

CHAPTER 2

(1961 – 1964)

My High School Years

In the first three months of my high school years, it was a requirement for new students to have a medical examination. A high priority was placed on hearing and eyesight; I managed to fail both. Discovering I was deaf in my right ear came as a surprise to me. I hadn't experienced any difficulties, which I must admit does seem strange. From information I have since obtained, I suspect my deafness was a direct result of a bout of glandular fever I had suffered as a four year old. In regards to my eyes, I was too young and not in possession of the knowledge I needed to understand what was happening. Perhaps no one else knew enough to be in a position to work through my difficulties with me.

Within a few months of my school medical I was taken to

an eye specialist in Macquarie Street, Sydney. This was the address of the most highly respected medical specialists in New South Wales. The specialist told my father he couldn't find anything wrong with my eyes other than to prescribe reading glasses. He told Dad to make an appointment with the Sydney Eye Hospital for me, as they may be able to help. Upon reflection, I am not sure if my father knew the extent to which I was having difficulties, and therefore put the problem in the 'too hard basket'. Alternatively, he may have been in denial that there was something wrong with one of his sons and he didn't want to admit it.

I waited twelve weeks for the appointment, which gave me a great deal of time to get worked up over very little. On my arrival at the hospital it didn't take long for me to be placed in a 'special patients' category. A nurse whisked me off to a private room through which groups of students filed, each taking turns at examining my eyes. They would take notes, leave the room, return for a closer look and then go off to write their reports. It quickly became obvious I suffered from something rare and the students were given the challenge of diagnosing the condition. Word spread to every student doctor on duty. A couple of the students did take an interest in me as a person, showing kindness and concern. However, to most I was just a subject and they were only interested in the condition of my eyes.

By midafternoon I was growing tired of the attention and asked how long it would be before I could go home. I was told it would not be long; there was a new group of students coming on duty and the head surgeon wanted them to look at me. "You're kidding," I said. I tried to remain calm as I thought they were going to fix my eyes, but this was becoming ridiculous.

I realised it was important to help them learn more about

my condition. Everyone was so busy looking into my eyes that no one took responsibility to tell me what was wrong. If they told my father he certainly didn't say anything to me.

I asked a doctor why my case was so interesting. She explained that I had Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP). "It is a rare condition," she explained. "You have limited side vision and will find it difficult to see in the dark."

I was thirteen and didn't comprehend what she was saying to me, neither did I understand what it actually meant in terms of implications for the future. Someone should have sat down and explained to me what the hell was happening. They could have explained how I would need to modify certain aspects of my life and that the need to compensate for situations was about to rule my life. I was a guinea pig for the students at exam time and that was about it.

Years later, I looked back and thought, 'What a joke!' Why didn't someone tell me never to drive a motor car, as I may endanger lives? Or that I should never cross a road without assistance? No! No one said a word; it was always someone else's responsibility. Maybe I am being too hard on them; in the early sixties they possibly didn't know much about the condition.

I continued to wonder why my parents didn't say anything to me. Dad must have known something, as he was the person who had accompanied me on three trips to the Eye Hospital over eighteen months. Possibly he didn't take the time to find out. All he did was drop me off at the hospital reception and give me directions to meet him in the city when I was finished. With the difficulties I experienced, how could it not have been obvious to him that there was something seriously wrong? I was left to work out the effects of Retinitis Pigmentosa for myself.

Of course it is different today. Modern hospitals have wonderful technology, which is easy for us to take for granted. We have scientists who dedicate their lives' work to researching and finding cures for blindness.

I was in my late forties when my mother, in a tender moment, confessed she felt guilty for having given me life with less than perfect vision. I assured her that her comment was unfounded. By then I was more informed and explained to Mum while RP is hereditary, it is unlikely I inherited it directly from her. I also explained how it could have been passed down from earlier generations. The relief showed on her face. It didn't stop me from thinking, that had my father not been so domineering towards her, with his self-centred attitude and his 'don't question me' approach, and if he had taken the time to listen to others, maybe things would have been different. I might have learnt more and understood what was happening to me.

Most students were turning thirteen when they started high school. I turned twelve only a few weeks earlier, which made me one of the youngest pupils. It caused complications for age sports such as athletics and swimming. Each sports day we would stand debating when our birthdays were and which group we should be in. My younger age also made me a target for the bullies.

My expectation of being in the same group as my friends John, Garry and Stephen never eventuated. John's father, who owned a farm, sent him to Hurlstone Agricultural College, although he did return to Camden High to finish his final two years. Garry was destined to be a school teacher and took his studies seriously, which I admired. He enjoyed 'A' grade status while I stuffed around wasting my school years. Without trying, I slid from 'B' to 'C' and then to 'D' grade classes. I didn't have a lot to do with Stephen

at school, but we made up for lost time on weekends, when we were inseparable. I referred to his mother as Aunty Eve. She was really my second mum, with whom I have enjoyed a lifelong friendship.

