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Culture Change in Practice

Interview with the MacKenzies

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My interview, a very informal and enjoyable one, is with part of the MacKenzie family, owners of [Aged Care Services Group](#) in Australia. Dawn MacKenzie and two of her three daughters talked with me over dinner at their home in Melbourne.

Dawn: Peter was a plumbing teacher, I was a nurse. We were disillusioned about working for other people. We owned our house, we had 3 young kids, two good jobs. We wanted to take a challenge - our own business that we could shape around a mission. We thought about childcare but it was too regulated we thought (see how little we knew?).

We wondered if we could find a way to make a difference in the world. We looked at a plumbing business but the building trade was too up and down. Someone said, Dawn, with your nursing knowledge, why not care for elders? We were inexperienced, and people told us that no one would take us on because of the capital investment. We looked for two years, until this landlord said he'd take us on, because I was a nurse and he could tell we were good people. It was a 44 bed unfunded low care facility. We put everything we owned into it and moved in with the girls, living on the premises.

We literally each worked 100 hours a week. We lived on the premises and Peter kept his job. I would start at 6 in the morning. We employed people, did the marketing, and the cleaning and the caring. Our family moved into the little two bedroom flat. The girls were 9, 8 and 7. They moved out of their house

where they had their own rooms, and they lived and played alongside us as we worked with the elders. They only had one grandparent, and they fell in love with the residents. We worked all through the day and I would do the night calls during the night. We did that day and night 7 days a week. We knew, even then, that we wanted it to be home. We knew it shouldn't be institutional.

The girls grew up with old people - it was their life. Sometimes I would feel like they were missing out, not having their parents all to themselves in the evenings. Sarah would bring home her reader, and read to the residents while I was working. Their friends would come over after school or for sleepovers.

Kate: I was 9 and I remember I loved to have tea parties with the residents. But instead of tiny tea dishes and pretend, my tea parties were real. There was one resident, Stella; we all loved her so much. I remember when she was dying. For days, if you couldn't find mum, you knew she was in Room 316 with Stella.

Dawn: The girls could do supper with the residents. They knew what everybody liked to eat and they sat and talked with the residents. Sarah has spent her whole life in Aged Care except for two years when she was 16 - 18 and she decided to work in retail. She broke away to become her own person, but then she came back when she was 18 and trained as a personal caregiver. From the time they were little they set the breakfast trays at the end of the day. They heard the calls in the night; they heard me getting up to answer them. I remember that one mother said to Sarah, "How are you going in the nursing home? Your parents must be

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Interview, *continued*



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very busy." "Yeah, they work a lot," she replied. "How do you like it when you see your mom and dad there instead of spending time with you?" Sarah replied, "I pretty well bring up myself!" My guilt as a mother was heavy when I heard that story!

It's true, they would come home with their school bags and they had to put the school notices under my nose for me to see what I had to sign. They had to be responsible very early. They grew up with old people and it was their life. I feel there were a lot of things that they missed out on that other kids got, kids who had doting parents in the evenings.

Sarah: But there was so much more that we had that other kids never knew. I remember Roy, he couldn't talk and it seemed to result in him being alone more. And I knew he always had time for me. So, that's where you could find me, getting all his attention! He and I became good friends. He would say 'doy, doy doy' and smile, I'd laugh, and he'd laugh. I'd make jokes and he loved it. I remember friends coming over after school saying that the residents scared them. I just couldn't understand that.

Dawn: As much as it's been Peter's and my journey, it's been their journey too, now for 18 years. Our whole family worked every Christmas Day so that staff could have the day off. We'd do breakfast and then morning tea, and dishes. We'd prepare a special day for the "ressies" [an affectionate Australian term for residents]. We worked every

Christmas from the time Sarah was 8 til she was 20. The first year we stayed home for Christmas, we didn't know what to do. The kids rang to see if we could work in a soup kitchen, or go visiting in the hospital. They couldn't imagine Christmas with just family.

Sarah: Christmas is about helping other people. It was just what we always knew. I'd hear other kids complain about having to do the dishes at home. You know, putting the dishes into the dishwasher after supper. I'd think, "Oh, poor thing, you should see *my* dishwasher."

If you wanted some vegemite after school, go in the pantry and get it-but it was in a 4-liter container! Everything was grand scale. You got used to it.

But there were built-in rewards too! I remember my 8th birthday was before the residents moved in. We had a sleepover. We had this whole big building to hide in, all night to run around. We took mattresses and piled them up and climbed up and slept, and jumped up and down. No one else had a home where they could do that!

Dawn and Peter own the Aged Care Service Group, a Melbourne based company that operates care facilities in Melbourne (Eden Terrace and Ashley Terrace) and on Bribie Island in Queensland (Eden on Bribie).

Find out more about them by visiting <http://www.acsg.net.au/>

