

Graham Newton-Small



The black sheep of the family

Graham Newton-Small would be the first to tell you he was the black sheep of his family. While his siblings all went off to be lawyers and an economist—the dutiful children of a banker—Graham’s only burning ambition in life was to travel. And so, at the age of 18, with a suitcase, a letter of recommendation to Lloyds Insurance and a hangover from his boisterous goodbye party, Graham boarded the Queen Mary bound from Sydney, Australia, for London in 1957. Lloyds lasted less than six months. Graham found much more entertaining employment tending bar in Earl’s Court, or west Sydney, as it was called for it was home to so many Aussies.

He’d save up and travel the continent, returning when a replenishment of funds was needed. It was ahead of an anticipated trip to Sweden that Graham answered an advertisement in the Times of London for government drivers.

A fateful offer from Winston Churchill

Little did he suspect that he’d soon be shuttling around Winston Churchill on off days and weekends. The former British prime minister was chatty. “So, Graham, what are you doing with your life?” he demanded.

Graham replied he had no ambitions, except to travel. The response perplexed Churchill. After some drives together, Churchill made Graham an offer: “Get a college degree, and I’ll write you a recommendation.” This proved too tempting. Graham spent a year earning an economics certificate from University College London. It was by no means a degree, and Churchill looked at Graham with no small amount of amusement when Graham presented him with the certificate. But, Churchill kept his word. “I’m going to recommend you for this new thing,” Graham recalls Churchill telling him, “the United Nations.” Graham would spend the next 38 years at the UN.

Graham, or Gray as his family called him, was born in the Australian outback town of Inverell, near the border of Queensland in New South Wales. His father, Cecil, was a Westpac bank manager. His mother, Clarice, was a schoolteacher who had her four children practice their penmanship every night. Graham was the second child after Geoff, followed by Trevor and Cecile, the only girl. Clarice doted on Graham, who’d been born a “blue baby.” The doctor told her he wouldn’t survive past two, but he grew into a healthy young man.

Geoff and Graham, just 18 months apart, were bundled off to boarding school at the age of eight, a tradition in Australia where farms are so big children commute by plane. Geoff and Trevor became lawyers, and Cecile an economist. Graham preferred a pint to studying.

Finding purpose and exploring the world

The UN changed Graham. He found purpose in helping others. Suddenly, exploration held meaning. His first assignment was Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where he helped restore the roads the Italians built during their ill-fated invasion. Then he worked on a geological survey of what would become modern day Darfur in the Sudan. In Zambia, he helped develop their national parks for tourism.

It was there, at age 35, that he met Sue Tang, a young Chinese Malay lawyer freshly arrived for a job with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. The office tour he was assigned to give her turned into a tour of Lusaka, which turned into dinner. By the end of dinner, Graham knew she was the one. He proposed six months later during a sudden monsoon whilst on safari. He became the exotic uncle at family gatherings, often commanding the room with stories about places and peoples no one had ever heard of. Half a world away, his parents missed his Malawi wedding and the birth of his daughter, Jennifer, in New York. But, over the years, the field work took its toll. Graham suffered from chronic malaria he contracted in Sudan. He increasingly sought desk jobs in New York and Asia.

Dining under Van Gogh's stars

As his daughter got older, he planned road trips with her across his native Australia, or Thailand, Namibia and Malaysia when he was living in those countries. When Jennifer was 12, the family bought a country home in the south of France, near some of Graham's former colleagues. The threesome spent long weeks every summer ambling around Provence, in search of the perfect melon or parcel of lavender. Good food, good wine and good company are the joys of life, he would muse contentedly after a large meal under Van Gogh's stars and cypresses standing guard in the courtyard of their old farm house.

A lifetime spent trying to make the world a better place, and living in some of the world's worst places, left both him and Sue dispirited. So, in retirement, they withdrew to lovely Naples, Florida. A place, he often marveled, where poverty and war didn't exist. Jennifer lamented that no one talked about anything but golf, bridge, the beach, grandchildren and tending their gardens, but he'd only smile. "It's an art to appreciate the little things in life," he'd say. He took delight in reading his daughter's dispatches as a correspondent for TIME magazine from many of those far-flung places he'd sought out as a young man. "Adventure, I discovered," he told his daughter, "was only meaningful when you had someone to share it with. And later, the adventure falls away and the only thing that's important is the one who's been on the road with you. And you find that if you can change one life, hers, or maybe two, yours, then that is a life well lived."