My brother, David and I were never close, even though we shared a bedroom for some of our teenage years. I didn't see much of him, as we both had our own interests and he was four years older than me. The expectation my parents had of me following in his footsteps never went away. David was only fourteen when he had a job at Mr Watkins' chemist shop, where he did very well. When it was my turn to take over the job, I hated every minute of it and dreaded the thought of turning up for work each afternoon. There was a lot of reading of small medicine labels in the dim light at the back of the shop on cold winter evenings. Delivering medicines to homes after dark was impossible for me, although it was expected as part of the job. I would pretend I didn't know where the streets were and David would deliver the medicines for me.

I may not have known where my life's career was heading but washing bottles was hardly stimulating. I lasted six months, when Mr Watkins concluded I was not up to David's standard. This is what I tried to tell him in the first two weeks of my employment.

It didn't take long to find a job as a paperboy, which was a totally different experience in every way from working in the chemist. I loved it. It was one fun experience after another. I would jump out of bed and couldn't get to the shop quickly enough: 5.00am rise and shine, roll the papers by 6.00am and delivered by 7.00am; one hundred and ten papers shoved tight in my paper box on the front of my bike. I would ride as fast as I could along the big, bold, white centre line of the Hume Highway. The highway was well lit

and staying on the line kept me straight. I was able to judge distances if a car or truck came hurtling along the highway and I knew how far to the left or right I needed to move.

As I belted along I would toss a Telegraph to the left, a Herald to the right, another Herald to the left. Whoops, they got both! At times the papers just missed the milk bottles, and on other occasions the milk bottles went flying. I was also able to gauge the weight of the paper, and using the centre line of the road as my guide, knew how hard to throw for it to land in the right place for each customer; except for the one time Mrs Thompson phoned the paper shop complaining about where her paper had landed. The truth was, I really didn't like her.

The next morning I decided to fix the problem. I slowed down, took aim and with a mighty toss I managed to get the paper beside her bed. The window was closed and the sound of smashing glass rang out down the street as I took off as fast as a scalded cat. She phoned the shop and complained before I arrived back to face the music. Having to pay for the window repair out of my wages made me rethink my strategy and I never did it again.

My favourite customer was an elderly gentleman in his eighties who lived behind the Camden District Hospital. I impressed him by always being on time. Each morning he would stand on the street in front of his house, looking a little rickety as his walking stick wobbled. His greeting never changed. "Did ya wet ya bed this morning?" he would ask.

I always got a kick out of his taking the time to call out.

While it was often dark at 5.00am bed, the light was coming through the sky before I left the shop for my deliveries; daylight-saving still being a few years off. On the mornings

it was overcast and difficult for me to see, I compensated by slowing down and using the streetlights to guide me, although it was still very difficult. Having the local Ambulance Station on my route gave me a sense of security: I knew it was only a short distance for them to come if I did hurt myself.

My first taste of new technology came when my Uncle Ernie purchased the newsagency where I was working. He was quick to introduce a paper-rolling machine, which made us all concerned that we would be out of a job. This, of course, was not the case. Although a couple of years after I had left, bicycles were replaced by a motor vehicle that carried enough papers to complete the run in just two trips, and made deliveries more economical. I guess paperboys did in fact lose their jobs after all.

Negotiating my first business deal came early in life. I was fourteen and felt I deserved a pay rise. After giving it weeks of thought, I plucked up the courage to ask my Aunt Marge, who was in charge of paper deliveries. One morning I hung around the shop, waiting for my chance when no one else was around.

“I would like to discuss an increase in my pay,” I timidly blurted out.

My aunt’s eyes peered over the reading glasses that barely balanced on her nose. Her mouth started saying one thing while her stern eyes suggested a not so pleasant version.

“You will have to talk to your uncle,” she explained.

“When?”

“Not today, he’s busy. I will ask him and tell you in the morning.”

“What, ask him for my pay rise?”

“No, that’s your problem. I will arrange a time for you. I don’t know why he’d give you extra money when he won’t

give me any.”

Her prickly attitude changed to compassion for a young boy who had more guts than common sense. She knew he would try to carve me up.

“Be prepared with your reasons. Sell your case.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Why do you deserve the rise? Why are you worth the extra, and how will the shop benefit by you getting paid more?”

Boy, this was news to me! I had obviously got myself in too deep. I gave it a lot of thought that day. The next morning I finished my run in good time. I thought I would be told the meeting was in a few days, but my aunty called me aside, pointed to the door and said, “He’s waiting for you.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.” She watched the lamb going to slaughter.

Bravely I walked toward the door. My heart had never beaten faster. All my father’s brothers loved taking advantage of the underdog and this would be no exception. It was a game to him and I would be his toy.

There was no putting me at ease. It was simply ‘cut to the chase’.

“You think you’re worth more money?” was his opening gambit.

“Yes,” I mumbled.

“Sit down over there,” he instructed.

The back room was a mess. There were piles of newspapers and magazines everywhere, the accounts, the chequebook were spread over a small table in the corner. It was certainly a multipurpose room. I had no desire to let him know I couldn’t see the chair he was pointing at.

