



Sir David Levene

Two key factors shaped David's outlook on business and life: observing his father, Lewis, and uncle Mark running a small paint and wallpaper business, Levene and Co., where margins and money were tight, and the generosity of his father to others in the community. David has been a highly successful businessman, particularly known for Levene's paints, which he took over managing in 1952. Through Lewis Holdings (the parent company) and Quadrant Properties, David and his team have mentored many start-up businesses. Through the David Levene Foundation, many community organisations have also benefited greatly from his philanthropy.

David Raymond Levene was born on the 19th August 1929 in Ponsonby, Auckland. *Ponsonby in those days was certainly not what Ponsonby is today.* His father, Lewis, one of thirteen children, emigrated to New Zealand from the north of England in the early 1920s.

My dad was out with his friends one night and he saw a notice that said 'Emigrate', so he went into the emigration office and said, 'I'd like to emigrate to the farthest place from England'. Weeks later he got notice to say he was due to sail for New Zealand from Liverpool the following Friday. His father landed in Wellington, then worked in a timber mill at Ruatapu on the West Coast. When visiting Auckland one Christmas he met David's mother, Sybil, *and I guess that was the end of the good life.* One of Lewis's brothers, Mark, also emigrated from England; they set up as painters in Auckland in the 1920s.

David recalls that times were hard. *I can remember Dad coming home and saying to Mum, 'There's no money this week, we've got to*

pay Phillips and Impey's account.' We never went hungry, but there was a sense of unease in the house.

David recalls that his mother spoilt him because he was an only child, and as a result his father decided he should board at New Plymouth Boys High School from 1943 to 1946. It took him a while to get used to being a single member of a large group, but eventually he enjoyed boarding school and made many friends. *It was a particularly good experience. It certainly straightened me out. It gave me siblings, if you like.* While he identifies as Jewish, David is non-practising and considers himself an agnostic.

When he left school David wanted to become a chemist; he began working with David Harper at the Harp of Erin in Greenlane. *I was counting pills, and rubbing ointments, and grinding powders, and making syrup simplex; and I was bored out of my tree.* His father suggested David join him and his uncle in their paint shop at 123 Karangahape Road. In 1947 he did just that. *The shop was about 20 feet wide, maybe 100 feet deep. It was narrow and had*



David Levene at the height of Levene's success

a basement underneath it where the bulk stock was kept. And it had two mezzanine floors. One where my dad and uncle framed pictures, and one where I did the office work. As you came into the shop, my dad and uncle had written up in gold leaf, 'A satisfied customer is our best advertisement' and that's right, of course.

David's outlook on life, his views on philanthropy and his success as a businessman were greatly shaped by those early days. *I don't like to see waste. My dad, even though we had absolutely nothing, he would always help people financially. He was that sort of a person.*

For many years, Levene and Co. operated from the single store in Auckland's busy K'Road. David urged his father and uncle to expand their business and begin sales to contractors. They had never done so because they worried about potential debt. *I nagged and nagged, and I remember one day my dad saying to me, 'Right, you go and do it your way, but if we lose everything it's on your shoulders.'* David changed the practice and firm by selling paint and wallpaper, to contractors. He also expanded the business by opening more stores around Auckland. In 1952, aged 23, he took over the management of the business and started to advertise heavily by distributing flyers to letterboxes. *When you're selling paint and wallpaper it's only every five or six years that somebody wants some, so we needed something to build store traffic.*

Following a trip to the USA in 1959 to research retail there, and after many subsequent trips, David was inspired by a businessman he met from Chicago called Dave Saks, who taught him a lot about marketing and merchandising. He then started developing the brand Levene and Co. into a major force in New Zealand retailing. By the 1960s, the company had diversified, adding hardware lines and even compost. *We'd put all these bits and pieces in at unbelievable prices, but paint and wallpaper we didn't discount too much. It worked.*

He then established a paint factory in Otara, South Auckland; it did not initially produce Levene-branded paint. The first Levene paint was not successful. It was marketed as interior and exterior paint, but it tended to wash off in the rain. *It was then I decided I had to have my own paint. But the paint had got a bad name before,*

