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tribute

100 NOT OUT

*What it takes to
get into this
exclusive club*



100 ON THE CLOCK

There is no secret. Let's get that clear straight away. There's no magic diet, elixir or pill. There's no exercise regime, restorative program or mystical chant to be intoned in a dewy field at midnight under the first full moon, while simultaneously bathing in ox milk and Himalayan honey.

Long life is basically a matter of luck, genes, attitude and, well, living. Just get on with it, one foot after the other, as it were.

Patience and a good sense of humour come in handy, especially when asked – as often as these good folks are – about age. Gladys "Lil" Couzens is 105, Ruth Frith, OAM is 102, Dexter Kruger 102 "and 19 weeks", and Lynton Gardiner 102.

They've had the big 100th birthday parties, heard all the cricket jokes about centuries not out, received letters from the Queen and Governor-General, and continue to be indulged by their families and fêted by the media.

Still, they remain bemused by all the fuss. As Frith says, "I don't think I feel any different when I was 70. There is nothing that you ever do – the person that is 100 – nothing they've ever done to be 100. Just keep breathing."

Kruger has been asked so often, he's fashioned his pithy advice into an amusing ditty: "Always eat when you are hungry, always drink when you are dry, always sleep when you are sleepy, don't stop breathing or you'll die!"

Each has lived almost the same number of years, witnessed the same world events and been awed by the same new inventions, but they are still very different people who have lived very different lives.

Frith, who was an at-home mum of two, has never eaten her vegetables but is a life-long avid athlete, who raised an Olympian in daughter Helen Searle and continues to set world records in hammer, shotput, javelin and discus. She just wishes she had someone to compete against.

"I'm sick of competing by myself. It never worries me if someone beats me," Frith sighs.

Kruger is a beef cattle grazer, who still helps grandson Darryl muster by quadbike occasionally, and always follows his daily meat-and-three-veg meal with a milk pudding.

He's a keen writer and poetry reciter, who belongs to a local old men's group but doesn't go very often because the other members are "all too old" and "won't do anything".

Couzens worked such long hours as a school cleaner and flower grower to raise three children alone, after being widowed young, that she thought she'd be dead at 50.

Life expectancy grows every year and the possibility of living for a century is more likely than ever. So what's it like to witness the passing of that milestone? We ask four Queensland centenarians

BY
LEANNE EDMISTONE

PHOTOGRAPHY
MARK CRANTICH



Long life: Ruth Frith, 102 (above, with her dog Tazri), says she doesn't feel any different to when she was 70. Dexter Kruger, 102 (opposite), still musters cattle.

That's when she stopped paying life insurance and paid for her funeral.

She's travelled the world by boat, loved a good costume party and was a keen artist. She still loves chocolate, is a life member of the local RSL where she plays bowls weekly, and meets friends for cards once a fortnight.

Gardiner played country football for years before leaving fields for \$1 a day (about \$80 today) to buy his own banana plantation. He sold it to go to war – the only time he's travelled overseas – then returned to Brisbane where he had a successful milk run before driving a taxi for 20 years. Gardiner still prefers rugby league to cricket, enjoys crosswords and once paid 10 shillings to go on a joyflight with a young pilot, pioneer Australian aviator Keith Virtue.

Centenarians are the fastest growing age segment of the Australian population. The 2006 Census counted 3154 centenarians in Australia (297 men and 2357 women), which is predicted to grow to 12,000 by 2020 and 50,000 by 2050. Globally, the number of centenarians is predicted to increase nine-fold to an estimated 41 million by 2050.

International studies reveal centenarians commonly have a good sense of humour, don't take things too seriously, have an innate ability to deal with stress, are active until very late in life, eat good food in smaller meals more often during the day, have never smoked or drunk heavily, share genetic traits and are spiritual people.

Society's fascination with centenarians can largely be explained by the importance we place on milestone birthdays: what's bigger than celebrating 100 years?

Psychology professor Nancy Pachana says our intrigue is also due to the huge breadth of world events, inventions and changes they would have witnessed and experienced.

Think for a minute – they've witnessed the arrival of electricity, telephones, radio, television, cars, aeroplanes, trains, computers and internet, vaccines and medical advancements. Then there are two world wars, as well as conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, the atomic bomb, the hydrogen bomb, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, space exploration, the first moon landing, the Challenger disaster, robots on Mars, the Great Depression, famines, natural disasters; women's and Aborigines' right to vote, racial equality, political freedoms, political assassinations, the millennium, September 11 terrorist attacks, the United States of America's first black president Barack Obama, Australia's first female prime minister...



"What is it like to have lived that long and seen all these changes?" queries Pachana, director of the University of Queensland's Ageing Minds Initiative.

"This is why our image of older people is really bad because we stereotype them as being inflexible and not being able to cope with change, when really they can, and have. They also have really gracefully coped with some of the more negative aspects of ageing such as illness and loss of family and friends."

Pachana says too often people are boxed into age brackets, but they are more interesting and unique the older they get by virtue of life experience and choices.

"In a group of 100-year-old people, each is very different from the other, compared to a group of 20-year-olds, because each of those 100-year-olds have had 100 years of making individual choices – to be married or not, to go overseas or not, to pursue study or not, and they're all very different. It's not just that they've lived 100 years, unique choices, whereas if you've only lived 20 years, people's experiences at that point are a lot more similar."

One of Gardiner's first memories is of 1918 Anzac Day celebrations in Billingsdel, northern New South Wales, where he was born and raised on a dairy farm.

"There was great excitement and all the farmers came down to the hotel. They had a few speeches off the pub veranda and then they wanted to go for a bit of a march," says Gardiner, who recently moved from his only son Graham's Stafford home, on Brisbane's northside, to an aged care facility.

