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Neil Cherry, scientist, teacher, politician, peace worker

Part 15

The last months - October 2002 to May 2003

Dorothy - 01/10/03

Neil and Gae Cherry showed great courage and inner strength in their stoic acceptance of the limitations imposed on them both by Neil's motor neurone disease. They frequently expressed their immense gratitude to the carers who made life at home possible for Neil. The Motor Neurone Disease Association, in particular the field worker Rosemary Hargreaves, and the community therapy team at the Princess Margaret Hospital gave Gae vital support in her care of Neil. A group of friends united to give Neil and Gae practical and moral support throughout Neil's illness.

Adjustments following the loss of power in Neil's legs

The loss of power in Neil's legs meant that he and Gae had to face more changes in their lifestyle and Neil had to cope with major physical adjustments.

The first adjustment was Sparky - using the electric wheelchair for mobility.

The second major adjustment was having Gae do more and more things for him and Neil having to explain to her how to do things that he had previously done, such as repairs and fuse changes, and what to do about the car.

The third major adjustment was having carers come and do the ordinary things that he had been doing for years but now progressively was unable to do, like dressing, undressing and getting in and out of bed, getting on to the toilet, showering and shaving and cleaning his teeth - the most natural things that he had always done. Even making decisions about what to wear each day was a problem, but once his carers, Sandra and Brenda, knew what his preferences were they made appropriate decisions.

By the time of my next interview with Neil in mid January 2003, most of his movement was by the hoist. To operate it required two carers. Two carers came in the morning to get him out of bed, help him with ablutions and a trip to the toilet and left him in the wheelchair so that he could work on the computer or go down to Riccarton Bush for a change of scene. Two came at lunchtime to shift him from the wheelchair to the Lazyboy chair to change the position of his legs,

and serve him lunch, and two came in the evening to clean him and put him to bed.

The fourth major change was the urindom which meant that he had a bottle on his leg and a fitting on his penis to collect urine.

Neil's keen mind and his enthusiasm for his work unimpaired

In 2003 Neil's mobility problems increased and he became more dependent on Gae and his carers, but his mind was as active as ever and his enthusiasm for science was undimmed.

Outstanding Contribution Award

In December Environment Canterbury presented Neil with an Outstanding Contribution Award honouring his work for the Canterbury community.

The citation

**"Councillor Associate Professor Neil Cherry
ONZM, BSc(Hons) PhD (Cant) FRMetS MRSNZ MamMetS**

"In recognition of outstanding service to environmental science, local government and the community

"Neil Cherry is a born and bred Cantabrian, but as an environmental scientist he has made his mark firmly on the world stage.

"Born and educated in Christchurch, Neil completed a PhD in physics at the University of Canterbury, and undertook postgraduate study at McGill University in Montreal and at Auckland University. He joined Lincoln College in 1974, teaching meteorology and climatology, and helped build an international profile for Lincoln's role in weather and climate research.

"He has pursued world-leading research in wind and solar energy, climate change and seasonal forecasting, human biometeorology, air quality and the effects of natural and artificial electromagnetic radiation on people's health. He is internationally regarded as an expert in this field, and has presented his research in conferences and courtrooms around the world.

"The common thread throughout Neil's career has been to link sound research and science with concern for global and personal health. This perspective led Neil to enter local government as a Canterbury Regional Councillor in 1992. In the past decade he has served council as chair of the Regional Planning Committee, and in this term also as chair of the Air Portfolio committee. He has been a passionate advocate for the sustainable management of Canterbury's natural resources, and has championed the development of an air plan to tackle Christchurch air quality issues.

"Neil is a past-chairman of the New Zealand Branch of the Australia and New Zealand Solar Energy Society. His international standing and contribution to environmental science have been further acknowledged this year with an Associate Professorship of Environmental Health at Lincoln University, and Neil became an Officer of The New Zealand Order of Merit in the Queen's 2002 New Year's Honours List."