“I’ll be fine standing.” To delay the inevitable, I asked, “What do you do with these papers?”

“They’re the ones not sold. We return them for a credit,” he explained. Realising I didn’t know what a credit was, he

added, “We don’t pay for them.”

I saw another way of justifying the extra money I was after.

“Back to this rise. How much do you have in mind?”

“Five shillings,” I told him.

“Ouch!” he said.

“Is your foot hurting?” I asked. He suffered from sugar diabetes and was losing his toes one by one. I thought one must have dropped off while I was there.

“No,” he answered. “Five shillings? That’s a lot.”

“Not really, when you look at what I do.”

“What’s that?”

‘Mmm’, just as my aunty warned me. I gave him my sales pitch, explaining my loyalty over the past two years, the good job I did and the fact he had no loss of papers with me.

“Do you know how many papers Freddie loses each week?”

“That little bugger! Best we don’t go there,” he replied.

“What if I could convince the other boys to bring their papers back rather than tossing them in the river. Will that save a lot of money?”

“You could do that without getting a rise and without coming to me,” he suggested.

“Yes, now I know how it works, I’ll make sure the others understand. You’re right, it isn’t a condition.”

I had manipulated him into being serious, or so I thought. He had some fun in mind and wasn’t about to let me go without having it.

“Tell me Paul, how can I give you a rise with my foot bandaged like this?”

I knew exactly what he was suggesting. I had plenty of experience with uncles and aunties; there was no way I was turning and touching my toes so he could kick me up the backside.

“If I give you a rise I would have to give the other’s one.”

“I wouldn’t be telling them. My deal is with you; if they want a rise, let them come and beg like I have.”

I was fed up with trying. Five shillings was no longer important to me; it just was not worth the effort. I turned and started opening the door while thanking him for his time. Before it closed behind me I heard him say, "It will be in this week's pay."

"Thanks," I replied, and continued on my way.

Being exposed to business people kept me thinking that one day I'd like to be a businessman. I became determined to do well in whatever career I chose. I was exposed to the news every morning of my early teens and it made me aware of important national and international events. One morning I arrived at the newsagency and the headlines read, 'US President John F. Kennedy Assassinated'. I realised I was ignorant about US politics and presidents and this news prompted me to learn more about them. President Kennedy was a supporter of the United States Space Program, which over the years has contributed significantly to new technology in many aspects of our human existence. The building and construction industry benefited from the invention of new construction materials, medical procedures also benefited, as did information technology, computers and software program development.

Being a paperboy provided plenty of fun moments. We certainly got up to our share of mischief. One Saturday morning we all finished our runs within a short time of each other, except good old Freddie, who forever complained he had further to ride than the rest of us. It was decided we would ride out to meet him, help him finish his run and while we were there we would pick up some grapes from one of the vineyards. I explained to the boys that the vineyard shop would be closed. I was assured there would not be a problem, which I took to mean that we would see the owner and buy our grapes.

After collecting our pay, we set off. There were lots of vineyards along the rich fertile riverbanks. We chose the one adjacent to the Cowpasture Bridge, which had a shop fronting the Hume Highway. I couldn't work out why we were spending our pay on grapes when Mum paid for our fruit out of her housekeeping money. We reached the vineyard and the order came along the line, "Drop your bikes. Here's a bag. Let's go." I realised we were to steal the grapes, not buy them. Peer pressure took over and I reluctantly joined in. We each filled our bag with grapes and were out of there quickly. That seemed easy enough and no one got hurt. Of course we didn't think about the damage we did to the vines and the cost to the owner.

I arrived home, and when Dad asked me about my pay, I reached into my pocket, then I went for my other pocket, I felt all my pockets; I raced out and checked the bags on my bike. The reality was I had just paid three pounds five shillings for my one bag of grapes, the most expensive grapes I had ever eaten. Explaining this to my father was difficult. It now involved lying, which made it worse. That morning I made up my mind: a career in crime was not for me. I also decided never to place myself in a position to knowingly lie or mislead anyone again. While others may hold a different opinion, I believe I have never let myself down on that promise. This was one of the times I thought the problems I experienced with my sight were beneficial; without losing my pay in the vineyard I may have thought a life of crime would be all too easy and headed down a different track.

Life was teaching me many lessons. My church life did not include the sorts of activities my school life did. At our church fellowship I didn't have the fear of bullies; we were taught to care about others and to tell the truth, while my school life was taken up with keeping myself out of fights.

Loyalty dilemmas were another of life's experiences I learnt as a paperboy. It was common practice for some of the boys to shoplift from my uncle's shop after their paper run. I had no trouble knowing where the line was drawn and refused to take part. The prospect of facing Dad if I got caught was something I didn't want to even think about: ten lashes with the razor strap would have been his starting point. The problem was, my so-called friends were ripping off my uncle. I was actually glad when they got caught and the practice stopped.

