

Down the Road: How Two Generations Found Home This Christmas

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A Queenstown Lakes Community Housing Trust story,

December 2025

Heather Morrison still remembers the tenements of Edinburgh. Growing up in Scotland's capital, neighbours knocked on doors to borrow butter, watched each other's children, and knew everyone by name. When she emigrated to Australia with her husband Gordon in their late twenties, they packed two babies, a suitcase, and a wooden tea chest.

Fifty years and a lifetime later, in a small street in Arrowtown, that sense of community has returned.

"In my whole life, this is like the best of the olden days. Everybody knows each other," Heather says. "You walk up and down this little street here, and you can't stop talking to people."

The Morrisons are one of 217 households currently housed through the Queenstown Lakes Community Housing Trust. Their story spans continents and decades, but this Christmas, it comes down to something remarkably simple: a grandmother can walk down the road to see her grandchildren.

A family scattered, then gathered

The path to Arrowtown wound through Edinburgh, Sydney, and Melbourne. Gordon worked as an engineer while they raised their family across Australia. When he was diagnosed with cancer, then later with Parkinson's disease, the family's priorities shifted.

Their son had already moved to Queenstown with his daughter. Their daughter Kerry, a single mother of three, was navigating life in Melbourne. Thirteen years ago, the pull of family brought Heather and Gordon across the Tasman.

"We were just here to look after the children while the two single parents could go out and work," Heather explains. "It was a fantastic opportunity for us to spend quality time with our grandchildren."

For Kerry, the decision to follow her parents to New Zealand came down to practicalities and hope. She loaded her three children—then in kindy, year one, and year two—onto a plane from Melbourne.

"I remember the drive down Malaghans Road with sheep and cows either side in the morning. It was nothing compared to an hour in busy city traffic in Melbourne."

When rents outpace wages

Kerry spent fourteen years working in retail management around Queenstown and Arrowtown, including a decade at Mooch kitchenware. She watched her weekly rent climb from \$470 when she first arrived to over \$850. The family went through the exhausting cycle familiar to so many local renters: three or so years in one place, then the house would sell or the owners would return, and the hunt would begin again.

“I was basically living on something like \$200 a week to feed everybody,” she recalls. “The rest of my money was just going out on rent.”

For Heather and Gordon, living on a fixed pension, the maths grew equally grim. “You pay your rent, but then you have to pay your bills with whatever savings you have, and that was becoming zero,” Heather says. “I thought, if it goes up anymore, we’ve had it.”

Kerry, despite working full-time and holding a community services card, found herself in an impossible middle ground. Banks wouldn’t approve a mortgage, even though she was reliably paying \$850 a week in rent. She attended QLCHT information sessions and saw the rooms packed with people in similar situations.

“I never thought I’d actually get one,” she admits. “I thought, so many people, and there was a real need for it.”

A phone call changes everything

Heather and Gordon’s names had sat on the housing list while they watched the Tewa Banks development take shape near Arrowtown. When a friend mentioned the pensioner units being built, Heather was encouraged to apply, though she expected nothing. There were only six units and dozens of applicants.

“We had the most beautiful interviews, where they came to the house and spoke to us,” she remembers. “I said, if we were fortunate, it would be fantastic. But if we’re not, well, I quite understand.”

They moved in just days before Christmas last year. “Gordon and I took the outdoor setting out the front, and we sat there in the sunshine. We had Christmas there, with all the boxes around us.”

Then came news that Kerry’s situation might also have a solution. After being knocked back twice, she received approval for an affordable rental, just as her landlord announced the house was going up for sale.

“The timing worked out perfectly,” Kerry says. “I could just leave when the house was ready.”

Her new home sits at the opposite end of the same street as her parents.

A street that feels like home

Kerry’s three children—now 16, 18, and nearly 20—have settled into their new home. She overheard them in the first weeks, talking to friends online about how much they loved it. The double glazing. The light. The air quality.

“For the first month, I was just pinching myself,” she says. “I couldn’t even believe it was real. I still can’t.”

The proximity to her parents has practical benefits. Gordon can spend time with his grandsons when Kerry works late at Moochi clothing, where she now manages the Queenstown store. The boys take him for haircuts. Alexandra, Kerry's daughter, pops in on her grandmother.

"It's such a simple thing," Heather says, "but just to see them walk past the window and come in, all the time."

Heather, true to form, has become a neighbourhood fixture. She volunteers with Baskets of Blessings, cooking on Mondays and packing food parcels on Thursdays. When surplus vegetables remained at the end of each session, she started making up bags and hanging them on neighbours' doors.

The neighbours noticed. They started a group chat to work out who was leaving the mystery deliveries. When they discovered it was Heather, they nicknamed her "the food fairy."

"It's caused them all to talk to each other, all the time," she laughs.

The street now has a communal lawnmower and a Christmas street party took place last week.

Building more than houses

The Morrisons' story plays out against a backdrop of persistent housing pressure. QLCHT's waiting list has grown 14 percent over the past year, with 1530 eligible households now seeking assistance. The Trust delivered 44 new homes in the 2025 financial year across developments including Tewa Banks, Longview at Lake Hāwea, and Hanley's Farm, with dozens more under construction.

For Kerry, the security means more than lower rent. "I was thinking, am I going to be able to stay in Queenstown? How am I going to manage?" she says. "Having family support close by was a huge deal for me. Now I can return the favour of helping Mum and Dad."

This Christmas will be different from last year's makeshift celebration among packing boxes. Kerry is hosting the family at her place. Heather's getting the lawns looking tidy. The grandchildren, once small enough to need minding after school, are studying, working, planning futures of their own.

"People say, you're so lucky you've got family in town," Kerry reflects. "And I do feel lucky and grateful. Lots of people come here from other places and don't have that."

Down the road, Heather is philosophical. After Edinburgh's tenements, Sydney's suburbs, and years of uncertainty, she's found something she thought had disappeared.

"We've all got the best neighbours in the world. Everybody was thinking, I hope they're nice people. And everybody is. We all like each other. It's just... it's so communal."

She pauses. "I can't believe I can just walk down the street, and there's my kids. There's nothing better you could wish for at Christmas time."

For more information about QLCHT housing programmes, visit qlcht.org.nz or call 03 450 1702.

