When a resident is awarded the Queen’s Service Medal, it’s recognition of voluntary service to the community or country beyond expectations. When two residents of a small town like Paeroa receive this recognition, it’s a reflection of the spirit and cohesion in the community, says Mayor John Tregidga.

This month, two past recipients of Hauraki District Council Citizen’s Awards were nationally acknowledged in the Queen’s Birthday Honours list: Bill Rackham for services to the New Zealand Fire Service and Alistair Buchanan for services to the community.

Some people serve the community in a myriad of ways; some are passionate about home. For Queen’s Service Medal recipient Alistair Buchanan, the two are the same. Paeroa has been “home” for six generations, for the past 45 years, and he and his wife Annette have sponsored everything they can to help it prosper.

Alistair started his working life on the family dairy farm at Waitawheta, eventually joining the Young Farmers Club and moving away from Paeroa. He attended Netherton High School and later attended Aorere College; he eventually became regional president of Positive Paeroa, a life-long resident of the town.

In addition, Alistair has used his organisational and business skills for community benefit, for instance in helping to keep the Goldfields Railway on track during a rough period, and on the Board of the Waitawheta Camp Society.

The couple jointly give of their time to ensure that any awards given truly reflect the recognition of voluntary service to the community, its young people, and the business community. “And our lives are the richer for it,” says Alistair.

Bill says he has continued in the brigade for so long because “it’s about the people you work with. The team around you, and I’ve had wonderful support from the communities.”

Alistair describes Alistair as an exceptional man. “A lot of Paeroa people wouldn’t realise just how much he has given over the many years,” he says. His quiet commitment to the community, its young people, and the business community has been absolutely inspiring.”

The awards are presented at a gala evening which, since 2006, has also celebrated the achievements of local 13 to 25-year-olds. Candidates for these honours can be nominated by schools, alternative education centres, youth groups, service organisations, or sport, recreation and culture clubs.

Nominations for both sets of awards must be received by July 18, on forms available from Council’s offices or on the Council’s website. Don’t leave it too late – our judging panel needs time to ensure that any awards given truly reflect the value of the volunteer’s contribution.

The presentations will be made in the Ngatea War Memorial Hall on September 24.

Above: Annette and Alistair Buchanan in the town centre they helped to shape.

A lifetime on call

Bill Rackham isn’t one for the limelight. He’d rather just get on with the voluntary work he’s been doing for the past 46 years, for which he has just been recognised with a Queen’s Service Medal for services to the New Zealand Fire Service.

Even before he joined the Paeroa Volunteer Fire Brigade in 1967, Bill was nurturing boots and helmets and polishing brass buttons – part of brigade uniform when his father was a member for about 16 years until 1966. Although Bill begrudged the chore, he admits to being fairly proud of his Dad.

After taking an apprenticeship with Walsmy Builders, Bill went on to become a fire fighter. “I was looking for a life of adventure,” he says. In 1972 he started working for the New Zealand Fire Service as a member of the depot at Waikato District and later moving away from Paeroa. He says his family’s long association with the brigade and the area – his grandparents were Karangahake miners – has made him our community feel all the more meaningful.

In 1975 Bill was elected junior vice president of the Thames Valley Goldfields Fire Brigades Sub Association, becoming president 10 years later. For 28 years he was active in annual waterways competitions – a test of skills and teamwork and “a heck of a lot of fun”. It was one reason he has been recognised with a Queen’s Service Medal.

At the time of the 1981 floods, Bill was the Paeroa Brigade’s deputy chief, and played a key role in coordinating emergency operations as the Fire Service’s first ever disaster response task force brought together available volunteer and paid personnel from around the region.

When Bill became Fire Chief in 1991 he had “big shoes to fill”. He says his predecessor Noel Thompson set high leadership and personal standards and was extremely dedicated and community minded – qualities that were recognised with a Hauraki District Council Citizen’s Award.

Bill too received a Citizen’s Award in 2007, which like his Queen’s Service honour was “unexpected and overwhelming”. He says fire brigade service is “about the team around you, and I’ve had wonderful support from the local team. I’m very proud of them.”

The special camaraderie with his fellow firefighters has been shared through 45 years of good and bad. “There are some things you never get hardened to,” he says.

Bill says he has continued in the brigade for so long because, “I need to do something I support it receives from members’ families, the community, for donations, business to be in and send our organisations.”

He also has a personal philosophy that once he starts a job, he needs to see it through. “It’s all about the people,” he says. In addition to being a member of the brigade, he is on the board of Fire and Emergency New Zealand, of which he was made a Gold Star honour, “Bill’s service is approaching double the tribute, he adds. It’s a recognition of voluntary service to the community, its young people, and the business community beyond expectations. When two residents of a small town like Paeroa receive this recognition, it’s a reflection of the spirit and cohesion in the community, says Mayor John Tregidga.

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