Being exposed to business people provided me with lots of good experiences. I enjoyed the times my parents took me with them to visit shops my relatives owned. Thinking I was not listening, they talked openly about business matters. At one stage, my Auntie Dorrie owned the Paris Café, Auntie Deanie owned the local fruit shop and Uncle Ernie the newsagency, all three were located in the main street of Camden. Uncle Essie owned the Niagara Café and Pharmacy in Katoomba, situated in the Blue Mountains, and Auntie Sylvia, Uncle Victor and Auntie Amy all owned large dairy farms.

School was not going to go away; I still had it to contend with. My father was very strict and he set the ridiculous restriction of permitting me only ten minutes between leaving school in the afternoon and arriving home. His expectations of me working around the house, and of my school achievements, were unrealistically high. He would leave instructions with Mum that prevented me from leaving for school till 8.25am, which meant I risked being late for class. There was never a level of trust. It angered me as I lay in bed at night thinking about the unfairness of his demands. I wondered if he was the same with my brothers and sister. His 'study, study, and more study' attitude, was also unreasonable. "Go and do your study!" was all he said.

His treatment of me made me rebel against learning. There was never a balance between work and play. When it came to sport there was a choice of tennis or tennis: not much of a choice for a person with vision difficulties. He told me if I didn't play tennis, to stay out of sport. I thought, 'Why bother? Just go along with him. It will be different when I leave school and make my own choices.' I kept telling myself that would be the time to study hard, not now. Why waste time learning things at school I would never need? Teachers didn't take the time to tell me why I should learn, they just accepted my slack attitude.

Today, if I see a young person wasting their life like I did, I take them aside and explain the consequences of their actions and the importance of learning. How I wish someone had grabbed me by my shirt, tossed me onto a chair and made me listen while they explained the need for knowledge and the importance of learning skills and concepts. If only they had told me how much easier my life would be with such skills.

It was the sixties and the rock'n'roll phenomenon was upon us. Led by Elvis Presley, the Beatles and The Beach Boys, we had rock'n'roll groups popping up everywhere. I was just one of many who placed the importance of the Top Forty Hit Parade ahead of everything else. My greatest interest at the time lay in which groups and which songs were in the top ten, and for how many weeks. This was more important than geography lessons. One afternoon our teacher, Mrs Richardson, roused at me when my mate and I decided to write two pages on the Deltone's hit song 'Hanging Five', rather than the geography lesson's subject, hanging valleys. The song was number two on the Hit Parade in 1963.

The 'Trouble' tag I had in primary school stayed with me through most of high school, except this time I knew I made

a major contribution. The people I hung around with were not the smartest operators. It was a daily task for some of them to find trouble. I was different; trouble just found me. I didn't have to go looking, it was lurking there waiting for me. I was regularly picked on and belted up by the school bullies. The word around school was, "Funnell won't fight back." I could never see the point in fighting. It has never solved a problem and it only showed who was the stronger of the two combatants. Boxing was not on my list of career options, so I had no interest in it. Still, the bullies were there and somehow I had to deal with them. I kept thinking, 'How can I fight when I can't see what's coming at me?'

Being picked on continued for more than half my high school life and it finally took its toll. I was sick of it and decided to take affirmative action. I had met an apprentice butcher at one of the shops where I delivered newspapers. He looked like a tough guy to me, someone who may be experienced in street brawling. My impression of him proved to be correct and he was willing to give me some personal pointers. "I'm getting my head knocked off anyway," I told him. "Why not give it a go?"

About a month passed and I had been given plenty of helpful hints and advice. One day I was in the toilets after lunch, when one of the bullies decided to push me around and rough me up. I took his shoving for about a minute but when he landed a heavy punch into my belly, I knew he was serious.

'It's now or never,' I told myself. With an almighty shove I pushed him against the brick wall, grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, screwed it up in my fist and lifted him off the floor. "You little bastard, I'm going to punch the living crap out of you!" I told him. "I'll be waiting outside the church for you this afternoon. Be there and don't keep me waiting."

I pushed him across the room into the urinal, and as he stood there stunned, wondering what had just happened, I pulled the urinal chain, leaving him drenched.

The showdown was set. I couldn't concentrate on my schoolwork that afternoon and there was no way I was telling anyone what was about to happen. I knew what it would mean if I lost. I would be the focus of the jokes for the insensitive fools that thought winning fights was an indication of their manhood. I would remain a target for the bullies the rest of my school days. Winning was everything this time. There was no talk about the fight; everyone had classes, which didn't allow time for the word to spread.

I was waiting outside the church right on 3.40pm. It was a terrifying experience, but I knew it had to happen. If the fight didn't take place, word of my cowardice would dominate talk in the playground the next day. I had two major problems: the fight was one, and Dad's afternoon curfew was the other. I had planned my fight tactics and I knew there was no hope of being able to see him swing his punches. If I allowed him to get any reach on me I would lose, big time. The only way I could beat him was to keep close and go at him like an out-of-control madman. My tactic would be to deliver short punches, as hard and often as I could.

