of concentrated sulphuric acid to make the cortisol fluoresce; an unbelievably primitive and insensitive procedure compared with modern methods.

Before I could use it for patients, I needed to know how much cortisol there was in the blood of normal people. I made a notice, with coloured pencils, and sellotaped it to the tiled wall at the entrance to the cafeteria - "How is your plasma cortisol? Would you like to know?" The result was gratifying. Soon, many volunteers had lined up to give me 50ml of blood – until the hospital manager arrived! It seems my little piece of sellotape had defaced the hospital fabric. There were many such upsets in the years to come.

As I read the letters, it seemed to me that what I had written about PMH, the Medical Unit and the fight for evidence based medicine in Christchurch which Don Beaven led and won, were important. These letters should be saved. I typed relevant extracts into my computer and sent them to old colleagues. One of them, Professor Gary Nicholls, persuaded me to expand them into a personal memoir.

And so I came to write a book, "Metamorphosis: A Scientist's Story". If all goes according to plan it will be launched here, in July, by Cuba Press of Wellington.

Ursula (Uschi) Cable

My early life in East Germany

Talk to the members of U3A Pegasus at the meeting on 17th February 2020

My early life in East Germany after WW II generally it would be considered an unusual start to life but typical for many post-war Germans.

I was born in October 1944 in the Province of Posen which was part of Germany at that time but reverted back to Poland after the end of WWII.

My father farmed there as had his family been farming there for 3 or 4 generations Poland being part of the Prussian Kingdom – later German Empire.

I was the 4th child and as my mother had a heart complaint, I was born in a hospital in the nearby city of Gostingen. During the air attacks the hospital staff ran into the shelters but patients and babies stayed in the wards..... it would have taken too much time to move them. Anyhow the hospital was not hit and my mother and I went home undamaged.

When my eldest brother was born my parents were lucky to employ a very nice German nanny for the children. Her name was Erika but my sister Marianne, 2 years old, called her Ete and Ete it stayed for the rest of her life. When she passed away 31 years later, she was still with our family.

However, in January 1945 – I was 3 months old by then - the dreaded news came that the Russian army had started to invade the eastern German provinces and Poland and it was recommended that the German population should retreat west to the German Reich. The German population was very apprehensive of the Russians. Within 24 hours my parents had to pack up and leave home. The goal was my mother's family home in Thuringen. It was mid-winter, - 20 degrees, snow, icy, churned up roads by thousands of refugees. My father and Ete each drove a horse drawn wagon. My mother with us 4 children went by train to Sundhausen – the home of my Granny. The train journey took a couple of days as the trains were overflowing, late in coming or not coming at all.

I was told that my mother fed me with bread which she had chewed as no milk or baby food was available.

At one stage the Russian army overtook the train and the soldiers searched the passengers. One soldier was very impressed with me and told my mother he wanted the baby. My mother got a terrible fright. She had hidden part of her jewellery in my nappies and neither wanted to lose her baby nor her jewellery.... Anyhow the soldier probably just joked and I and the jewellery stayed with my mother. We eventually arrived at my Granny's house and a couple of days later my father and Ete arrived as well. They had to abandon one wagon (half of the household goods.... Some of the horses had collapsed).

We stayed with our Granny for about 2 years. I have no clear recollection of that time. Then my father decided to farm again. That was a bad idea. The farm he rented in East Germany had been neglected during the war years and he didn't have enough money for farm workers or seed or equipment and he couldn't sell his produce to the co-op which only dealt with state-owned enterprises.

East Germany was under Russian and communist control and state-owned collective farming was enforced. Private enterprise had been terminated, big farms, factories, big businesses, banks... were expropriated and came under communist control.

I just remember that the farm house was very big and had no electricity. Ete and I slept on the second floor under the attic and at night I heard the rats running around there. I was always terrified that they might gnaw through the ceiling and fall on my bed.

After about 2 years trying to farm my father gave up and took on a post as agricultural teacher in a small village in East Germany right next to the Polish border.... My father still wanted to be the first to go home.

Here I started Kindergarten and then primary school.

The first day of school was lovely. We were 5 new scholars and each of us got a Zuckertuete..... a big cone-shaped cardboard bag filled with a big ball, apples, biscuit, nuts and some sweets. We were told the sugar tree grew in the cellar of the school house and produced enough Zuckertueten for each new pupil.

