

## **"When I came here it was heaven": From volcanoes and open seas to safe harbour at Ryandale**



Article and photography by: Corné van Hoepen

The shuffle comes first. Soft, steady and unmistakable. Then, around the corner, Ryandale resident Alan Miles appears, moving at his own unhurried rhythm, as if each step has a story tucked inside it.

Those feet have crossed more ground than most passports ever dream of. They have stepped off buses, climbed onto container ships, walked across continents. They have found balance on the rocking deck of a boat in the Caribbean and outpaced the ash fallout of a volcano.

“When I look back,” Miles says, “my first image would be I was building my own little raft on the grass at the back of the garden and imagine I was sailing all the way down to Africa.”

He was born in London, England, his accent today a tapestry of a life lived in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and a dose of sea spray. As a young man in Sydney, he slipped aboard a ship to Wellington, blending in with the crew. “I lived in a locker down below... so I wouldn’t be discovered by the captain.” Three days across the Tasman Sea, hidden and hands gripped in excitement of the adventure that stared him down.

He has set foot on nearly every continent. Europe. Africa. Asia and South America's edge near Venezuela. The Caribbean, however, is the place that shaped him most.

"The big word that resonates with me is respect," he says. "Everybody deserves respect." What stayed with him was "freedom... They're pretty free."

Freedom, and the ocean. "Home to me means the great wide open ocean," Miles says. "So really you could say I'm a man of no home."

That is until April 8, 2021.

That afternoon, everyone on the island of St. Vincent looked up and saw a ballooning mushroom cloud. "Something told me this is the beginning of the end," he recalls. The next morning, ash blanketed everything. "I was literally on the moon." He refused to abandon his boat until a two-man dinghy carried four souls through darkness and falling ash. "I obviously thought, 'Alan, it's been a good life.'" They ran out of fuel before landfall. Someone handed him a ginger ale. "I drank the ginger ale as if it was unbelievable."

After the volcano came deportation, detention, exhaustion. Then a bus to Kingston. A shelter. The Hub. In From the Cold. And finally, Ryandale.

"When I came here... it was heaven," he says quietly.

After detention cells with no beds and food once a day, after ash fell like a winter that would not end, Ryandale felt warm. Not just the building. The welcome. The way someone shows you where the warm, freshly-brewed coffee is. The way a staff member sits down and says, "let's sort this out together."

Two years later, the shuffle of his feet move through a different kind of harbour. Here, the tides are routines. Meals. Appointments. Laughter in the common room. A culture class on making bear grease. A lottery ticket checked at Metro just in case fortune decides to toss him a life raft. Staff helped Miles secure his pension and back pay, untangling paperwork that felt as daunting as the open ocean. "The staff have been very good at helping me in all kinds of ways."

Recently, he even secured his Canadian passport. "I'm headed back mate," Alan says.

He speaks often of the people. "I've learned so much from everybody," he says. "We all come from the same kind of hard living." There is a kinship in shared survival, in stories traded over tables. He mentions a fellow resident's name with deep gratitude "He's done a lot for me and for other people that I've seen."

In winter, he jokes that the icy sidewalks look "like a volcano," slippery and unpredictable. In summer, he soaks in the sun whenever he can. "I was free from day one," he laughs, remembering himself as a child running wild and unburdened. That streak of freedom still glints in him, even today.

Ryandale does not replace the ocean in any way, but it gives him something the sea never did: steadiness. A place to rest without scanning the horizon. A community that knows his name.

At 80, he still studies the globe and says he wants “to jump right in and get back.”

For now, the sea and her spray lives in his stories, and Ryandale is the shore holding him steady.