If I was going to stop the bullies picking on me I had to win, and I had to hurt him. I convinced myself I could achieve my goal and I was determined not to feel sorry for him. I justified my actions by reminding myself I was only giving back what he had dished out to me for two years. This time my ethics weren't important and there would be no turning the other cheek.

He arrived on time.

"Lets get this over Funnell, I have to get home."

“Suits me,” I replied.

He shaped up like a professional boxer.

“That isn’t going to scare me,” I told him.

I flew at him and let fly with as many hard punches as I could, one after the other. I couldn’t see him, but I could feel where he was.

“Enough! Enough!” he called.

“No, you bastard! You never heard me when I said that to you!” I yelled as I kept ripping into him.

A crowd was gathering as I dragged him up off the ground, to pound him some more.

The crowd chanted, “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

School buses loaded with students drove past.

One boy called, “It’s Funnell! Funnell is in a fight!”

The secret fight wasn’t a secret any more. Then the manual arts teacher turned up and ordered us to stop. This didn’t suit me and I kept pounding punches to my opponent’s body. The teacher finally convinced me that stopping was the best thing to do. He instructed everyone to go home. All he said to us was, “Are you both okay?”

I looked at him. “What, you’re not judging us?”

“Okay, on your way, both of you, and I’ll see you in the manual arts room, lunchtime tomorrow,” he told us.

When I walked through the school gates the next morning the fight was headline news: ‘Funnell wins’. It didn’t impress me, not one little bit. We both arrived at the manual arts room, spot on 12.30pm, expecting to get a dressing down and detention. The blinds had been drawn to stop the kids in the playground looking in. The darkened room put me at a disadvantage; here was another instance where I wasn’t able to see.

“What was that display about yesterday?” Mr Beard asked. Neither of us was forthcoming.

After a short silence I said, “It was just one of those things. We were seeing who was the best fighter.”

“Good,” Beardy said. “How about we find out once and for all?” as he pointed at two pairs of boxing gloves on a bench.

I paused and gave it a moment’s thought. I looked at the other kid, and then back at the teacher.

“Not interested,” I said. “And if you want to call me chicken, go ahead, I couldn’t care less. Are you finished with me? I want to eat my lunch.”

Beardy turned to the other bloke, “What about you? Had enough?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Shake hands and off you go. If you want to settle anything come and see me, the gloves will be in the cupboard.”

I figured that would be the end. Oh no! Word was out Funnell was fighting and now everyone wanted to know who would be able to beat me. Things did get better and the fighting eventually came to an end, although I do recall one final encounter, when an older boy asked his mates who would be a good person for him to beat up. They were quick to offer me as their sacrifice. When it came time for the fight, there was no doubt I was scared, I just wanted it to be over. Win or lose, this fight was not going to last three minutes. I remembered Cassius Clay, the world heavyweight champion, cleaning up his opponents in the first round. I figured this was how my fight should end. Just think how the other guy would feel, walking away with a first round victory, and I would have helped him achieve it. After all, he wanted to be able to say he had beaten the person who was now considered to be one of the best fighters in the school. Of course, I wasn’t really, but he thought I was. If I had my way he would be a hero. I just wanted to walk away and hopefully be unhurt. I had heard he was a massive puncher and he could do a lot of damage.

The fight started with the usual pushing and shoving. Today we would call it foreplay. He swung with his right - not that I saw it; I know it must have been from the right as it hit me on the left side of my throat.

‘Why not end it now?’ my inner voice called, as I went down grabbing for my throat.

“Is he okay?” one of his mates yelled as I lay gasping.

“Who cares?” called another. “Lets get out of here.”

They all took off like a pack of hounds. I gave them a ten minute start while I enjoyed the warm winter sun beating on my body. I jumped up feeling like a winner who had stuck to his fight plan and headed home.

With the bullies off my back I was able to concentrate on schoolwork. ‘Reality time’ had arrived. My desire to achieve was not going to survive unless I woke up to myself and took my schoolwork seriously. Many of my past choices had been poorly thought through. I figured it was not too late and started to become more positive.

My eyes continued to cause me trouble. I didn’t understand why I knocked over glasses of water, bumped into people, walked into streetlight poles, and couldn’t distinguish people when I entered a room with only a few occupants. Neither did I know all the ways to compensate to make my life easier. I knew I had problems, but I couldn’t work out the level of sight that other people possessed, so it was difficult for me to know what was normal. I was aware, that other students could easily do things where I had difficulty.

My grades were no longer going backwards, and my life was full steam ahead. I was breaking free of the idiots I hung around with and was trying to form new friendships with the achievers. I considered this to be an important step in the right direction. The problem was, the achievers

had no room for me in their circles. I had left my run too late; my reputation was set in concrete as far as they were concerned. I was seen as a leader amongst my church friends and a loser at school. Nevertheless, I decided that this was not going to stop me from achieving my goals.

