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‘Nomadic’ Crane Association Chief Executive calls time on varied career

For the past 12 months, Rod Auton and his wife Kui – short for Kuimira – have been living in their motorhome in preparation for a retirement spent on the road.

Despite being married for more than four decades, they thought it best to test out the living arrangements – just in case.

Currently parked up at the Wellington Top10 Holiday Park, 15 kilometres from the capital, he says life is “very structured”.

“We’ve been married for 41 years, so life on the road should be a piece of cake.”

It’s characteristic of Rod, who hasn’t been one for settling in one place his entire life.

Born and bred in Invercargill, he was out of the house aged 10 and delivering The Southland Times.

Later, driving a delivery van and truck before a stint at the local meat works, it wasn’t until the army was “recommended” as a suitable alternative to his then lifestyle choices, that he realised his true passions.

“I did the third territorial intake after the national service closed down. And I ended up driving trucks, loving every minute of it,” Rod says.

“That’s one of the reasons why I transferred over to the regular force in 1974 and carried on from there.”

Joining at the age of 20, Rod participated in two tours in Singapore but never saw active service.

Gaining promotions almost “every two years”, he reached the rank of Warrant officer Class One and then took a commission in 1990 aged 37 and sent to Waiouru Military Camp to command the transport, movement and catering unit.

Over the period of his military career, he would move to different military bases throughout New Zealand, but eventually called time on army life at the age of 40.

If he was going to have a second career, it needed to happen before the military retiring age of 55, he says.

He began selling insurance and retirement packages – an introduction into business and the commercial aspects of business and dealing with families.

After two years he went out on his own, describing his army-civilian transition as not “too traumatic.”

But seven years of self-employment as a business and risk management advisor was tough; not just for him but his wife, too.

So, he took a job running quarantine, warehouse and port operations for Jeffs Vehicle Deliveries in Christchurch.

A redundancy ended that position, but he quickly bounced back as a freight hub manager and port manager for Pacifica Shipping.

Key to that role was building relationships, a skill he fine-tuned while in the army.

“Nine times out of 10, you’re trying to get the best out of the soldiers. And the best way to do that is with honey, you know, rather than vinegar.

“I think that skill just carried over into that role, but I also suppose it’s my personality type. I’m reasonably comfortable with all sorts of people and I don’t get offended easily.

“I like to take the mickey out of people, and they can do the same – so, I’m quite happy with that. Also, I surrounded myself with very good staff, that’s important.

“Normally they were smarter than me, so they made me look good.”

Later, the role of the then Canterbury Drivers Association’s Executive Officer was an opportunity Rod couldn’t pass up, and would prove beneficial for the industry, too.

In 2006, he became the CEO and set about transforming the regional association into a national entity, on the condition that the then board approve Rod’s request to complete a master’s degree in transport logistics at Lincoln University.

Deliberately choosing papers that would assist in the restructure, he focused on branding and strategic communications, and the New Zealand Trucking Association was born within a 12-month period.

“The NZ Trucking Association is going really well, and the guy who succeeded me has taken it to a new level – which is really good.”

Stepping down in 2010, he took a position in Bahrain that same year thanks to his old Lincoln Professor, Chris Kissling.

At the time, Chris was helping develop the Bahrain Polytechnic, offering a transport and logistics management degree.

Starting out as a tutor, Rod quickly became the Head of School for General Studies, helping students and ensuring they had enough English and skills to complete the degrees.

With his adult-children now having children of their own, Rod and his wife decided to return home.

“Strange enough, that’s when I got the phone call about the Crane Association CEO role,” Rod says.

Applying for the role while overseas, he was interviewed on a Thursday morning and offered the job that same afternoon and started the next day.

“I started with very little crane knowledge and the Crane Association’s Executive assisted in mentoring me into the position.”

One of his focuses – helped by Scott McLeod – was upgrading all the Association’s systems; from the CRM and introducing apps, to bringing the accounting in-house and rebuilding the website.

That allowed Rod to then turn his attention towards KPI’s and the analytics of the business to determine the Association’s direction and strategic plan.

In the last three years, the Association’s revenue doubled, and with good growth in the membership. Rod is particularly proud of the conference’s development.

One of the best things he ever did, he says, was commissioning the skills of Robyn Grooby, wife of former CANZ CEO, Ian.

“She has been my right-hand woman for just about the whole period.”

Rod isn’t worried about the Association’s future, especially with the new CEO, Sally Dunbar, at the helm.

“There are certain things that we need to achieve around inclusiveness with the members, the associates and regulatory bodies so that we can get things done more effectively and smoothly. That’s something I’m sure Sally is very capable of.”

As for his future, it will be the same as all his other adventures; behind the wheel and on the move.

“We’ll be on the road by the end of July. We’ve led a really nomadic lifestyle, and this is just a continuation of this I think.

“I don’t think we could ever settle in any one place. We’ll have to eventually, when they take our licences off of us – that’s if they can find us.”

Retiring CEO, Rod Auton July 2019

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