

The end of an era: Vale Petronella Jacoba Wensing OAM (1924-2023)

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 and bureaucrats 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 Wensing (nee Goderie) was born in Teteringen in the Netherlands on 22 January 1924. She was the fourteenth child of seventeen. As a young child, Petronella suffered from rickets, although this condition did not hinder her education as she was a bright girl who learnt quickly at school. When she started school, she could already knit and crochet. 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 19 August 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. Consequently, encouraged by the Netherlands Government and with the assistance of the Catholic Migration Association in Breda, Petronella and Michael migrated to Australia. Petronella and Michael travelled with their two small sons, Lucas and Frederick, on the *Sibajak* to Sydney, arriving 11 June 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 went to Canberra ahead of the family, and was met by a Dutch painter, the Van Duren's, who employed dad 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. There was no electricity, so heating and cooking was done by wood fire and kerosene. The Russell Hill Settlement began in 1926 as a temporary measure to provide homes for families moving to Canberra to take part in the building boom of the 1920s. By the early 1950s only a few homes remained, and Michael and Petronella bought one of them. The Wensings were the last to leave the Russell Hill Settlement in 1957 to make way for the suburb of Campbell when they took up residence in Torrens Street in Braddon.

As a young migrant who arrived in Australia from the Netherlands in 1953, Petronella became concerned about the welfare of other migrants, particularly women, and how they could successfully integrate into the community. She quickly realised the difficulties faced by women when they first arrived in a new country. Without being able to speak fluent English, many migrant women suffered from a lack of confidence restricting their daily lives and integration into the community. Because of the influx of new immigrants into the ACT after World War II, the Good Neighbour Council had been established in Canberra in 1950. In these early years, new settlers were welcomed on their arrival at the Canberra Railway Station and at social gatherings held every Sunday afternoon.

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 criminal law 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, still with a young family herself, she successfully completed a Certificate in Fashion at the College of Technical and Further Education in Canberra. 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. She always treated everyone as equals.

In 1980, Petronella's work was exhibited at the 1st Australian Fibre Conference in Melbourne. In 1981-82, her *Gown of the Year* design entry was accepted for travelling exhibition around Australia. In 1997, her *Bok Tower Carillion Lace* was installed in the Olmsted Gardens in Florida in the USA. In 2000, Petronella was invited by the Belgian Ambassador to select exhibits for a display titled *From Belgium with Lace* for the Canberra Museum and Gallery. In 2002, her lacework impressions of the stained glass windows in the Bok Tower Carillion were installed in Florida. In 2003, the Canberra Museum and Gallery staged a curated exhibition titled *The Wensing Collection of Lace*. Until 2005, Petronella continued giving workshops on lacemaking and embroidery, transferring her knowledge and crafts generously to many people around the world. The National Museum of Australia holds a collection of her personal papers and several objects related to her life. Petronella also spoke four languages, English, Dutch, French and German. The list of Petronella's endeavours and achievements is endless.

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. Jim Fraser, John Knight, John Langmore, Margaret Reid, Trevor Kaine, Rosemary Follett, Katy Gallagher, Joy Birch and many other local politicians were on the receiving end of her representations. She often got her way, whether it was about a local bus stop or policies impacting on newly arriving migrants to Australia. 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 Australia's 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.

Dr Ed Wensing (Life Fellow) FPIA FHEA

Ed.wensing@gmail.com M: 0419302887

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/>