



11 OCT, 2024

## Willowbank celebrates 50yrs

*GreatScott.*

Greymouth Star, Greymouth West Coast

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**T**he Willowbank Wildlife Reserve in Christchurch began as a family dream — and 50 years on, it's still thriving.

In 1969, Michael and Kathy Willis said they bought a piece of land covered in gorse and broom on the outskirts of Christchurch.

There was no roading or urban development nearby, but their dream was to one day open a zoo.

On Labour Weekend of 1974, the Willis family opened Willowbank Wildlife Reserve.

"I had looked forward to that moment since I was young, so when it finally came to fruition it was quite surreal," Michael said.

"It was quite scary at the time, people called me a crazy dreamer."

Now 50 years later, and with their children Mark and Kirsty at the helm, Willowbank is celebrating.

"When mum and dad opened Willowbank, they didn't even have an entrance building, they just sat in an old Land Rover with a shoe box as a till and put an ad in The Press advertising 25 cents an adult and 10 cents a child," son Mark Willis, who is now co-director with his sister Kirsty, said.

Willowbank was the first to open a glass-free nocturnal house for kiwi in a natural environment and has

worked with many conservation projects.

The milestone birthday has had Mark and sister Kirsty reflecting on their far-from-ordinary childhood living at a wildlife reserve.

"When the first Star Wars movie came out, Mark was looking forward to getting a Luke Skywalker figurine for Christmas. Instead, we got a mountain lion cub in a dog crate wrapped in Christmas paper under the tree," Kirsty Willis said.

"We named him Lewis and he did everything with us. Mark would take him for walks on a lead and down for a swim, and he even used to sleep in my bed.

"Then he grew bigger teeth and bigger claws so playing started becoming a bit painful after a while."

The family is thankful for the local support they have had.

"We genuinely feel that we've only got this far because of the support from the community so now we want to give something back," Mark said.

"Right from the very beginning we've had help from other people, people who brought into our dream, and for that we'll be forever grateful," Kathy said.

For its 50th birthday celebration, Willowbank is offering a contest where people can share their park memories and win free passes.

— RNZ



Michael Willis at the zoo with some friends.

PICTURES: Supplied/Willowbank





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Kathy Willis with a kea.



Kirsty Willis with a young lion.