



Best WISHES

Viv James believes that life doesn't end just because you're in palliative care. So she set up Race4Life Trust to make sure those nearing the end make a few memories first BY ERIN FISHER

Every so often, you meet people who completely restore your faith in humanity and leave you inspired to live with more kindness and generosity. Viv James is one of those people. She is the founder of Race4Life Trust, the only charity in the country that aims to fulfil the wishes of patients over 18 who are in palliative care. Over the years, Viv's work with Race4Life has been featured on TV shows such as *Close Up* and *Campbell Live*, as well as receiving achievement awards at New Zealander of the Year, but talking to Viv, she makes it clear none of it is about her.

From a young age, she was intrigued by death and yearned to understand it, especially after the sudden death of her best friend when Viv was only 18. After marrying and having three children, she worked as a teacher at a primary school neighbouring a hospice. Without giving her busy schedule much thought, she followed her instinctive desire to connect with people who were close to death and began volunteering part-time.

The more she got involved, the more she loved it, and her teaching job soon took a backseat when a position opened up at

Mercy Hospice. Viv first ran the Opening Doors programme, where palliative care patients were invited to a day of art, music, pampering and fun.

"We created this vibrant community of people who were dying, and every week they just couldn't wait to get there," she says.

FROM SMALL BEGINNINGS

In 2008, Viv's husband came up with the idea of taking 15 patients with terminal illness out to Pukekohe for a spin around the track, with 17 racecars and a catered lunch. Spurred on by the abundance of positive feedback, the outing became an annual event and Race4Life Track Day was born.

And there's no shortage of people who want to join in and assist Viv on the day in any way possible.

"Everyone seems to be able to identify with a certain side of us, because no one gets out of this life alive," Viv says. "Each year, more and more people have come on board. We now have 300 volunteers, \$30,000 that comes in just from donations, businesses that come and do the services like the drinks and catering, we've got schools that do the domestic help and

we've got an all-day barbecue that's provided – there's no cost. It's brilliant."

Viv resigned from her role at Mercy Hospice in 2014, but took the inaugural Race4Life event with her and it continued to grow each year. In 2015, the Race4Life Trust was formed. Their mission? To enable people living with life-limiting illness to realise their dreams and create memories that they and their families can cherish.

Being a volunteer-based charity, every grant, donation and sponsorship goes straight to the wish service. From family holidays, high tea and honeymoons, to hot-air balloon trips and champagne breakfasts, the trust has helped bring so many dreams to life. Just sharing some of the wishes and stories, Viv is bubbling with excitement and grinning from ear to ear.

The generosity of communities and businesses nationwide has been overwhelming, and she is humbled and incredibly grateful to be in her line of work.

"Because of the work we do, we are exposed to the very best of humanity, the absolute best," she says, laughing about how hotels and restaurants have been so keen to get involved with wishes that there



Left: The Race4Life volunteer team worked to raise funds and awareness during the Targa South Island Rally in October 2018 – and also got to celebrate with the winners. Viv (below left); and farewelling rally duo Martin Dippie and Jona Grant at the start line in Dunedin (below).



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have even been disputes about who will host the party and who will make the cake.

THE DRIVE TO GIVE

They've also had stars like Josh Kronfeld, Rachel Hunter and Greg Murphy play a part in several wishes.

"As soon as the human spirit feels like it's doing something for others, it's beneficial and it's really infectious," Viv says. "The ancient adage that in giving you receive is alive and thriving."

Viv sees her work as a privilege. "I try to talk to my staff about that too," she explains. "That this is an honour to see humanity working like this and to see the beauty and the joy that's created."

One wish fulfilled by Race4Life was that of a quiet man who longed for a ride in a Lamborghini. Viv made some quick phone calls and had it arranged, but when the car arrived outside the hospital, he was suddenly unsure if he could go through with it. Viv and the nurses egged him on and suggested just taking some photos by the car to begin with. Not long after, the man was belted up in the passenger's seat

and taken out for a 45-minute spin. For a man of few words, Viv said he couldn't stop talking upon his return. Two days later, he passed away.

Viv understands that family and friends can feel over-protective of their loved ones who don't have long to live, especially when it comes to activities like racecar rides and bungee jumping, but at a time when life is particularly fragile, she believes joy should be always paramount.

The original Race4Life Track Day event has already celebrated its 10th anniversary, and reflecting on the journey thus far, Viv can see how much her own outlook has changed.

"My belief now is that we're surrounded by love. The universe is very powerful, there are signs everywhere and we should open ourselves up to that."

From something that started as just an idea in her bedroom, it's amazing what she has achieved, and her fingers are crossed that the passion of her team and the work that they're doing continues to impact the lives of many Kiwis and communities throughout New Zealand. ✱

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