

A LONG LIFE, LIVING WELL

Aucklander **Winsome Johnston** turns 93 at the end of November. She is recognised as the oldest person in the world with type 1 diabetes. Her daughter **Jan Grove** describes life with her inspirational mum.



“Mum has a positive attitude, and she always has, especially when it comes to managing her diabetes and keeping her blood sugar down”

Winsome Johnston, who has been living with type 1 for 87 years – since she was six – is held up by healthcare professionals around the world as an example of what’s possible.

Jan Grove, her daughter, says, ‘Mum has a positive attitude, and she always has, especially when it comes to managing her diabetes and keeping her blood sugar down, which I believe was drummed into her when she was young. A strict diet has totally brought her this far in life.

‘One of her biggest fans is her diabetes nurse Rab Burton. He’s often commented on what an amazing lady she is. He tells so many of his patients about her and uses her as an example of awesome management every day. Rab’s been a wonderful help to me, as well, over the latter years, and has become a friend.’

BORN AT THE DAWN OF INSULIN THERAPY

Insulin was discovered seven years before Winsome was born. It meant that, when she was diagnosed with diabetes at six, she had a decent shot at life, whereas, just a decade earlier, things would have been different. Indeed, she had an older sister who died of diabetes at 16.

Of course, diabetes management was much trickier then. The only way to check blood glucose was through urine testing. Doctors didn’t always have the most thoughtful bedside manners, either.

Winsome still remembers the shock of her doctor waving the vial of urine in front of everyone in the waiting room as he announced loudly to her mother that Winsome had diabetes.

Winsome’s doctor believed that, despite the treatment that had become available, Winsome might not live long. But Winsome and her family were determined. Winsome remembers her mother making low-carb ice cream, and her father going down to the port to collect her insulin shipments from England. The needle she used to inject her insulin had to be boiled in a pan to sterilise it, and her father sharpened it using a razor blade.

DEFYING MORE PREDICTIONS

As an adult, Winsome became a nurse, met Herbert Johnston (known as Bert), and married. She continued to be determined to meet any challenge.

Jan says, ‘Mum and Dad were told they would never have children because of diabetes. Well, they proved them wrong. Early in their marriage, mum went on to have four beautiful babies. First born was my sister Sherryn, who left home at 17 to do an OE in England, made her home there, married, and had two children of her own. Fifteen months later, I was born – I’ve had four children of my own.



Winsome in her early nursing days, and Winsome and Bert, just married.



Left: Winsome cutting the 25th anniversary cake with Diabetes NZ Ambassador Dame Denise L'Estrange-Corbet. Middle: Winsome enjoying some outdoor time during lockdown. Right: Winsome and daughter Jan with the latest member of the family.

Then Mum had twins five years later: a boy who lives in the far north, John, and a girl, Joanne, who's made her home in Taranaki, and who has had two daughters.

None of us have diabetes. And we've gifted mum with 14 great-grandchildren now too, none of whom have diabetes so far either.

'I really do believe Mum's proudest moment was introducing her four babies into the world.'

Diabetes didn't feel like a big thing to Jan growing up. 'It was a loving happy family with two totally devoted parents, not only to their four children but to each other.'

'We had no idea that Mum had diabetes! I guess it wasn't as prevalent as it is today, and Mum and Dad never spoke of it. Mum must have had amazing control and, knowing how Dad was so devoted to her, he must have watched her closely.'

'To her four children, she was just a lovely normal mum, baking all the time, great family dinners on the table, and normally pudding after.'

'The only diabetes-related

memory I have was a stainless steel tin in our fridge. It was in there all the time. It smelt of methylated spirits – awful. That was Mum's tin and I later found out it contained her needles and syringes for injecting insulin.'

GOING FOR A WORLD RECORD

In 2018, Winsome and her family attempted to have Winsome recognised by the Guinness World Records as the world's longest living insulin-dependent diabetic. Jan says, 'Our attempt was rejected as we couldn't provide proof of the dates when Mum was diagnosed. Her records only go back 10 years with the DHB.'

But Jan says, 'We are definitely not giving up on that. At the moment, we have been working on a second attempt to get Mum's record accepted.' The attempt is being supported by Diabetes New Zealand.

MORE CHALLENGES

Jan says, 'Don't be fooled, life has not always been straight sailing.'

'Several years ago, Mum had a small heart attack, then about two years ago she broke her hip. In both cases, she was so down, and I was frightened she wasn't coming back.'

'She pulled through both of these times. Watching her in pain, as she was, was dreadful, but she was so strong and her attitude was amazing. Each morning, she was up and she would dress herself ... Makeup always went on, then out she would go to do her exercises – some mornings with excruciating pain. I don't know how she did it.'

In 2006, Winsome's beloved husband Bert passed away. Not long before that, the pair had decided to move to Crestwood, a retirement village in Titirangi. Winsome moved there on her own anyway.

Jan says, 'Best move ever. Since Dad's gone, Mum has made a lot of friends. Earlier on, she was very active in the village and involved in a lot of groups. She's slowing down a lot now, but she's far from giving up. She also still lives independently.'



Jan's son Bryce and his two children popping in to visit great-grandmother Winsome.

PLENTY OF VISITORS

Jan says, 'My four children just adore their Nana. They'll call by to see her, just to check she's okay, and have a chat and a coffee. Often two of my girls will meet her at the Crestwood Cafe, and our morning teas often turn into lunch.'

'Mum is a born star in my eyes. The journey we've had together over the latter years are so special to me, and, although we're mother and daughter, I'm proud to say we're now best friends as well. I keep a close eye on her, and, if I can't see her on a particular day, I ring her three or four times to check in.'

'Mum now lives a lovely quiet life, and she deserves it. She's surrounded by people who adore her, especially family.'

'She tries every day to go for a small walk, and, before lockdown, I'd pick her up and off we'd go on outings. She's happy to sit and read a good book too.'

Winsome has often volunteered with Diabetes New Zealand Auckland to speak to people with diabetes and encourage them. 'Mum is here for a reason,' says Jan. 'I believe that so strongly. She's often said she wants people to know, especially the young ones, that life goes on, and, with good management and a positive attitude, you can live a long and healthy life with diabetes.'

'Mum's done the hard yards, now it's time to relax and enjoy the quiet life.'

MY IDENTITY
IS PROUD TO CREATE

WINSOME



\$79

FASHIONABLE MEDICAL
ID JEWELLERY

*An inspiration to all she
meets, Winsome Johnston
has been living well with
diabetes for 87 years.*

SHOP NOW
FOR A BEAUTIFUL PIECE OF
JEWELLERY AND SUPPORT
OUR COMMUNITY

LIMITED NUMBER AVAILABLE.
ENGRAVING INCLUDED.

MY IDENTITY 
WWW.MYIDENTITY.CO.NZ