



50 YEARS IN PROPERTY: BEHIND AN INDUSTRY LEGEND

WITH 50 YEARS OF INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE NOTCHED ON HIS BELT, A MEDAL OF THE ORDER OF AUSTRALIA ON HIS LAPEL AND NEARLY 30 INDUSTRY AWARDS ON HIS WALL, PROPERTY DEVELOPER **BERT DENNIS** HAS REASON TO GLOAT. THEN WHY DOESN'T HE? HE TALKS TO **KATE ELLIS WELSH**.

Bert Dennis has been delivering affordable homes to families for longer than I've been alive.

And, 10 minutes into our two hour conversation, I begin to understand why he's so committed to it.

This year, Bert Dennis OAM – founding chairman of the Dennis Family Corporation – celebrates his 50th year in the property industry. The company project manages a number of masterplanned communities in Melbourne, Regional Victoria and Queensland. Dennis Family Homes (part of the Dennis Family Corporation) has homes in over 40 locations across Victoria and New South Wales, creating affordable living solutions.

So: why the commitment to delivering affordable housing to families?

"By the time I was 13, I had lived in 15 different houses," Bert explains of his family's early struggle.

"And one of those houses was a tent on the bank of the Murray River for 12 months.

"The houses we stayed in were always derelict, and there was never enough food or enough clothes for us all – I never got my first pair of shoes until I was eight years old.

"But mum was determined to keep us together."

A victim of mental trauma caused by serving in the trenches at Gallipoli and an alcoholic, Bert's father committed suicide when Bert was only two years old and his sister Dawn had just been born. Bert's mother was suddenly left in the midst of the depression years with five children and no income.

For the next 10 years, Bert's mother moved her children in and out of dilapidated accommodation, before their family was one of the first to be awarded a housing commission house in 1947 in West Ivanhoe in Melbourne's north-east.

"Our first house was very small – about 110 square metres," remembers Bert.

"It was a three bedroom, brick veneer house. There was no dining room; just a basic lounge, with no heating or air conditioning, and with an outside toilet. But we thought we had it made, because it was the first flush toilet we'd ever had."

It was soon after being awarded their first housing commission house that Bert experienced another first: underpants.

"I got my first pair of underpants at 13 years old at Preston Tech," recalls Bert.

"During tech I never had any idea what I wanted to do.

"At age 15, I started to play baseball. One of my mates made the Victorian side, so I set myself the target of becoming a member of the Under 18s Victorian side.

"The only catch was that to get in the side, you had to be a school boy – which meant I had to proceed on to Senior Tech at Footscray to do a diploma.

"I didn't realise that I was pretty good at maths, but I was getting marks between 90 and 95 percent in a class of about 50 students. As a result I was awarded a four year government scholarship and got

30 pounds a year, which helped with school fees and books – so off I went to Footscray Tech to start a diploma in civil engineering.”

Not only did the determined Bert make the Under 18s Victorian baseball team – he was elected state captain – and played against Australian cricketer legend Norm O’Neill and with Bill Lawry.

Bert decided to complete the Civil Engineering Diploma – not because he wanted to be a civil engineer – but because it was a “means to an end.” By the time he finished school at 21, he had gone to 19 different schools.

It wasn’t until Bert was at his second job with Heidelberg Council that he realised what he wanted to do.

“I was working with a consulting civil engineer and I realised how much he got paid, and suddenly the light came on: I thought, ‘I’ll become a consulting civil engineer!’” Bert explains.

Ever the goal-setter, Bert aimed to become a shire engineer at 30, a deputy city engineer at 35, a city engineer at 40, then retire, and “make a fortune in consulting”.

But it didn’t quite work out that way.

“The catch was that to become a city engineer in those days, you had to have a Municipal Engineer Certificate – a qualification over and above my diploma,” says Bert.

“Just after I sat for the exam when I was 22 years old, I applied for an assistant engineer’s position at the City of Chelsea.

“It was during the interview before the mayor, town clerk and city engineer, that I realised they had mis-described the position in the ad. They were actually seeking a deputy city engineer and could not legally appoint me until I was 24 years old, passed the exams, and had four years’ experience of which six months had to be structural.

“Sitting in the interview, I was thinking, ‘Geez, what do I do now? Do I get up and shake their hands and say that I’ve applied for the wrong job?’

“I decided to stick it out. When they asked me that – if they were to appoint me, what they could appoint me as – I cheekily replied ‘acting deputy city engineer’ until such time as I passed the exams.

“So, they gave me the job, and at 22 years of age, I had the job that I’d aimed to get when I was 35.

