

FAR NORTH RADIO NEEDS A LITTLE HELP

Countless boaties around the Far North, and indeed New Zealand, are familiar with the expression “Good as gold”, thanks to the extraordinary devotion of Far North Radio’s Maureen MacMillan.

Maureen and her husband, Malcolm, have been manning the marine radio system around the clock since 1992, and plan to continue for some time yet, but Maureen has a tough road ahead of her.

She was diagnosed last September with motor neurone disease, a condition that has taken a severe physical toll, and weakened the voice that has always been there for those in distress on the sea for the last 15 years.

But it has yet to overcome her determination not to give in. She and Malcolm are still doing as much as they can, she says, with the radio within easy reach in case it crackles into life, as it did. The caller was assured that she was fighting fit and that everything was as good as gold, but the time has come when a little help is needed, she says.

“A lot of people have radios at home, and if a few of them are prepared to help out then that would be brilliant,” she says. “If we get enough, we could draw up a roster so people are manning the radio for one morning or one afternoon each week.”

A radio room was about to be established at the Houhora Big Game and Sports Fishing Club, which would help considerably, but she and Malcolm are anxious that the community respond to the need for reinforcements, lest the Coastguard in Auckland move in and take over.

Not that Maureen has any immediate plans to retire. “I’m not giving up,” she says. “We will still be available if anything goes pear-shaped.”

She and Malcolm had committed much of their vast store of knowledge to paper. It wasn’t easy to pass on 15 years of first-hand experience, preceded by many years out on the water, but any new volunteers would not be alone. Wherever



Malcolm and Maureen MacMillan
with a young family member

they were, on whichever side of the Tasman Sea, if problems arose they would only be a cellphone call away.

Far North Radio is receiving good support from boaties, which hasn’t always been the case, Maureen says, while Malcolm says they can reliably expect to respond to three or four incidents of some sort every week, even in fair weather.

While Maureen’s voice has changed, he adds, boaties who know her, and they are legion, are keen to keep hearing her. And Maureen makes it clear that they will continue hearing her voice for some time yet, thanks in large part to the support she is receiving.

“Malcolm’s been bloody marvellous. He has been the greatest support I could ever


hope for, and our friends have been wonderful, too. You don’t realise how many people care until something like this comes along.”

She and Malcolm had been responding to boaties since they gave up fishing in 1992, when it was Mangonui Radio, and hadn’t really appreciated what they were taking on.

“It’s grown like Topsy,” Maureen says. “We had two scheds a day, but soon found that we had to listen all day. People don’t break down at sched times, and of course there are a lot more boats out there now than there were in 1992.”

It is tiring, she concedes. “But it’s always been something I could do at home, and of course everyone understands how important it is to have someone to call on when something goes wrong.

“I hope someone will take over when the time comes, but that sort of person seems to be a bit thin on the ground. People seem to be better at taking than giving these days.”

Anyone who might like to contribute to keeping Far North Radio on the air, or who would like to know more about what is involved, is urged to contact Maureen or Malcolm at 09 406 1423. 

A VOICE OF THE SEA IS LAID TO REST

BARRY GROOM – 1931-2007

The New Zealand boating fraternity farewellled one of its most recognised voices on June 11 at Rangiora.

Barry Groom, the Canterbury marine radio operator known as the “Voice of the Sea”, died at the age of 76. He had run the Waikuku Marine Radio from his home for 24 hours a day, seven days a week for almost 35 years, and was the comforting voice that professional mariners and pleasure boaties heard along the Canterbury coastline. He is thought to have been

responsible for assisting more than 300 rescues throughout his career.

The coxswain of the Sumner Lifeboat Institution, Paul Lawson, said Barry Groom’s death was a tremendous loss to the community, as he offered a service that was almost impossible to replace. His reassuring tones would be sorely missed from the marine airwaves.