Video for the Inside Out Television Programme

From the time of the diagnosis of motor neurone disease a team from Frank Films, led by producer Gerard Smythe, filmed episodes in Neil's life until the beginning of 2003. It was shown on national television in March 2003. It gave a picture of what it was like to live with the disease and showed the day to day adjustments that had to be made, but above all it celebrated the richness of life and the people involved with Neil and Gae at that time.



Making the video -From left: Gerard Smythe, Karla (partly obscured), Neil, Gae, Jo on crutches and Neil's sister Jenny Griggs

Peace Award

On 3 December 2002 Neil was one of the recipients of the first eight Christchurch City Peace Awards given to local groups and individuals.

Peace Award Citation

"Dr Neil James Cherry ONZM

"Neil Cherry has been a tireless worker for peace and disarmament research and education for many years. In 1985 he founded the Canterbury Branch of Scientists Against Nuclear Arms and convened the group until 1996. He was an active member of the US-based Union of Concerned Scientists and 'Beyond War', the Aotearoa/New Zealand Peace Foundation, Students and Teachers Educating for Peace and the Riccarton Peace Group. He was a member of the local committees of the 1986 United Nations International Year of Peace and served as the scientific member of the Public Advisory Committee on Disarmament and Arms Control from 1989-1991. He was awarded the 1990 Commemorative Medal by the government for services to peace and disarmament research and education. He has also published articles about the dangers of nuclear power and nuclear winter, and the need for nuclear disarmament."



Neil with the Mayor of Christchurch, Garry Moore, at the presentation of the Peace Award

Evidence for court cases

On his return from Taupo in 2002 Neil had an email from a Japanese community group in Tokyo asking him to come and give evidence as an expert witness in a court case against a celltower very near to people's homes. He emailed them that he could no longer travel, but that he would provide a signed affidavit. He emailed it as a PDF file and it was translated into Japanese.

Affidavit for Nuclear Veterans

In parallel with the Japanese affidavit he worked on an affidavit for the nuclear veterans' case taken by one veteran against the New

Zealand Government for exposure to nuclear radiation during Operation Grapple. On average the veterans are dying earlier, and many of their children and grandchildren have serious health problems consistent with their father or grandfather being exposed to genotoxic ionising radiation.

Neil explained, "I calculated that during the atomic bomb flash - a very short exposure - they were exposed to more than 25 years of the longterm fall out exposure which people in New Zealand experienced. They continued to suffer exposure during the three months that they stayed close to the epicentre while the New Zealand navy monitored the air and water.

"At that time it was not known that they should be wearing protective gear. These men were guinea pigs. Their sperm was damaged.

"The Wellington Medical School has issued a report saying that there is no evidence that their children and grandchildren are sick because of the veterans' exposure to radiation.

"I understand that it is globally accepted that nuclear radiation is ionising radiation which is a genotoxic (i.e. DNA damaging) carcinogen. This is accepted by the WHO, the International Cancer (Research)Agency, and the National Radiation Laboratory. A genotoxic substance has **NO SAFE THRESHOLD**. Therefore if the exposure is above zero there are always risks. These men were exposed to a level far above zero. Their exposure included the whole body, including the sperm. If the sperm did not die or the DNA was not repaired - which is possible for some - they could pass on mutated DNA to their children.

"The British Government has taken the lead and granted compensation because they have found a significantly lower life span in the British nuclear veterans with an average of fifty seven, and generational problems.

"Why does the New Zealand Government not do the same? These veterans were at the test site on the orders of the NZ Government and on behalf of the NZ people. The evidence even for the one veteran is totally consistent with the above hypothesis. Few of the veterans are still alive, most having died in their fifties. Surely we should use today's knowledge to say we are sorry that they were (ordered) to do this and here is the compensation."

Neil appeared at the court case. His evidence was heard in Christchurch because he was unable to fly to Wellington. He was cross-examined for a whole day in what of course was a stressful situation. He coped with this experience with his usual assurance, but it took an enormous toll of his diminishing energies - and this was only two months before his death.

