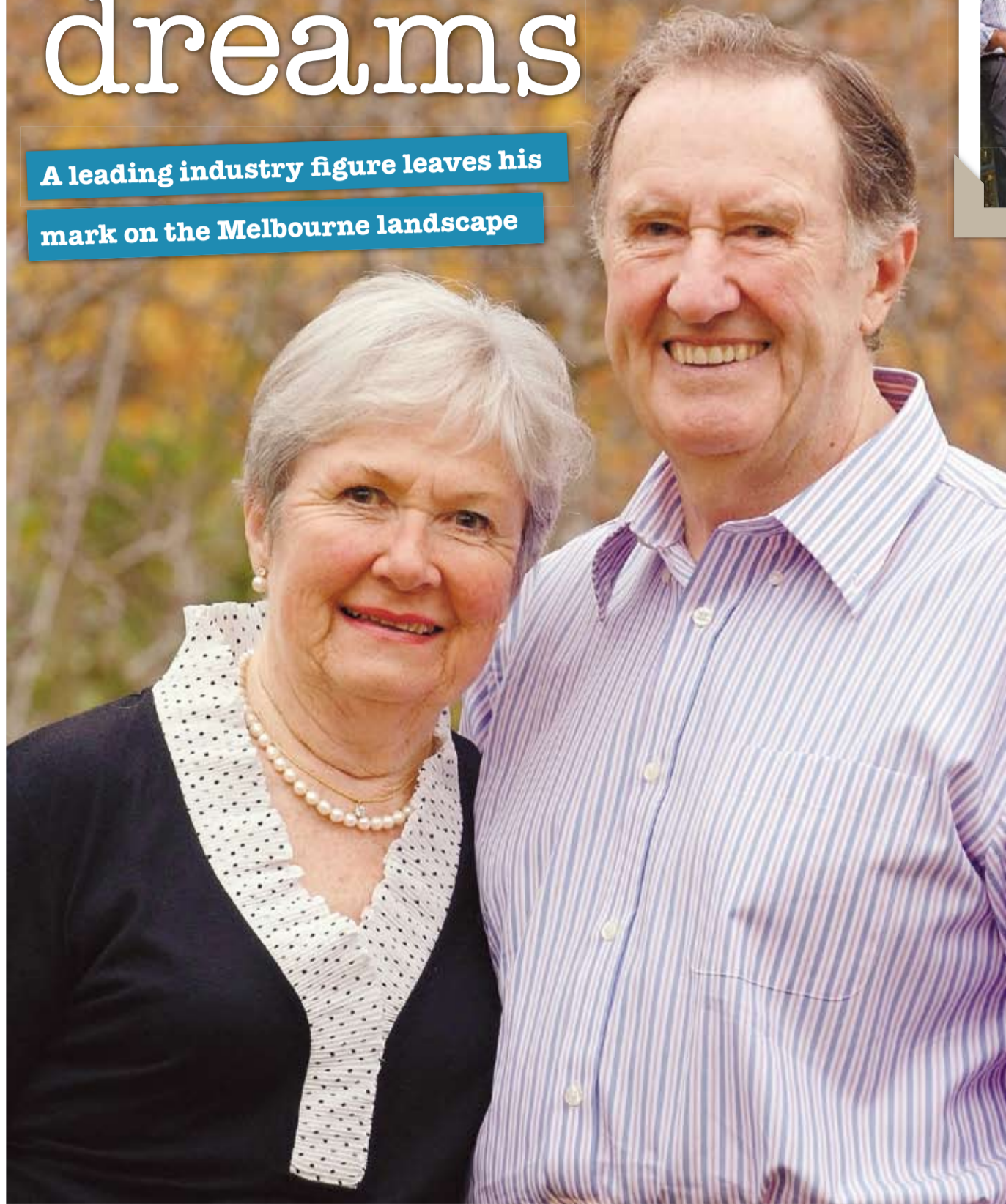


# Building dreams

A leading industry figure leaves his mark on the Melbourne landscape



(L to R) Bert, daughter Natalie, wife Dawn, son Marshall, daughter Adele and son Grant