I loved my school and my teacher. First and second years were in one class room. We started off with slate tablets and slate pens. I was very proud of my wet sponge hanging out of my school bag. The sponge was used for rubbing out mistakes – and making space for home work. Ink and paper were used in the 2nd year.

My father supervised our progress. Homework had to be perfect, we had to rattle off tables and as soon as we were able to write a bit we had to write to our grandmothers and god parents at Christmas and Easter and for their birthdays ... and the letters had to be perfect.

We didn't have many books but our mother was a wonderful story teller and knitter and when we were waiting in the afternoons for our father to come home, she entertained us with old tales and new inventions. Our mother was a wonderful cook as well and created the tastiest meals with simple ingredients.

Food !!! we were never hungry.

My father had two big vegetable gardens, he grew and sold seedlings to the villagers, we had fruit trees, chickens, rabbits and my parents raised and fattened geese for the Christmas market.

Geese: that was quite an undertaking. The big and fat geese were slaughtered and cleaned and then my parents put the carcasses into a suitcase or bags and transported them by train to West Berlin. Here they sold them on the Black Market. The German city dwellers were very hungry and the fat geese were snapped up eagerly. With the West German money my parents could buy essential food and goods not available in the East.

It was quite a dangerous mission as the East German soldiers controlled the border and trains between east and west and if caught black market activities could land you in jail. We could buy food in our little village shop or at the butcher but only with food stamps which allowed very small quantities per person.

During the next couple of years the communist iron grip increased. Our parents were regarded as former capitalists and big land owners. They were under constant surveillance and the villagers were encouraged to spy on them and report back any word my father might have spoken against the government.

The brain washing started even with children. I remember when Stalin died in 1953 we were all ordered to assemble at the village green where a big statue of Stalin stood. Long speeches were held about how good Stalin had been and that he had freed the workers and poor people from oppression and on and on. It was cold and windy and I didn't understand one word but knew if somebody died one had to be sad – so I with all my class mates tried to cry but as I didn't know Mr Stalin it was a futile exercise. We children were only dimly aware of the tension and anxieties of our parents. However, each time our father came home after dark he whistled when he arrived so our mother knew he had come home safely and it was not a police control.

During the summer of 1954 my parents decided to flee to West Germany. My father's post as teacher was on the balance, the possibility of him being put into jail was great. In 1954 it was still possible to escape into the West via the train to Berlin. However, everything had to be done in secret.

My parents told everybody that the family would move to my Granny in Nordhausen. The furniture was sent there by train, the dog and cat given away. Chickens, rabbits and geese sold and then we were ready. We children were kept in the dark, one wrong word and it would have been the end.

Now my parents had a logistical problem. For the past couple of years our sister had been staying with our Granny where she could attend high school.

Our eldest brother lived with our Grandmother in Colditz to attend school there. Our parents solved the problem thus:

Our mother took the train to Nordhausen, (a) to say good-bye to her mother and then to travel with our sister to West-Berlin.

Our father did the same - he visited his mother, said good-bye and travelled with our brother to West-Berlin.

Our nanny Ete decided to flee with us. My brother Henning and I were told that we would visit Ete's two sisters for a couple of days (also for Ete to say good-bye).

Our father told Ete which train to take to Berlin and at which station he would meet us. That specific train station had 2 levels.

The top level, where we were supposed to meet our father, was in West-Berlin. If you went down the stairs you had to go through a guarded security gate and landed back in East Berlin.

Now our Ete was a dear but not very familiar with the train and border system.

Either our father was late or we didn't spot him, after a couple of minutes searching around, Ete took us down the stairs, through the border control and into East-Berlin again.

Our father searched frantically in the West, we were waiting patiently and hungry in the East. Now my brother Henning deserves great praise. Not quite 12 years old he remembered where one of our mothers cousins lived in East Berlin.

With Ete's last East German money we bought tram tickets..... it was a long tram journey and a long walk to our mother's cousin's house but Henning's memory was spot on and we arrived late at night.... And when we rang the bell there was our father who had searched for us all afternoon. The rest was relatively easy. Next morning we bought train tickets, managed to avoid east German police and controls and were re-united with our mother and siblings in the first refugee camp in West Berlin.