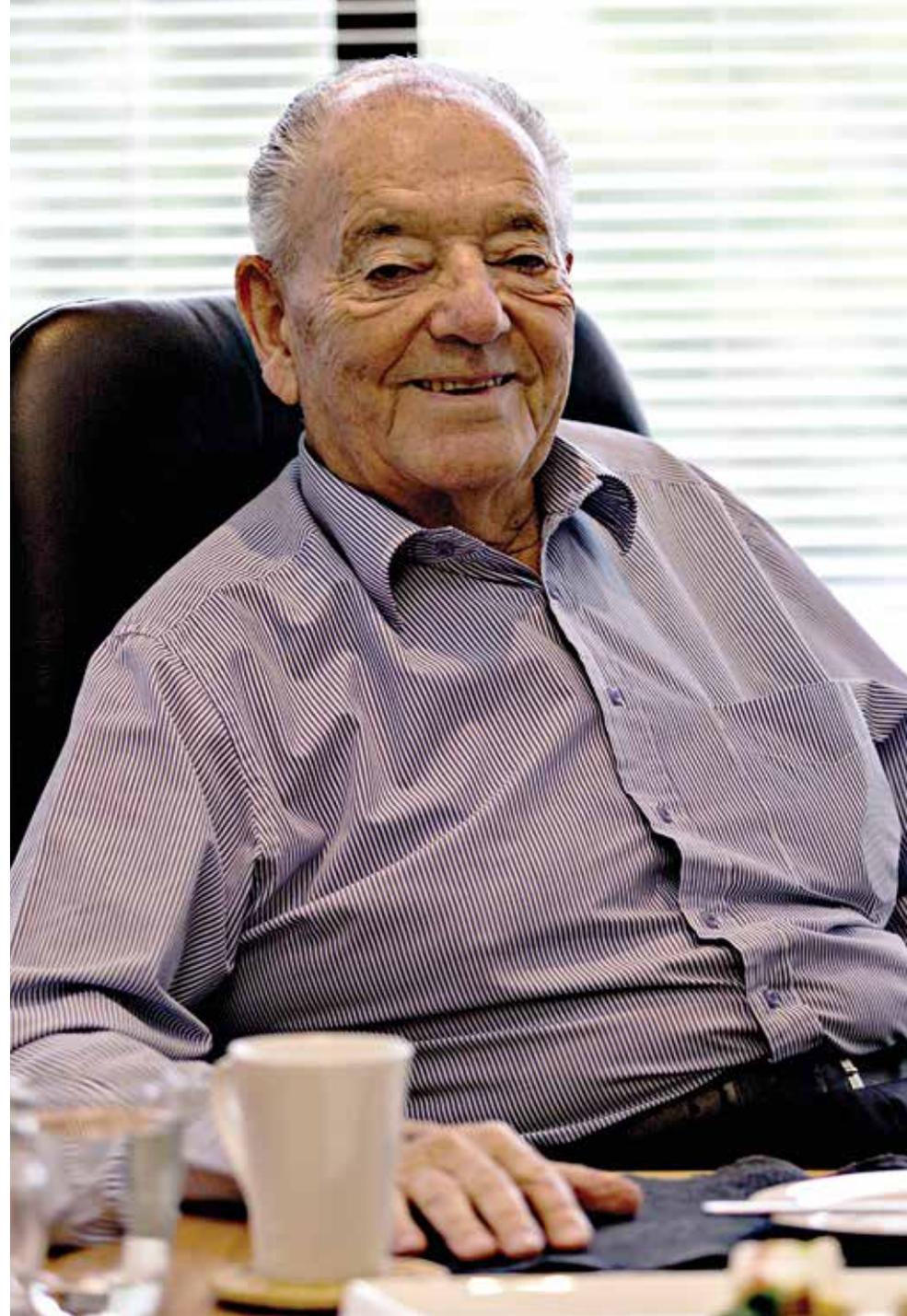
so it took me many years to overcome the idea that Levene's paint is no good. In the end Levene's stores only sold Levene paint, and it was highly successful.

By the early 1980s there were other large businesses in the trade, and it became tough for Levene to make a living from paint and wallpaper. We made a conscious decision to change our business to a lifestyle business. We brought in bed and bath. We brought in housewares, curtains, crockery, and that sort of thing. It was pretty successful. We became the in-place, because we had people with very good taste who would go overseas and buy, and we would be way ahead of the market in housewares.

By the time David sold the business to Skellerup Group in 1994, there were 52 stores throughout the country, as well as paint and wallpaper factories. The company was employing 1,000 people and had a total turnover of \$150 million. The sale turned out to be an unhappy decision, as Levene and other Skellerup-owned businesses went into receivership in 1997. It was terribly sad for me, because some of those people had been with me just on 50 years. We had marvellous people and it all went. It all went.

Reflecting on the culture at Levene when it was a family business, David says, Anybody could walk into my office at any time—the door was never shut—and talk to me. I preferred to be out and about than to be in my office. I preferred to be round the stores, round the factories and talking with the people, getting to know them a bit. The rule was everybody called me David, and we had a very open, happy culture.