Part of the new direction I was taking concerned my developing interest in sport. I admired John's success in rugby league and cricket. I spent a lot of time with him on his father's farm, and one Sunday afternoon he took me into the large paddock beside their house, where he explained the principles of cricket to me; showing me how to hold the bat, play some shots, and teaching me fielding skills. My efforts were short-lived, when the following week at school sports I couldn't see the ball after it left the bowler's hand.

On one occasion I got lucky and hit the ball for a beauty. John, wanting to build my confidence, told me that if the field had been marked, my hit would have been equal to four runs. I think he was dreaming. My involvement in cricket ended as quickly as it started. That afternoon it became obvious I couldn't see the ball to field it. I tried softball, which was worse. The bat was much thinner and I had no hope of ever making contact with the ball. (Mind you, in 2002 when I visited the USA and watched the Chicago Cubs baseball team play at the famous Wrigley Field, I am not sure that many of the players were able to see the ball any better than I could. They certainly did their share of missing it.) My desire to achieve was not enough to help me on this occasion.

I envied the students in the sports photos, receiving trophies and pennants at the school assemblies. How I wanted to win a trophy for being the best!

Winter was around the corner and I decided to give rugby league a go, even though my father hated rugby league and forbade me from playing the game. It was not surprising I looked like a loser.

“Study! Study! Study!” I got told day after day.

I liked rugby league and was going to play. The following Sunday after church, I arranged to go to John’s place for the afternoon and I shared my idea with him. John, being a diplomatic confidence builder, gave me all the positives. He explained why I would be a good player. John played for The Oaks ‘A’ grade team and I enjoyed watching him belt down the wing to score tries in the corner. The supporters for the opposing team would rib him, calling him ‘a broken-down trotter’, but he showed his class with speed and a magical side step.

He spent the afternoon teaching me how to pass the ball and we practised tackling skills to reduce the chances of my getting hurt. If my father found out it would be disastrous. Over the coming months we attended the Sydney club games. I liked watching Graeme Langlands, the St George and Australian fullback, with his famous covering tackles, diving tries and accurate goal kicking. I am sure I missed more than I saw, but when the play was on my side of the field I got to see some brilliant play. The atmosphere was electric.

We also attended the NSW v Queensland interstate games. In those days interstate games didn’t draw big crowds. NSW had the best teams, so the good Queensland players chose to play in Sydney, which made them eligible to play for NSW. The bottom line was, Queensland had very little hope of winning. Everything changed with the introduction of State of Origin rugby league in 1980. Players were only permitted to play for the state where they played their first senior game. Virtually overnight, players began to be

motivated by pride in representing their home state, and the good players were more evenly distributed between NSW and Queensland. Fifty thousand plus spectators attended the annual battle. It increased to one hundred and eighty thousand spectators in 2006, while millions more watched the direct telecast on television.

My chance came when I was selected for the Camden High School Open 'B' grade team. It felt good and I thought I had potential. However, it was more difficult seeing what was happening around me than I expected. As the ball was passed to me from close range, I was able to anticipate what would happen, which helped tremendously. Playing as a front row forward meant tackling was important. The opponents were usually big guys and they ran straight at me and all I had to do was tackle them like John had taught me. 'No legs, no go' was the idea and it worked. I dropped the ball on occasions and missed tackles, but so did everyone else. I enjoyed the game and not being able to see everything that happened didn't bother me. I am not sure if anyone noticed that I couldn't see properly.

My father eventually found out and put an immediate stop to my playing. "Tennis or nothing!" he told me again. I chose nothing. His attitude became too much for me. Any hope of my father and I getting along in life gradually came to an end. There were many conflicts over the following five years. Some ended in violence on both our parts. I have never been able to comprehend how a father and his son could end up in the situations we did, fighting in the backyard like a couple of street brawlers. Our blue cattle dog would come to my defence, threatening to rip my father apart if he didn't leave me alone.

I never forgave my father for his brutality towards me and others in our family. He was no better than the bullies I encountered at school. Not forgiving someone is difficult,

particularly when you have been raised in the church, but I could never find it in my heart to feel love or respect towards someone who had caused such hurt and who had been so domineering and controlling that he refused to allow me to become independent as I was advancing towards adulthood.

As life progressed, I was always polite and welcomed him into my home: he was the grandfather of my children and the husband of my mother, and there was no reason for them to suffer because of my feelings. Unfortunately, I never respected him, nor did I make peace with him. I resented his treatment of me and I was intolerant of his hypocrisy.

As a teenager I found myself living in two very different worlds. My school life presented one problem after another, while my church life was full of good and exciting experiences. The obvious difficulties I was having with my eyes didn't help, but I have always believed my teenage years were the greatest period of my life.

I was halfway through my first high school year when I decided it was time to give the church fellowship camps another go. I had heard there would be one on the October long weekend. The registration fee was equal to one week's wages for my paper run. A little expensive, although a long weekend away from home had to be worth it; Friday night through to Monday afternoon was more than I could resist. Earning my own money and paying my own way made me feel important and it gave me a sense of self worth.

