

Brenda the Bar

As Peter Cross discovers there's more to Brenda Munro than being one of our favourite bar volunteers.

Brenda was bitten by the squash bug early. She grew up, the eldest of six, in Rotorua where Colin Brownlee and his family built the first squash courts in that area and the Munros were early converts. This was back in the 1970s when squash was the coming sport. Brenda's dad, who was an excellent tennis player, took up squash as did her mother and then Brenda when she was ten or eleven. There was a strong junior programme in place and pretty soon she was playing in tournaments and remembers how the club used to hire buses that took players and parents up to Auckland and around the North Island for tournaments picking up other juniors along the way.

Like many young people of her generation Brenda set off on her OE to Europe. In her case she packed her rackets and along with a couple of squash friends headed first for England. They went via the States, driving across the country, stopping at many squash clubs for a hit and showers. These were all, back then, hardball squash centres. She anticipated a trip lasting a couple of years but she didn't return to live here for almost a quarter of a century. Most of the eighties were spent in London; a spell that included managing the South Bank Squash Club a huge setup on Vauxhall Road that contained 18 courts, which was run as a business with paid rather than volunteer staff.

For reasons we didn't discuss, at the end of the decade Brenda moved to Barcelona where she lived right through the nineties and the first few years of the new century. She was heavily involved with the Real Federación Española de Squash, Spanish Squash Federation and among other things looked after the Spanish women's team for a decade. She also had a small business teaching English as a foreign language. Barcelona is the capital of Catalonia so you won't be surprised to learn that Brenda speaks the language of the Catalans in addition to Spanish.

At the end of 2003 came a return to New Zealand. She elected to move back to Auckland rather than where she was raised as most of her friends were here. Brenda's career took an interesting turn when she was appointed to a job at Literacy Aotearoa, a not-for-profit organisation that delivers literacy and numeracy programmes around the country for adult Kiwis that missed out at school. Brenda works in the National Office and her job is ensuring the organisation does what it's committed to do and justifies government funding it gets from money allocated to the tertiary education pot. She soon realized that the job alone was a sufficiently worthwhile reason for staying in NZ.

Brenda was looking for a club so she could resume her squash and approached Glen Wilson at a tournament for advice. He suggested us, "You'll really like Herne Bay Ponsonby," he told her, "It's really social and full of veterans." Nice one Glen.

So what brought Brenda's squash to an end? Her knees had been giving her grief for some time but she played through and eventually in 2011 she had to have her right hip replaced brought on by the wear and tear of four decades on the court. So that was that.

I've often thought about what it must feel like to be unable to play squash and find it hard to imagine. Then a sentence from 'The Quiet American' came back to me. Graham Greene's protagonist Harry Fowler contemplates losing his Vietnamese mistress muses. "It would be the beginning of death." By comparison Brenda is somewhat understated when I broached this subject: "It's really hard. I thought how could you not play squash?" It had been a huge part of her life for four decades after all. She continued to stay involved by coaching women players and eventually stopped this too. "There's nothing else that gives you such a workout in such a short space of time." She told me. Nothing else had attracted her in the same way. She told me how much she loves the atmosphere you get around squash and the friendships you make through squash that she had never found anywhere else. "It doesn't matter how good you are, providing you are with someone about the same level, you always get such a great game. The ball keeps coming back making you work while if you are not that great at tennis you spend a lot of time without moving a lot and picking balls up."

Brenda can't remember when she became a bar volunteer but thinks it must have been before she stopped playing. She tells me she does so as it's a way of giving back to something that has given her so much. It also makes her go to the club now she is not involved in playing or coaching and she loves it when she gets here and a chance to catch up with old friends. As for a downside to working behind the bar she couldn't think of any.

Away from the club and work Brenda is loving living in Auckland. She has simplified her life, banished a car from it and walks and takes buses everywhere. She walks half marathons with family and friends, enjoys watching the way the city is growing and experiencing all the different cultures. Her parents are still alive and well and play golf three times a week. Presently Brenda is heading off to her old haunts in London and Barcelona for a break. On reflection 'the beginning of death' is pushing it somewhat.