After he sold Levene and Co. in 1994, David set up Lewis Holdings, named after his father, and under its umbrella, Quadrant Properties was formed as a property development and property management business. Lewis Holdings invests in start-up companies from a wide range of industries. David says he will listen to anyone who is capable and passionate about an idea, but always puts the applicant through a series of psychological assessment tests. His son-in-law, Rob McKay, developed psychometric personality



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testing, which has been widely used in recruitment in New Zealand and around the world. Over the years, Lewis Holdings has built a substantial investment portfolio that includes biotechnology and environmental monitoring programmes, through to digital-media start-ups. *We've done pretty well. I'm a lucky man.*

David's involvement in philanthropy has its roots in his father's attitude towards life and helping others. His father always helped those in need. *He was very good to his people, to his staff, and that rubbed off on me.*

Never one to seek the limelight, David believes in the importance of giving back to the community and, since the 1960s, he has been a generous benefactor of many and varied New Zealand charities. One of the first groups he supported was the Outward Bound Trust. He is the surviving member of a group of prominent New Zealand businessmen who were called together by Lord Cobham to discuss establishing Outward Bound in the early 1960s. Levene and Co. initially sponsored students to attend Outward Bound courses. Since then the Foundation has also supported capital projects and pledged support to the Cobham Memorial Scholarship Fund. David became a Trust director in the early 1990s and has been patron of the Outward Bound Trust of New Zealand Foundation since 2003, as well as being an active member of the Rotary Club of Auckland since 1963.

Another example of his long-time philanthropy is his support of the Halberg Trust, and for several years David anonymously provided financial support to a rising star, golf player Lydia Ko. He has been an avowed fan of Ko's and was involved in the Whangaparoa Golf Club at Gulf Harbour, which is now Lydia's home club.

Education and medicine are a focus of the charitable organisations funded by the David Levene Foundation because of David's own interest in these areas. The David Levene Foundation

has supported the Neurological Foundation to co-fund a chair in Neurology at the University of Auckland. David was also a foundation investor in the Auckland UniServices New Zealand Seed Fund Partnership for emerging biotechnology and technology companies. At Massey University, the Foundation also supports a scholarship fund for students.

Other activities include support for the Great Potentials Foundation. The organisation works with low-income communities to promote family functioning, and works to break down the cycle of continuing deprivation in disadvantaged communities. It does so through programmes such as MATES, the Mentoring and Tutoring Education Scheme, which matches university students with high school students in a mentoring role. The programme was developed by Dame Lesley Max.

On the North Shore, programmes and organisations such as YES Disability, Books in Schools at Onepoto School, De Paul House in Northcote, the North Harbour IHC, North Shore Hospice, Rotary Club and the breast cancer charity, the Louise Perkins Foundation, have all been supported by the David Levene Foundation. The Foundation has funded YES Disability since 2005 and David has been patron of YES Disability since 2013. Executive Officer Sonia Thursby is proud to have Sir David as patron. 'We are so grateful to have his endorsement of our ongoing work.' In total, the Foundation gives to around 300 charities each year. David hopes to increase the amount of money available through the Foundation in the near future.

David and his wife of 48 years, Billie, settled on the North Shore in the early 1960s and brought up their two children here. David still lives in the same house. Billie lived with Parkinson's disease for many years; she passed away in 2010. David was patron of the Parkinson's Society from 2007 to 2014. He feels strongly about helping others who also live with Parkinsons.

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Now in his eighties, he is still actively involved in business in Lewis Holdings and Quadrant Properties, going into the Takapuna office most days. *I come in and I annoy people. I check my emails and my mail.* He attends staff meetings and is always available to give advice. He says it keeps him from *only associating with other old people.*

David was awarded an OBE in 1995 and a knighthood in 2010 for services to business and the community. He received an Honorary Doctorate of Literature from Massey University in 1994, and an Honorary Doctorate of Laws from Auckland University in 2014. He was inducted into the Manukau, North Shore and New Zealand Halls of Fame in 2002, 2006 and 2006, respectively.

He is modest about the Foundation's achievements and about his knighthood. *I didn't accept for a few weeks. I guess it's an honour and very nice. It embarrasses me quite a bit. Usually I'll use Colin Meads's answer. If somebody calls me 'Sir David', I'll say, 'You're only ever allowed to do that once, you've done it, and from now on it's David.'*

Sir David Levene after receiving his knighthood in 2010