"There was no band, so they gathered up empty kerosene tins, split timber from lawnmower cases and went for a mile or two march, belting the tin. I was only eight, so I only had a two-gallon oil tin to belt," he recalls with a grin.

Radio is the invention Gardiner singles out. His family had the first radio in the district and for important announcements, it would sit on the windowsill for the whole township to listen to.

"When (the Australian) Parliament changed from Melbourne in 1927, a lot of people came to our house to hear Parliament being opened in Canberra for the first time. There were a lot of people who didn't have radio then, it was 17."

Cousens laughs when she says the washing machine was "one of the best things in the world", surpassed only by refrigerators, for easing a wife and mother's lot in life. Her parents emigrated from England, looking for a better life, and they lived in the same neighbourhood in Unanderra, now a suburb of Wollongong, NSW, as "convicts".

"Women were slaves, you were born a slave being a woman," she says.

"Mum had 12 children. They were asked to have as many as they could to fill Australia. She did her business," she laughs, before adding, "(but) she never got any pleasure at all. Dad would go out and play cards or something, but Mum never did. I call it the do-without-mob, there was never any money."

Cousens wanted to stay at school but was sent from home at 14 to work in a dental clinic. One of the first things she told husband Alf, whom she met at 19, was that she didn't want a big family. He died before their third child was born.

Fritth agrees with Cousens about household labour-saving devices being the best inventions, and recalls the first moon landing in 1969.

"Sydney stood still. I remember my husband (Raymond) ringing me from the office to say, 'Has he landed yet?' as if he was a good friend."

Fritth's only regret is not being able to realise her childhood dream to become a doctor, thanks to her lack of mathematical ability. She started training as a solicitor, before giving up paid work to get married.

"Once you're married, you all fall in for a job! I don't believe when you're married you should go to work because I say you're taking the job of a young single person," she says.

For Kruger, the motorbike and the chainsaw simplified the grazier's life, but in the kitchen he loves scissors.

"These days, everything's done up (in packaging) and try as you might, you can't tear it. I went to New Zealand



Staying active: Gladys Lil Cousens, 105, sends me down at the Holland Park RSL.



Fond memories: Lynton Gardiner, 102, still loves a crossword. As a kid in Billingsdal, his family had the district's first radio.

once and on the plane they brought out a meal. Well, if it hadn't been for the lady sitting next to me, I would have starved! She opened it for me."

He pauses, then his deep, slow chuckle rumbles down the line.

"Lots of people talk about the good of days, but really they were bad of days. But our life was more relaxed."

"You know, if you're riding along the road somewhere on a horse and you meet somebody else on a horse, you stop and have a yarn."

"But if you're in a motorcar or on a motorbike, you don't even wave unless it's someone you specially know and that sort of sums it up best."

These are some of the special memories author Samantha Mawdsley has gathered for her book, *The 100+ Club* presents Reminiscing.

As co-ordinator of The 100+ Club, a non-profit international organisation exclusively for centenarians as part of Queensland Community Care Network Inc, Mawdsley interviewed 30 centenarians for their personal perspectives on historic events. Kruger, Frith, Couzens and Gardiner are all proud members.

"I thought there would be a bit of whinging about how hard life was and how easy kids have it today, that sort of stereotypical attitude," Mawdsley, 26, says.

"But it didn't come across at all. They were so thankful for everything they did have. The whole attitude to the world around them wasn't, 'why isn't it better?' It was, 'we're lucky it's as good as it is', even though they had had to walk in the rain with no shoes on to get their groceries and go to school."

"It humbles me. They had to grow their own food and make their own clothes."

"If I had to do that, I'd be sitting here naked and hungry right now!" she laughs.

The 150-strong club enables members to mix with people their own age. Each receives a badge, newsletters and invitations to three formal functions a year.

Gardiner, Kruger, Frith and Couzens seem content with

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DEXTER KRUGER

the lives they have lived, and continue to live. All except Gardiner remain in their own homes, largely doing as they have always done. Frith lives with daughter Helen in Algester, on Brisbane's southside. Couzens in a flat below great-granddaughter Naomi in southside Holland Park, and Kruger, who lives alone in Roma, is the "most famous resident" on the western Darling Downs.

The foursome individually talk of a world that knows more, moves faster and has more opportunities for young and old. If pushed, they say they are optimistic about society's future but still have niggling concerns.

Frith and Gardiner despair at the breakdown of the family unit and seeming lack of parental discipline. Frith does not flinch when admitting she does not acknowledge descendants born out of wedlock in her large family.

Couzens fears Australia's rich natural resources will prove too attractive for a hostile force, while Gardiner and Kruger do not understand where all the money has come from – where once people barely talked in thousands, now economies are measured in billions and trillions.

Inevitably conversation turns to their deaths. None professes any fear. In fact, Couzens "wouldn't mind going", frightened that if she lives too much longer the tumours growing in her head might rob her of her mind and memories.

Kruger "doesn't feel like dying" but is a Christian who believes in life hereafter (mainly due to lack of proof otherwise), while Gardiner is a spiritual person with "no idea" what's coming next. Frith is perhaps one who could tell us, having collapsed at home recently and "died" twice in an ambulance. She underwent emergency surgery to fit a pacemaker to correct an irregular heartbeat.

She laughs. "There was no bright lights, nobody coming down the path for me."

Next week in *body+ soul*: Life lessons from women who have lived more than a century.

Frith and Kruger feature in a documentary, *Compass: The 100+ Club, Just Keep Breathing*, screening on ABC1 next Sunday, July 1, at 6.30pm. Contact Samantha, The 100+ Club, at samantha@qccn.org.au

