Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4879

Wensing, Petronella (Nel) Jacoba

(1924 - 2023)

Born	19240122, Teteringen Holland
Died	20231207, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Artist, Community activist, Designer, Social worker, Teacher

Summary

As a young migrant who arrived in Australia from the Netherlands in 1953, Petronella Wensing became concerned about the welfare of other migrants, particularly women, and how they could be successfully integrated into the community. As a consequence of her growing awareness of the problems that existed for them, she became a delegate of the St. Patrick's branch of the Catholic Women's League and on 22 June 1961, a member of the Good Neighbour Council of the ACT. Her work with migrants was recognised in the ACT International Women's Day Awards 2011.

As a skilled artisan her specialities were lace making and embroidery. She was foundation President and a Life Member of the Canberra Lace Makers Association, a past President of the Embroiders' Guild of the A.C.T. and as well, a member of the Australian Lace Makers Guild. She continued to volunteer and consult with the National Gallery of Australia and the Canberra Museum and Gallery, Canberra on lace and textiles for many years.

Details

Petronella Wensing was born 22 January 1924 in Teteringen, the Netherlands, the fourteenth child of seventeen, born to Johannes Goderie and Cornelia De Weert. As a young child, Petronella suffered from rickets, although this condition did not hinder her education as she was a bright little girl who learnt quickly at school. When she started school at the age of five, she could already knit and crochet. Growing up in the Netherlands during the depression was difficult for the family and even though her father was employed by the Netherlands railway, four of Petronella's five brothers suffered from long term unemployment. In 1943, her mother passed away and her father remarried in 1944.

Petronella Goderie and Michael Wensing (1912-1988) were married at Ryen on the outskirts of Breda on 19 August 1948. Even though Michael was a skilled sign writer, painter and paper hanger he found there was little work for him in the Netherlands devastated by the Second World War. Consequently, as many other people from the Netherlands were, they were also encouraged by their government with the assistance of the Catholic Migration Association in Breda to immigrate. Initially the family wanted to go to New Zealand but due to restrictions on the immigration to that country of married couples with children, they decided on Australia. Petronella and Michael travelled with their two small sons, on the *Sibajak* to Sydney, arriving 11 June 1953. The family then spent four months at Scheyville Migrant Camp near Windsor in New South Wales. Their third son was born at Windsor Hospital, the first night they were at Scheyville.

Around October 1953, Michael found that he could obtain work in Canberra, so the family moved there. They lived on Russell Hill for a time before moving to Braddon. Petronella quickly realised the difficulties faced by women when they first arrived in a new country. She believed that without being able to speak English many migrant women suffered from a lack of confidence restricting their daily lives and integration into the community. Because of the influx of new immigrants into the A.C.T after the war, the Good Neighbour Council had been established in Canberra on 22 March 1950. In these early years, new settlers were welcomed on their arrival at the Canberra Railway Station and at social gatherings held every Sunday afternoon. Petronella joined the St. Patrick's branch of the Catholic Women's League and the Good Neighbour Council with the primary aim of assisting new women settlers. She organised functions for women and children from many countries, working with them in a friendly and unbiased manner regardless of nationality. She advocated strongly the need for consultation between migrant groups and government bodies, so that migrants were made aware of issues surrounding family and criminal law and human rights.

In the late 1960s, she taught part-time at St. Patrick's Primary School and at Aranda Primary. She loved teaching children particularly. During 1970, still with a young family herself, she successfully completed a Certificate in Fashion at the College of Technical and Further Education in Canberra. This was essentially the beginning of a long career as a specialist artisan, as she has gone on to inspire generations with her dedication as a teacher and skill as an embroiderer and lace-maker. Between the years 1970 and 1986 she taught Embroidery, Needlework and Fashion at St. Clare's Catholic College in Canberra. In the year 2000, for three months, she undertook a teaching and lecturing tour of New Zealand. In 1982, during a journey she and Michael took to the Netherlands to meet family, she studied lace-making at Brugge, Belgium.

Up until 2003, she continued to give workshops on lace-making and embroidery transferring her knowledge and crafts generously to many students.

Her work has been exhibited across Australia and in many parts of the world notably:

• 1980 – her work was exhibited at the 1st Australian Fibre Conference, Melbourne.
• 1997 and 2002 – her lace adaptation of the Bok Tower Carillon was exhibited at the Bok Tower Gardens, Florida, U.S.A .
• 2000 – at the Canberra Museum & Gallery. She was invited by the Belgian Embassy to select and curate their lace exhibition – *From Belgium with Lace*.

For several years she played a prominent part in bringing to Australia international lace makers and textile designers such as Victoria van Strik. In 2006 she received a grant from the government of the Netherlands to assist with the celebration of the 400th Anniversary of the arrival of the Dutch in Australia. She spoke four languages, English, Dutch, French and German. She was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in June 2013.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Conference Paper
State Conference, 1964

Book
A History of the Good Neighbour Council of the Australian Capital Territory Inc., Fleming, C.I., 1975

Journal Article
Southern Stitches, Wensing, Petronella, 1989

Resource Section
ACT Women's Honour Roll: Celebrating local women on the 100th Anniversary of International Womens' Day, http://www.dhcs.act.gov.au/women

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013, http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Papers of Petronella Wensing, 1946-1987 [manuscript]

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Digital resources



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