

## NEWS OBITUARY

# Vale skilled teacher and activist

A formidable woman, of short stature, but not short on tenacity and determination.

## Petronella Jacoba Wensing OAM

January 22, 1924 - December 7, 2023

MANY Canberra women will remember my mother as their teacher at St Clare's College in Griffith where she taught sewing, needlework, embroidery and fashion. The numerous tributes on the St Clare's College Facebook page are testament to her legacy. She was a formidable woman, of short stature, but not short on tenacity and determination when it came to questioning authority and confronting politicians whenever she thought it necessary to do so.

Petronella was a skilled artisan, designer, teacher, social worker and community activist. Her specialities were Belgian lace making and embroidery. She was foundation president and life member of the Canberra Lace Makers Association. A past president of the Embroiders' Guild of the ACT and a member of the Australian Lace Makers Guild. She gave generously of her time and expertise as a volunteer to the National Gallery of Australia and the Canberra Museum and Gallery on lace and textiles. Petronella also spoke four languages, English, Dutch, French and German.

Petronella Wensing (nee Goderie) was born in Teteringen in the Netherlands on January 22, 1924. She was the fourteenth child of seventeen. As a young child, Petronella was a bright girl who learnt quickly and could already knit and crochet when she started school. Growing up in the Netherlands during the depression was difficult for the family. Even though her father was employed by the Netherlands railway, four of Petronella's five brothers suffered from long-term unemployment. In 1943, her mother passed away and her father remarried in 1944.

Petronella Goderie and Michael Wensing (1912-1988) were married at Rijen on the outskirts of Breda on August 19, 1948. Even though Michael was a skilled artisan in his own right, there was little work for him in the Netherlands devastated by World War II. Encouraged by the Netherlands government and with the assistance of the Catholic Migration Association in Breda, Petronella and Michael migrated to Australia. They travelled with their two small sons, Lucas and Frederick, on the *Sibajak* to Sydney, arriving June 11, 1953. The family spent four months at Scheyville Migrant Camp near Windsor in New South Wales. Their third son, Edward (Ed), was born at Windsor Hospital on the first night of their arrival in Australia. Mum had three more children, Alan, Veronica and Bernadine. Alan died at birth in 1956.

By the end of October 1953, Michael was persuaded that Canberra was the place to find work. He came to Canberra ahead of the family, was met by a Dutch painter who employed him and arranged accommodation in the men's migrant hostel on Capital Hill. Michael borrowed four hundred pounds to buy an old house at Russell Hill. The Wensing family were the last to leave Russell Hill in 1957 to make way for the suburb of Campbell.

As a young migrant arriving from the Netherlands in 1953, Petronella became concerned about the welfare of other migrants, particularly women, and how they



Veronica Wensing and her mum Petronella Wensing. Picture Canberra Times archive

could successfully integrate into the community. She quickly realised the difficulties faced by women when they first arrived in a new country. Petronella joined the Good Neighbour Council and the St. Patrick's branch of the Catholic Women's League with the primary aim of assisting new women settlers. She organised functions for women and children from many countries, working with them in a friendly and unbiased manner regardless of nationality. She advocated strongly for consultation between migrant groups and government bodies, so that migrants were made aware of issues surrounding family and human rights. Her work with migrants was recognised in the ACT International Women's Day Awards in 2011. In 2013, Petronella was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia 'for service to the creative arts, and to the community of Canberra'.

In the late 1960s, she taught part-time at St. Patrick's Primary School and at Aranda Primary. In 1970, she completed a Certificate in Fashion at the Canberra CIT. This was essentially the beginning of a long career as a specialist artisan. From 1970 to 1986, she taught at St Clare's College, leaving life-long legacies of sewing and needlework skills with successive generations of students who

remember her fondly. From 1980, Petronella created hundreds of pieces of Belgian lace work and embroideries, participated in several exhibitions and until 2010, continued giving workshops on lacemaking and embroidery, transferring her knowledge and crafts generously to many people around the world. The list of Petronella's endeavours and achievements is endless. The National Museum of Australia holds a collection of her personal papers and several objects

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relating to her life.

Mum was a tough lady. She would take the bus to Parliament House or the local Legislative Assembly and wait patiently for hours to meet with local politicians to

discuss issues of concern to her. Many of the local politicians were on the receiving end of her representations and she often got her way. She kept her wit and wisdom to the very end, contributing to the Longitudinal Australian Women's Health Survey in her last days.

Petronella also kept up with the times. She voted "yes" in the same-sex marriage plebiscite and in the referendum to include the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia's constitution. If she taught me anything, it was to question authority and to fight for social justice.

Petronella spent her final three years at the Southern Cross Care home in Campbell. She felt she had returned home to the same place she had started her life in Canberra and enjoyed her time there. The family is very grateful to the staff at Southern Cross Care who looked after her in her final years. She is survived by five children, 12 grandchildren and 16 great grandchildren.

By Dr Ed Wensing (Life Fellow) FPIA FHEA  
Some of the information for this obituary was drawn from Petronella Wensing's entry in the Register of Australian Women and from family records. <https://www.womenaustralia.info/entries/wensing-petronella-jacoba/>