“And I passed the exam!”

Eighteen months later Bert applied for a job with prospects of partnership with a retired city engineer who was 65 and who wanted to start a consulting practice. He had the contacts Bert was seeking but was too old to do the work.

Bert got the job, his partner retired again five years later, and at the age of 29, Bert owned the consulting practice.

And so Bert’s developing days began.

In 1958, Bert married Dawn Hicks, his wife now of 52 years. They had four children and at the same time started renovating old houses.

From single houses, Bert invested in bigger and better investments, including a Brashs store in Prahran’s chic Chapel Street, and a factory in Bayswater.

In the sixties, Bert – as the owner of AG Dennis and Associates – embarked on his first residential development of about 20 lots in Ringwood.

Bert continued with small subdivisions around Ringwood, Lilydale and Croyden before starting to work with a local Werribee farmer-come-property-developer, Baden-Powell (not the same person who founded the scout movement).



BERT DENNIS (CENTRE) WITH WIFE DAWN (FAR RIGHT) AND THEIR FOUR CHILDREN

While the sixties brought Bert ample opportunity – including the Mossfiel Estate in Hoppers Crossing in Melbourne's west which took 28 years to develop – it also brought a crippling credit squeeze, the first of many which Bert has seen come and go in his career to date.

"The sixties credit squeeze was absolutely disastrous," remembers Bert.

"I went away on a holiday for a fortnight, and we had 12 months of work lined up ahead of us.

"When I came back from holiday, every job we had was cancelled – every job that we'd started design on, every job that was about to go to construction – even the ones under construction were stopped."

Nine months later Bert's lifeline came from Baden Powell who paid all of the former developers outstanding bills on the proviso that Bert would continue design on the Mossfiel Estate.

Bert survived another credit squeeze in 1980 and welcomed his children on board in the late eighties. Today, Bert's eldest child Adele Levinge (née Dennis) is Executive Director and Chairperson of Dennis Family Homes, second child Grant Dennis is head of the company as Executive Chairman and third child Natalie Postma (née Dennis) is also an Executive Director and is Company Secretary. The youngest, Marshall Dennis focuses on his farming interests.

"Up until the early nineties I had no intention of building a big business," says Bert.

"In 1992 I said to the kids, 'Don't live my dream – you tell me what you want to do with the business. It wouldn't worry me if you were to sell it.'"

The Bert's children, however, had other ideas, deciding to build-up the Dennis family brand and develop a long-term business.

Today, the Dennis Family Corporation is the biggest private property developer in Victoria, and builds around 1,000 homes and develops around 900 lots a year across Victoria and New South Wales – not surprisingly, focusing on building affordable housing for families.

While obviously proud of the history behind the Dennis Family Corporation, Bert is modestly matter-of-fact when it comes to his personal achievements.

Five years ago, Bert was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for service to the housing industry, to the community through contributing to the debate on urban planning and to support for charitable organisations. (The Dennis Family Corporation has so far built more than 10 homes for various charities, and, on each of its project managed estates, sets aside an amount from the sale of each per lot which is then annually granted to local not-for-profit community groups. Over the life of these projects, around more than \$1.4 million is expected to be donated to community groups.)

As well as assisting his four children in running the Dennis Family Corporation, Bert is the inaugural chairman of the Property Industry Foundation Board of Advisors (Victoria), as well



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as Founding President of the Australian Population Institute, and has been involved in the numerous discussions of late about Australia's expanding population.

"A lot of the growth in the economy comes from the growth in the workforce which is then dependent on population growth," explains Bert.

"The states that have the strongest population growth have generally got the strongest economy.

Bert says that in order for Australia to continue to have a strong economy, we need to ensure that there are a sufficient number of workers who are paying tax which means the population needs to grow.

"At the moment we've got about five and a half people of working age to every person that's over the age of 65. By the year 2050, that's expected to drop down to two and a half people of working age to all those retired.

"That's obviously not going to work: we'll either have to double our taxation or halve our standard of living to handle it."

And while Bert believes Australia will need to stabilise its population, he thinks that should happen over a long period of time rather than immediately – and halting immigration is not the answer.

"Firstly, we've got to increase our fertility rate or we're going to breed ourselves out of existence. But it takes a long time for us to reach replacement level, and a long time for babies to reach working age.

"Secondly we've got to increase immigration, because we're going to be short of workers as the baby boomers are now starting to retire.

"Thirdly we've got to extend the working age, and push the retirement age out beyond 65."

At 75 years old, Bert himself still works full-time. But does he have any plans to hang up his boots?

"Yes," answers Bert, "when I get old." 🍷