Karla's visit

In the same week as the court case Karla and her husband Jack arrived from England for their last visit with Neil. While they were in Christchurch they renewed their marriage vows as the family had not been able to attend their wedding.



Neil and Gae look on as Karla and Jack cut the cake



**The family group
Gae, Jack, Karla and Jo stand behind Neil
in his wheelchair**

A time for looking back

Some of the lighter sides of life

Children's birthday parties

With her typical imaginative touch Gae planned special birthday parties for the girls which were real family occasions. There were Spooky parties and Bad Taste parties and others which were centred around pop stars or another music theme. The games and the food were centred round the theme. Gae created a piano cake for the music party and put a cobweb icing with spiders and flies from the Magic Shop in the web and made marshmallows into eyeballs for the Spooky party.

Memorable concerts and shows

Neil treasured his memories of the Roger Whittaker concert in Montreal, 'Phantom of the Opera' in Sydney, and 'Les Miserables' in Auckland and in Christchurch.

Neil did the lighting for one of the plays at St Christopher's where Gae was in the cast, and also remembered the pantomime in which she and Jo and Karla took part. He never missed seeing any show Gae was in.

Memorable places

At the top of the list would come Iceland. They went first for two days in 1981 on their way to Europe for the World Wind Survey and Neil visited scientists in Reykjavik. They visited again on the world tour in 1996 and travelled to the north of Iceland, which was a real adventure. It meant a lot because of the people, their philosophy, and the natural environment. Like New Zealand it is a small country surrounded by the sea and its people have a strong belief in democracy. It is so different from being in the massive continent of America.



Gae and Neil in Iceland

Scandinavia and Switzerland are a group of countries they especially loved visiting.



Gae and Neil at St Moritz in Switzerland

Salzburg was a favourite and memorable city for them, "with its spectacular castle on the top of the hill where we walked and got a wonderful view of the valley and the city, full of beautiful old buildings and wonderful gardens around the tombstones, and the major river flowing through it."

Memorable experiences

The family craved nearness to the sea. After being in Richland for some time they loved a visit to the Oregon coast and enjoyed the waves. One day they went to Haystack Rock and the tide came in at frightening speed. Neil and Gae picked up a child each and ran to the shore and even then arrived back drenched. "After months in the desert, seeing the ocean and the waves was so exciting for us all."

"A moving memory I have is of Gae and me going up on the Franz Josef Glacier in a helicopter," said Neil. "Being on top of the mountains and seeing the Southern Alps with Gae was very special to me. Across all that snow we saw Mt Cook and Mt Aspiring."

A very full life

Gae and Neil said, "We have had a very full life, so much more than the average person has, and now we have friends all round the world, and many have visited us here and been introduced to New Zealand."

Warning that there was little time left

In early May the family were told that Neil would probably have only weeks to live. Karla arranged to return for one last visit.

The book suggested by Chris Beaver

Neil continued to work on the book into the last week of his life.

On Sunday, 18 May, I sat with him while Gae went to a church service. Neil was in his wheelchair, working with a friend on amendments to the chapter he had just finished. Gae thought he would not work long as on the previous day he had been taken to the windmill site in Gebbies Pass - an experience which had been deeply satisfying, but very exhausting for him. Neil worked for three hours that morning. He sat still in his chair, not moving a muscle. At first I thought it was a sign of the depth of his concentration, but of course it was because the development of the motor neurone disease meant that he was incapable of any movement.

He continued to work during the following week, but on the Friday he had serious difficulty with his breathing which made working impossible.

The following day, Saturday 24 May, Neil died peacefully at his home with Gae and Jo beside him.

Karla arrived after her father had died, but was able to be part of the service in Neil's memory at which family and hundreds of friends and supporters from Christchurch and further away came to celebrate the life of this remarkable man.

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