



AITON ON MONDAY

with Doug Aiton

Mayor, councillor, chairwoman, OAM . . .

Val's one busy gal

IT'S no wonder that Val Lawrence was recently awarded the Queenscliff Citizen Of The Year title. She is constantly involved in a string of local activities.

Val gives the impression that she would not be at all happy to be idle. She just has to be flat out all the time.

She has been mayor of Queenscliff, as well as serving on the town's municipal council for 10 years. And for 20 years Val has been president of the local Red Cross, which is work she finds particularly rewarding.

She is also chairwoman of the board of Geelong Community Foundation, which seeks to have people donate the interest on money they invest to fund chosen people and organisations in need.

As Val points out, the donated money is never spent; just the interest it attracts.

There are other activities in Val Lawrence's life. She is a marriage celebrant, and a justice of the peace, for example. And she has been involved in computer training. And the Queenscliff Maritime Museum. And then there was the Order of Australia Medal awarded in 2009.

Val is very much a Queenscliff person. She and husband David have long lived in a spectacular old house, built in 1886, two storeys, with the top one peeping out to sea. It's one of the oldest houses in Queenscliff.

It was there that I met her. We sat in the upstairs sitting room looking out to a sparkling blue sea, where Val Lawrence told me about her early life. We went up to the top level by lift, but we could have used the handsome staircase.

Val was born in 1938 in Frankston. Her father, Jim Grundy, was in the navy and later managed a factory. Her mother was Elizabeth, and Val attended Frankston High School, which she remembers with considerable affection.

After school, Val worked briefly as a dental nurse but then joined the big Melbourne stockbroking firm JB Were. Women did not become stockbrokers in those days, but Val showed enough style to end up as a senior clerk.

At 23 she married David Lawrence, then a second lieutenant in the army; they went to live at first at Puckapunyal.

Our life is so strong in this borough because everyone pitches in. I've led a privileged life, and I just feel I want to give something back.

David went on to have his own successful career in the Australian Army, which meant that they lived in various places around the world. He retired as a colonel and now enjoys, at 75, a quieter life in Queenscliff.

A dominant part of the Lawrences' life has been not only travel, but living at various postings. They have three adult children.

Val listed the places they have lived: Puckapunyal, Brisbane, Holsworthy, Parramatta, Vietnam, Canberra, Fort Knox in Kentucky, Mornington, Bonegilla, Melbourne, London. They lived from 1987 to 1990 in Kensington Gardens, London, which was a particularly enjoyable posting.

"I have never got to count how many houses we have lived in," said Val, a trim, carefully-groomed woman with a bright smile, and, of course, an exceptionally positive disposition.

I asked her about the beautiful Queenscliff house. It really is quite amazing. Next to us in the upstairs living room was a vast dining room with a table that could seat a small platoon. Spacious rooms stretch in every direction, both upstairs and down.

"It has the name *Charlecote*," said Val. "It was built in 1886 for Sir Henry Wrixon, who was Victoria's attorney-general. At that time it had stables and servants' quarters next door. We bought it in 1972. We've

done an enormous amount of renovation."

Val and David have recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. Their children are now aged from 47 to 50, and they have two grandchildren.

Val is particularly interested in the Geelong Community Foundation.

"The money they receive is there forever," she said. "They asked me to join the board when I was mayor of Queenscliff, so I've been there since its inception in 2000, and chair since 2009."

"But I'm still very involved with Red Cross. I've been chair there for 20 years now. I do think women today are more vital than they were in the past."

I asked: "You're also involved with Queenscliff's maritime museum. I think you must like being as busy as you can possibly be."

"Absolutely," beamed Val. "Why?" I asked.

"Well, I don't really find it so busy. I think I've had a good life, a blessed life."

"Our life is so strong in this borough because everyone pitches in. I've led a privileged life, and I just feel I want to give something back."

"You should never forget the people who do all the work. They're the ones I admire. And I would never ask anyone to do anything that I wouldn't be prepared to do myself."

"I've always had the most wonderful team of helpers, with anything I've done."

I asked: "So you see yourself as a natural leader?"

"Oh, I don't know. I do like to see things done that should be done. I have never belonged to a political party. I've always thought that's a better way to be."

"Apart from family, I suppose my greatest pleasure has always been travel. We have certainly travelled extensively. Look, I've got the atlas

out at the moment. We're off to Africa in 2013. We're going on the *Queen Mary* to Cape Town, then off to some game parks."

"And in 2015 we're booked on an Italian liner. We are going to be in Gallipoli for the 100th anniversary."

I felt obliged to ask Val if she thought she might ever slow down. "I've been blessed with good health," she replied.

Does she get relaxation from books or movies?

"I don't get as much time as I would like for reading. Movies, hmmm. Well, I still love *Breakfast At Tiffany's*. I like feel-good movies."

I asked: "You have lived in many places but perhaps now you are a Queenscliff person. Perhaps you'll stay in this house now."

"Oh yes, very much a Queenscliff person. And, yes, we'll stay here in this house now. That's why we got the lift put in."



THE WORLD ENDS AT QUEENSCLIFF: Val and David Lawrence have lived in homes as far afield as London, Kentucky and Vietnam.

LIVING FOR THE COMMUNITY



Citizen of the Year: with Mayor Bob Merriman and Australia Day ambassador Lisa Edwards.



2009 Queen's Birthday Honours: Margaret Hughes, Barry Smith and Val Lawrence all got the OAM.



As Geelong Community Foundation chairwoman with Community Development Minister Lily D'Ambrosio.



Red Cross: Val with the group's Mark Cochran-Holley and appeals committee chairwoman June Wales