

A veteran of the backflow sector

From prisons to paradise, Graeme Mills is looking at retiring after over 50 years in the water industry. He spoke to **MARY SEARLE BELL** about his career and his passion for clean water.

In 1964, 16-year-old Graeme Mills signed on for a plumbing apprenticeship with a small business on Auckland's North Shore. Back in those days an apprenticeship took six years or 12,000 hours, and young Graeme wondered what he'd signed himself into.

When the end was finally in sight, the system was reconfigured – the term was lowered to five years or 10,000 hours. The thing was, Graeme had finished his five years under the revised system but was yet to sit his final trade certification – something the plumbing industry did not appear to have a resolution for.

“There were a few of us caught in the apprenticeship transition, and the plumbing industry didn't seem to want to make a decision as to when we could sit our final exam,” says Graeme.

“There was a lot of uncertainty and no answers. It was very disheartening.

“I very nearly threw the whole thing in at that point. I'd gone as far as applying to join the police force. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I was too lightweight for the police – back



Graeme Mills with the water main flow trailer the Tauranga City Council developed for leak detection.

in those days, you had to be at least 10-and-a-half stone.”

In 1970, Graeme got a job as a maintenance plumber at Paremoremo maximum security prison, a role he held for almost three years. He finally was able to complete his trade certification too. However, he couldn’t see himself as a plumber, so when the opportunity arose to move into water and wastewater, he leapt at the chance.

“Because the prison was isolated, the water and wastewater wasn’t connected to a public network,” he says.

“It had its own schemes.”

He achieved C Grade certificates in both water and wastewater through the Ministry of Works training scheme in 1971. He then had a one-year stint at Waikeria prison as an assistant plant operator for both its water and wastewater treatment plants, moving back to Paremoremo in 1974 to fulfil the same role.

“By 1977, I was thoroughly disheartened with working at the prison. The location was very isolated – we had no car and the bus service was infrequent. There was a lot of stress too, and when the neighbour’s wife committed suicide I

thought, ‘I can’t put my wife and family through this’.”

So, Graeme got a job with the Cambridge Borough Council as a water and wastewater treatment plant operator, and moved his young family south.

“The plant was on the banks of Lake Karapiro, just above the dam. When I arrived, the grounds were an overgrown mess and I was asked if I would tidy it up as the World Rowing Champs were to be hosted there in 1978.

“And so I did, creating a nice space for me to put up a deck chair and watch the races – in my own time of course!”

After seven years in the role Graeme was looking to broaden his scope. His role at Karapiro was a solo one and he wanted to get some experience in staff management. Consequently in 1984, he took a position as water overseer with Mt Maunganui Borough Council, responsible for looking after the town’s water from catchment to meter, with a team of four under him.

Local government reform in 1989 saw the council sucked into the Tauranga City Council. A LATE (Local Authority Trading Entity) was created to manage the water



Graeme Mills speaking at the Water New Zealand conference with entertainer Frankie Stevens.

and Graeme was appointed as its water overseer, working through Aspen Contractors.

With a staff of 20, he looked after the water and wastewater networks, right through to 1997.

“I decided to get out of Aspen and went back to the council in 1997. They were considering moving to universal metering so were looking at water conservation in a big way. Two of us were appointed,” says Graeme.

“One dealing with domestic customers, while I dealt with commercial customers, helping them manage their water use to improve their bottom line. We also did leak detection and night flow testing too.”

The role later shifted focus to water quality, and Graeme was responsible for the city’s backflow programme, mitigating potential hazards through backflow, crossflow control, and responding to water quality complaints that could be associated with cross-connection contamination.

“It was at this time I got involved with the backflow industry. The Backflow Group was an incorporated society that later joined forces with Water New Zealand, becoming a special interest group within the association.”

In his 20 years with the group, Graeme has served as chair for more than 10 years. His generosity with his time, knowledge and skills saw him awarded Honorary Life Membership of Water New Zealand this year.

As his citation reads, “Backflow is one of our more active and successful groups and much of that is because of the effort that Graeme has put in over the last decade. During his time as chair, the Backflow Group developed a number of important initiatives including:

- NZQA backflow testing standards 23847 and 23848,
- The Backflow Code of Practice,
- The New Zealand Industry Standard for field-testing backflow prevention devices and verification of air gaps,
- Organising numerous conferences throughout New Zealand, and
- Facilitating a large number of backflow forums in association with the local branches of Master Plumbers.

Now, after 20 years with the Tauranga City Council, he is looking forward to retiring in January next year, having already cut his work back to just four days a week.

“I have nothing but gratitude and respect for my current employer. But retirement will give me the opportunity to travel, as well as more time for my other interests.”

Graeme remarried in 1996, and he and his wife breed German Shepherd dogs on their lifestyle block. He is also heavily involved in the local community patrol group, and until last year was one of a number of search managers of the local group of Search and Rescue.

He remains passionate about water however.

“Water protection is always placed in the too hard basket. They say it’s too expensive, but that’s a myth. The expenses in the aftermath of a waterborne disease outbreak would be catastrophic – not just in the cost of clean-up but also the impact on tourism and the credibility of the water provider.

“You do what you think is right,” he adds.

“Some people will love you, others will hate you, but you need to be proactive, and retain your individual integrity and principles.” **WNZ**