

Brian M. Davis AM

24 May 1930 - 13 February 2021

Tucked inside the kitchen cupboards of most Australian homes is a lasting reminder of the remarkable life of Brian Myddleton Davis.

The man who would go on to create the Décor brand and bring world-class design, creativity and innovation to Australian homewares, was born in Broome, Western Australia, in the first year of the Great Depression. His father David “Bo” Davis was an English adventurer turned pearler and his mother, Belle, was the daughter of a pearler fleet owner.

When the pearl industry declined and with World War II looming, the family, including younger brother Kim, moved to Melbourne. Despite his parents later separating and his father moving back to Broome, Brian had a happy childhood in Brighton and spent some of his early years designing and building model boats and billycars. His love of design and being a stickler for doing things properly had begun.

On leaving school in 1946, Brian joined G.J. Coles and Co as a trainee executive and discovered the excitement of merchandising, working with homewares and toys. He worked his way up to assistant store manager before leaving in 1953 to manufacture toys with his uncle Alex Tolmer at Toltoys.

While working for Toltoys in California, Brian introduced the cane hula hoop to friends from the Wham-o toy company and within two weeks they were producing and selling 25,000 brightly coloured plastic versions a week. The hula hoop craze then swept the US and the world.

Returning to Australia, Brian’s interest in homewares remained strong. After failing to convince his uncle to enter the field, it was agreed that Brian should resign from Toltoys to start his own business in early 1958.

Brian was certain the timing was right for the development of a superior plastic homewares range and so he established Brian Davis and Company Pty Ltd from a desk in his bedroom and with just 1000 pounds in the bank. The company adopted the original Décor trademark.



Brian Davis outside Décor’s head office in Melbourne.

One of Décor’s first products, the Habana beaker set of six plastic tumblers, which fitted into an airtight container, was an instant success. This was quickly followed by the first modular and stackable airtight food containers.

Brian’s philosophy was that his products should be simple, work well and be readily available. It was a winning combination.

Every item produced by Décor, which was incorporated as the Décor Corporation Pty Ltd in 1960, showed innovation and creativity and met the high standards of design that became synonymous with the brand.

Brian hired only the best designers, including Richard Carlson and Tony Wolfenden, who between them co-designed the bulk of the Décor range with Brian.

In 1979, with a growing number of BYO restaurants emerging in Australia, Décor released an insulated two-bottle BYO wine chiller that quickly grew in popularity and was widely exported.

The cooler was awarded the Prince Philip Prize for Australian Design (consumer category) in November 1980. Then, in July 1981, Décor sent two wine chillers to Prince Charles to commemorate his marriage to Lady Diana – the item was specifically requested on Diana’s wedding list.



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In 1983, the BYO wine chiller was chosen for permanent inclusion in the Design Collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art based on its quality, innovative and artistic design, and historical significance.

Brian was a quiet, unassuming man but one who stood by his decisions. He took a major risk using his own money in 1986 to launch a wholly owned US subsidiary of Décor before globalising Décor to more than 38 countries. Décor's overseas success came from the simplicity and quality of the product design and never resorted to using Aussie gimmicks such as cuddly animals or rugged bushmen to improve sales. The products spoke for themselves.

During the 55 years that Brian ran Décor, the company received more than more than 300 awards for excellence in design, promotion, or export. Brian was inducted into the Design Institute of Australia's Hall of Fame for his philosophy of design excellence.

With his strong work ethic, Brian continued to put in 10-hour days with the company he loved until he sold it at the age of 83. He had rejected many offers over the years and waited for the right buyer because it was important to him to ensure his staff would be looked after.

While Brian will be remembered as a pioneer in design and a successful businessman, his lasting legacy will be the lives he changed by quietly donating the money he made to help others in need.

Brian gave generously to the arts and a wide range of organisations that could help people in real need including the Salvation Army, food relief charity FareShare, the Smith Family, Very Special Kids, Australian Red Cross, World Vision and the Cancer Council of Australia.

Despite never having children of his own, Brian had a lifelong desire to help disadvantaged children and youth. He never sought recognition and often donated anonymously – whether personally, by the Décor Corporation or by his charitable foundation – to ensure there was no fuss about his generosity.

He was described by his closest friends as courteous, caring, and decent. He was a man of few words, but a very good listener. Brian was loyal to his small, close group of friends and was happiest when relaxing in their company and attending the arts including the opera, ballet, theatre, and galleries.

He had few personal interests but had enjoyed skiing in his younger years and watching Test cricket in his latter days.

Brian was honoured as a member of the Order of Australia in January's Australia Day awards for his commitment to philanthropy and business.

Geoff Fitzpatrick, Design Ambassador for the Design Institute of Australia, said: *"The peaceful death of Brian Davis marked the passing of a remarkable period of creative design and marketing in mid-century Australia."*

"As founder and sole owner of Décor Corporation, Brian had the singular vision and drive to build a homewares company in Melbourne that became recognised worldwide for its innovation, quality and appeal of more than 300 products, of which 100 have won Australian design awards and have been exported around the world."

"The key to his success had been in his concentration of what he did best – designing and marketing. A memorable life indeed."



This obituary was published in The Age on 30 April 2021 and was written by Darvell Hutchinson AM (now deceased), Brian's oldest friend from the age of five when they met at Sunday school, and Marcus Godinho, CEO of food relief charity FareShare, of which Brian Davis had been a generous supporter.