

AN OAM ACKNOWLEDGES MEREDITH'S YEARS OF VOLUNTEERING

In 1998 Meredith Dennis became part of a passionate group of community members with a vision: to create a charity to care for people with a life-limiting illness and eventually to open their own hospice. Thus, Tweed Palliative Support (TPS) was born. Four years ago, TPS opened Wedgetail Retreat Community Hospice. The charity has grown from a handful of individuals to several hundred volunteers and it continues to expand. Meredith has tirelessly presided over the success and growth of the organisation since its beginning. The opening of the Hospice has been one of the rewards for her years of commitment to bringing quality end-of-life care to the Tweed community and beyond.

Today she has been awarded the OAM (Order of Australia Medal) for her services to the community and palliative care.

TPS hospice-at-home service is designed to keep people in their homes for as long as possible by providing shopping, personal care, transport to medical appointments as well as respite for the primary carer. It also loans medical equipment such as electric hospital beds, wheelchairs, etc. Each year TPS trains up to 20 new volunteers who then go on to take up various roles within the charity: home respite, transport, office work, fundraising, assisting the Registered Nurses at the hospice. All TPS services are free and Wedgetail Retreat operates on a donation basis.

The Registered Nurses are the only paid staff in the organisation and along with the running cost of the Hospice, annual expenses are in excess of \$600,000.

What is extraordinary and unique is that TPS and Wedgetail Retreat have achieved all this without government funding. Recently though, they have applied and been successful in receiving one-off small grants from the government and various foundations. Otherwise, they rely solely on their Opportunity Shops sales, the fundraising efforts of their volunteers and the community's generosity.

Meredith Jane Dennis was born on 14th March 1961 and grew up in the Adelaide Hills in South Australia. She trained and worked as a nurse there before moving to Sydney and working at St Vincent's Private Hospital. The death of a cancer patient devastated her and caused her to consider another career path. It's ironic that palliative care would become her true life's passion.

She became a Director of two Video Ezy stores and also owned and operated an organic fruit and vegetable store in Sydney. She continued caring for others by volunteering with ACON and Meals on Wheels. Meredith sold her shares in the Video Ezy franchise and moved to Murwillumbah in 1996. This is when she began her long volunteer commitment to community palliative care in the Tweed Shire. She concurrently volunteered as a 'Pink Lady' at Murwillumbah Hospital for 10 years, the "Friends of The Art Gallery", 'Wildlife Carers' and opened and ran the Murwillumbah Hospital Coffee Shop for 2 years to help raise funds and the profile of TPS.

Meredith's strong advocacy for quality community palliative care options has brought the community together. Her exceptional leadership, determination and inclusive approach are widely respected by the medical profession and community at large. Currently she volunteers approximately 60 hours every week in her role as President and Volunteer Coordinator, overseeing all of the charity's services. She delivers medical equipment, meets new palliative care clients and their families, supports Wedgetail Retreat guests, staff and volunteers, attends palliative care meetings and collaborates with the multi-disciplinary medical teams and community services (volunteers, nurses, doctors, hospitals, nursing homes, home health agencies, councils, social workers, community health workers).

Her only paid employment is on weekends when she works as a nurse providing care for up to 8 RSL clients as well as assisting a chronically ill friend. Somehow this charismatic, inspirational force of nature still finds time to run her small farm and lovingly care for multiple dogs, horses, cats and some fish!

The growth of TPS and the opening of Wedgetail Retreat are testimony to Meredith's dedication and leadership skills. Over the last 20 years, Meredith has been instrumental in the exponential growth of the charity from a handful of people to hundreds and it continues to expand today. She is a mentor to many and is adored by all. This incredible woman is one of a kind!

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