Bert and Dawn on their wedding day



Bert (second from left) at head-office opening, 1990



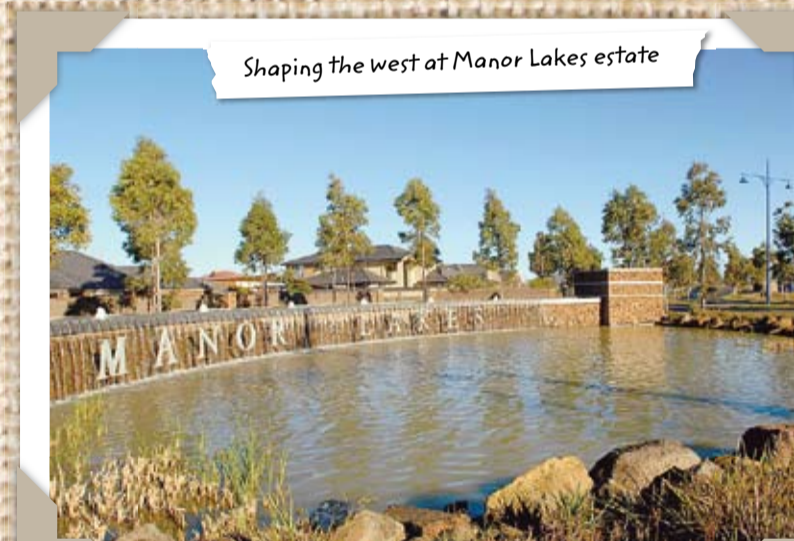
Bert with his mother and two sisters



The award-winning Hunt Club Estate, in Cranbourne



Bert at the turning of soil, Manor Lakes



Shaping the west at Manor Lakes estate



Bert Dennis (right) – a passionate supporter of Legacy

## Celebrating 50 years of development

- 1935 Bert Dennis is born.
- 1937 Bert's father dies and the family spends the next 10 years moving from one form of accommodation to another.
- 1950s Bert works as a civil engineer for Heidelberg City Council and deputy city engineer for the City of Chelsea.
- 1960s Marries Dawn Hicks. The couple have four children – Adele, Grant, Natalie and Marshall. Joins Oscar Flight, a retired city engineer, in a civil engineering consultancy partnership. Meets a Werribee farmer Baden Powell (not the Scout leader) and they begin a handshake relationship to develop hundreds of hectares. Also joins a retired solicitor and a real-estate agent to form Triset Nominees, embarking on a small land-development project in Ringwood.
- 1970s and 1980s The development and engineering elements of Bert's business grow, with investments in Melbourne's west and southwest, as well as some farming ventures. Three children – Adele, Natalie and Grant – enter the family business, which also includes the establishment of a home-building arm, Triline Homes. The fourth child, Marshall, is involved in farming. Two other building arms – Glenbrae Homes and Executive Homes – would later be introduced.
- 1999 The Dennis Family Corporation (DFC) is set up, bringing all the elements of the family business under one banner.
- 2000s The DFC focuses on expanding its business with residential estates such as The Hunt Club, Rose Grange and Manor Lakes, as well as building homes. The latter are consolidated under one name – Dennis Family Homes. Bert establishes community funds from which he distributes grants to various not-for-profit groups in and around the estates.

### Words Andrew Brasier

**B**ert Dennis, one of the major movers and shakers in Melbourne's burgeoning new-house-and-land scene, is still a man on a mission at 75. The founding chairman of the Dennis Family Corporation believes it is vital that Australians have access to affordable housing. It is a subject dear to the heart of Bert, who is celebrating 50 years in the residential engineering, building and development industry. He says lack of land supply and increasing government levies and charges are putting the great Australian dream out of the reach of many, especially single-income families.

Top Bert Dennis and his wife, Dawn, celebrate his 50 years of success

And he believes governments can ensure affordability by releasing adequate supplies of land for residential housing, and funding community services in new estates through general revenue, rather than property-based taxes levied on first-home buyers purchasing new-house-and-land combinations. In large part, he admits he is driven in this quest by memories of his childhood. His soldier father, George, still haunted by his World War I experiences, committed suicide in 1937 when Bert was just three, leaving his mother, Coy, and his four siblings struggling to get work and accommodation. In the next 10 years, his family traversed Victoria in search of basic life necessities. Bert says by the age of 13 he had lived in 15 houses and, by 21, when he finished his education, he had attended 19 schools.

He has vivid memories of his embattled childhood, including living in window-less fruit-pickers' sheds with bare concrete floors. "We did it very tough," Bert recalls. "I got my first pair of shoes when I was eight and my first pair of underpants when I was 13. Mum shifted around quite a bit in search of work. "Mum was an extremely strong-willed, resilient person. She was determined that no one was going to break up our family. "She lived in fear of the social-security department taking her children from her and putting us in a home or placing us for adoption. "For 12 months in 1942 we lived in a tent at Piangil (northwest Victoria)." Bert says his family often didn't

have money or regular supplies of meat. "Having no money meant if I wanted something I had to either make it myself or repair someone else's cast-off," he says. "We had very little to eat. The evening meal regularly consisted of fried bread, fried potato fritters or fried bread dough, which finished up like a doughnut. There was meat on the table at odd times." **"I got my first pair of shoes when I was eight"** Bert Dennis Things improved for Bert and his family when his mother obtained a war-widow's pension and a Housing Commission home in West Ivanhoe. But his earlier experiences made the young Bert strive for a better life.

"Because I had to fend for myself, it taught me to be very self-reliant from an early age, very determined and capable," he says. "You had to fight for what you needed." After a junior baseball career in which he played with and captained future Australian Test cricketer Bill Lawrie, Bert eventually got his big break by completing a diploma in civil engineering with the help of a government scholarship. He used his qualification to gain work at councils before becoming a consulting engineer and developing small residential projects in the 1960s and 1970s. "It wasn't until I was working at the Heidelberg Council I realised what I wanted to do and that was to become a consulting civil engineer," Bert says. Later, he was involved in bigger projects

and farming ventures in Melbourne's west, which form the basis of the Dennis Family Corporation business today – estates such as Manor Lakes and Rose Grange. The Dennis chief has come a long way in 50 years but is still a very modest man who does not lead an ostentatious lifestyle. "I drive a Ford, I have no plane and live in the same house in Glen Iris we bought in 1972," Bert says. "I am very content with what we have got. A highlight for me was when three of the four children came into the business. (The fourth child, Marshall, is involved in farming)." The founding chairman says today his role in the company also involves mentoring his grandchildren in business. "I suppose the highlight was building a family business. I love what I do." 🏠

Photography: supplied; estate images: (opposite page) Chris Groenhout