

OBITUARY: DON BARNETT

Visionary who made the Gardens a reality

By ANITA BEAUMONT
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DON Barnett, who died on April 19, was never one to covet praise.

The former Hunter Water Board architect preferred to work relentlessly behind the scenes on projects he thought were important for the community.

Don was a driving force behind the establishment of the Hunter Region Botanic Gardens, and he played a large role in preventing the popular Blackbutt Reserve from becoming a major road.

His contribution to the environment was recognised in 1995, when he accepted the Order of Australia.

"It was a proud, proud moment, but one that he played down," son Ben said in his eulogy.

"He never wanted to put the OAM letters at the end of his name."

Don was born in Melbourne on June 27, 1936, to Harry and Mary Barnett.

His family, which included older sister Ruth, moved to Newcastle in 1945 and he attended Hamilton Public School and, later, Newcastle Boys' High.

Ben remembers his father regaling them with stories about the mischief he got up to in Hamilton.

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"This included entering the underground drain system with his mates and coming up inside the Broadmeadow race track," Ben said.

He studied architecture at Newcastle University, and married his first wife, Helen, in 1961.

For their honeymoon, the couple travelled to Europe by ship.

They saw some sights, worked in London, and made life-long friends before returning to Newcastle.

Don and Helen had three children: Ben, Jane and Alex.

Sadly, Helen was diagnosed with breast cancer when the children were very young. She died in 1975.

"It knocked the wind out of Dad's sails," Ben said.

"He travelled for a short period overseas, visiting friends to gather his thoughts. At that time we were cared for by loving neighbours and friends."

Don returned and threw himself into single parenting while working full-time.

He was "no chef", but he tried.

When he met Leone, who would become his wife, she would send crockpot meals around to the house.

The kids lapped it up.

"Leone has been unbelievable," son Alex added.

"When Dad was diagnosed with prostate cancer, the doctor told him he had between three and six months to live.

"He lasted 18years and we think a lot of that is because of Leone's undivided love and care."

Trees and plant species were always a topic of conversation in the house.

"His favourite tree was the Illawarra flame tree," Alex said.



“All of our friends, family and neighbours ended up receiving one as a gift at some stage.

“He had a little nursery of plants in the backyard which he'd share with everyone.

“Still today we'll drive to a friend's place or go somewhere and we'll see a flame tree that Dad had once propagated and gave away as a present.”

Don retired from his role at Hunter Water Board when he was 55.

Prior to Don getting involved, there had been many failed attempts to create a botanic gardens for Newcastle and the Hunter region.

He was instrumental in the eventual establishment of the Hunter Region Botanic Gardens, near Raymond Terrace.

“A true volunteer, Don devoted a great deal of his free time to the creation and establishment of the unique local landmark we all now enjoy,” Gardens chairman Kevin Stokes said.

“It was due mainly to Don's vision and determination that we are able to enjoy the wonderful facility we see today.

“Now it is up to us to ensure the legacy left by Don continues to thrive.”

Don was always a traveller. He was known to travel all over the world armed only with a small hand-held bag.

“He only required a fresh change of underwear and socks, and a keen set of eyes,” Alex said.

“There was hardly a year that went by when Dad and Leone didn't go on a holiday somewhere, and generally that was to see some sort of architectural feature or a botanical garden.”

The family had a lot of fun, a lot of adventures, together.

“One of the funny things he was known for was his jokes,” Alex said.

“For example, you could be having a really rough day and be in a serious meeting, and the phone would ring.

“There would be no introduction. He'd just launch into a joke, deliver the punchline, and then there would be a huge roar of laughter before he hung up. It would automatically change your day.

“Some other family members have started doing it now. No introductions, no see-you-laters, just the joke, and laughter.”

Don had always admired art and many of his friends were artists.

“He always said he wanted to try his hand at it. However, with his involvement with the Botanic Gardens, and three very active children, he had his hands full,” Alex said.

“But a few years after he was diagnosed, he decided to have a go at it, and he was very good at it.

“He found it was great therapy.

“We built him a little art workshop down in the bush behind the house and that was what got him through his days when he had his cancer and his pain.

“On his good days, that was his outlet. He'd head down and grab a piece of Hebel block or sandstone or timber and chip away.

“He made some magnificent pieces.”

Don will be remembered as a loving father, husband and friend. He was also a traveller, a tireless volunteer and a man of dignity and pride.