The camp was at Bundeena in the Royal National Park south of Sydney. It was not going to be plain sailing for me, as I had to make my own travel arrangements to and from the camp. I was surprised to learn my father would not be

taking me. It was not an easy train trip and this would be my first big lesson in using public transport. I arranged to meet a group of kids at Sydney Central Station so we could travel the second leg together. Fortunately, there was a group leader to guide us to our destination, which included an enjoyable, scenic ferry trip across Port Hacking.

I don't remember every detail about the camp, but I do recall having a great time. There were no bullies, no one telling me what I couldn't do, plenty of encouragement, understanding and lots of girls. I started learning to compensate for my eyes; I avoided the night walks and joined in the daytime beach activities instead. I also made sure I was with one of my new-found friends when walking to and from the dining hall in the evenings. There were some things I was limited in, such as joining in the pillow fights; and running around outside the dormitories in the dark was not on. It didn't matter, as these activities were not approved and they were easy to avoid. I had found freedom and I wanted to make the most of it.

The following Sunday at church, I gave John and Stephen an earbashing about the fantastic time I had, but they just thought I was exaggerating. Every chance I got, I let them know what a great time they had missed. When John finally gave in and attended the next camp, it was under protest. Much to his surprise he became infected with the great times and our group grew from two to ten people. By the fourth camp the number was up to fifteen and eventually we had the largest contingent from a single fellowship, with over twenty attendees.

Week after week there was always something happening in our fellowship, and it often consumed our entire weekends. We had great leaders who wanted to take us on outings and who would organise special afternoons at their properties.

Two of our senior members were Mr Tegel and his wife. They owned the famous Tegel Turkey Company and were very well off. Mixing in their circle provided opportunities which were not available in the strugglers' category to which I was accustomed. The church building fund benefited from their generosity with donations to build the youth hall and other renovations the church needed from time to time. The youth group was not short of energetic married couples who wanted to help. Getting things done was easy and there were few restrictions on what could be organised.

I was attracted by the excitement of organising activities and being able to ask senior members for assistance, knowing they were only too willing to agree to almost any request. If we wanted a hay ride, Mr Anderson stepped forward, volunteering his tractors, large flat trailers and barbecue facilities; all we had to do was bring our own food. A car rally was easily organised; we would let people know it was on and the senior fellowship members would turn up in their fancy cars. When we wanted to visit a fellowship group in the city, all we had to do was ask.

Slot car racing was the rage in the sixties and someone suggested we should have a club within the fellowship. It may have only been a suggestion, but a few weeks later David Betts had built a big four-car track. Everyone purchased their own slot car and away we went. I enjoyed my role as an organiser and was nicknamed 'Leader'. It was up to me to coordinate activities and transport arrangements, as well as being responsible for ensuring the activity occurred at the planned time and at the specified venue. At times being the leader was difficult, particularly when I was shown documents and brochures that I had difficulty in seeing to read.

On one occasion in early spring there was to be a hay ride on Mr Anderson's Brownlow Hill property, which was a large potato farm run by his family. The property was ideal for hay rides with its gentle rolling hills and winding tracks that led to the banks of the Nepean River, which formed one of the boundaries. The barbecue and sing-along was to be held on a large flat area adjacent to the river.

As the night drew closer it was becoming a big event and no one wanted to miss it. I started working myself up over my inability to cope with the darkness. I didn't want to make a fool of myself; that was the last thing I needed, particularly in front of David and Beth. It turned out my concerns were not unfounded.

It must have been one of those things; when you think something is going to happen, it does. The more negative you feel about it, the more likely it is to go wrong. It was 7.00pm when we gathered in the farm shed. We were all deciding who would sit where. Two trailers filled quickly and it became obvious some of us needed to wait for a third trailer to be prepared with the bales of hay. John, Stephen and I decided to wait, and as the two tractors with loaded trailers drove off, we could hear the singing and laughter fading as they became more distant.

The three of us found ourselves stranded when the third tractor had a mechanical fault. Mr Anderson decided it was not worth trying to fix the problem so we set off walking across the paddocks. It was a long way by foot to the river. I was finding out just how bad my eyes really were without any streetlights to guide me. Stephen started running as fast as he could, climbing through the fences without any trouble. John took off after him. I was left walking aimlessly. 'How can they see?' I wondered. I could only see black in front of me. By listening to their voices I was able

to tell in which direction they were headed.

There was a glow high in the sky from the moon, but it was not helping me. John realised there was a problem and came running back.

“Hurry up, Paul,” he told me. “Follow me.”

“I can’t bloody well see!” I angrily replied as I dropped to the freshly ploughed ground, close to tears. I wanted to cry, but that was not the done thing for a teenager.

“What’s the problem?” John wanted to know.

“I don’t know. I just can’t see where I’m going.”

With an understanding voice he said, “Hold my hand and I’ll guide you.”

We ran across paddocks, climbed fences and went through gates. It took about thirty minutes, but we made it.

Everyone was gathered beside the river. We were at the top of a fairly steep bank in full view of the entire group. Stephen had made it to the bottom. John thought I was behind him and slid down the bank. I froze: I couldn’t see a damned thing. I had no problem with my hearing as people took it in turns, trying to talk me down the bank. The more they yelled, the more embarrassed I became. I wanted to die. At a time I needed understanding and help, I was painfully aware my brother was not pleased and that I had shamed him. I am sure this is why he avoided me at future social events. It was like I was a liability to his social life. Somehow I got through the night, but not without mental scarring.

Cracker nights were another fun time of the year. They were a big event in the sixties, although the government finally put a stop to them due to the danger and large number of injuries caused by the stupid things people did. My favourite cracker was the tuppenny double bungler. The name ‘tuppenny’ came from the cost, which was two

pennies, and the ‘double bungler’ was due to its size and the fact it went off twice; one loud bang followed by another just a split second later.

The weeks leading up to the big night were a fun time as we started trying our crackers early. My father didn’t always see it as good fun. This particular year the boy down the street blew our letterbox to bits. Dad came complaining to me that his new letterbox was ruined and he would need to purchase another one.

“Don’t blame me, I didn’t do it,” I explained.

“No, you didn’t, did you? But if you hadn’t blown up theirs first, we would still have ours,” he angrily pointed out.

‘Mmm. He knows.’

“Well Dad, theirs was timber and it did more damage than ours,” I proudly informed him.

“Yes, I bet it did,” he replied with some satisfaction.

One year, our fellowship leader rounded up a group of us to build a huge bonfire on his cattle property. It was at least twenty feet in diameter at the base, rising to a point about thirty feet in the air. Everyone turned up with a good supply of crackers, which, when put together, was more like artillery. When it got dark the bonfire was set alight and within fifteen minutes it burnt brightly. I am sure it would have been admired from the neighbouring farmhouses in the distance. The bright glow helped me see what I was doing and what was happening around me. Things were going along fine, until about an hour into our activities the local louts turned up and started a full-scale war. They terrorised us by tossing large double bungers at us. There was no doubt they intended to hurt us.

“Watch out Paul, it’s at your feet!” someone warned me.

I knew where my feet were, but couldn’t see the cracker. I didn’t have to, the bungler exploded right beside me.

Eventually, bungers were not enough for the louts:

skyrockets came speeding through the air, aimed directly at us. It wasn't entirely their fault, we gave as good as we got, which only encouraged them. There was no way we were going to be seen as a bunch of softies. How I lived through that night God only knows. I walked on enough fireworks to have blown myself up. Crackers went off in my hand before I could toss them. Trying to stay out of the path of the skyrockets was unbelievably difficult. Maybe it was good training for my eyes and for developing quick reactions.

Two months later it was time for Christian Endeavour camp. John reluctantly agreed to attend after I played my trump card, and convinced him there would be plenty of girls. He threatened that if we didn't have a good time it was 'never again'. The other condition was, I had to do all the organising and get us there and home again, while he would just turn up. Fine by me. I wanted him there to help me, so this was not a big price to pay. The campsites were usually bush settings, which made them very dark at night, and dormitories were a long way from the activities area. Having John there would make a big difference for me. This particular camp was to be held at Katoomba Christian Convention Centre, situated in the Blue Mountains adjacent to the Scenic Railway and not far from the famous Three Sisters rock formation. I had never been there and didn't know what to expect.

As the weekend drew closer we became excited, anticipating what may be in store for us. Every day John continued to renew his threat. "This had better be worth it," he reminded me. It turned out he had nothing to complain about. Everything went well. On our arrival we liked what we saw. The dormitories were massive; there would have been more than a hundred beds in the boys' section alone. Only thirty-five were attending, with a similar number of girls.

"Wow! We can have more than one mattress on our bed."

“You can have ten if you like,” the group leader told me.
“I could easily sleep on that many,” I bragged.

On the Saturday night as I slept tight the boys got together, lifted my mattress with me on top and slid an extra one under, and another, then another, until I was high in the air. The next morning when I woke, it took a little while for me to work out where I was. How did they get me up so high without me waking? I later found out they were worried that I might hit my head on the rafters, or even fall off the pile.

It didn't take John long to make friends. He was a good all-rounder who could hold a conversation with the well educated and was well informed on most topics that kids liked to talk about. The highlight for us was the Saturday afternoon hike. We were to take the Scenic Railway to the bottom of the mountain, walk through the rainforest and climb the Giant Stairway adjacent to the Three Sisters. One thousand stairs! The thought didn't bother us we were young and fit.

“Get up front!” someone called as we made our way to the open coalminers' style carriage for the ride down the mountain. What the Scenic Railway had to reveal was not visible at this time, although we should have suspected something: the seats had a forty-five degree backward slant in order to tilt the passengers back. “All aboard. All aboard,” the operator called. “Keep your hands and arms inside the cage.” A big motor could be heard in the distance and there was a large cable attached to a counterweight high above the trees which moved in the opposite direction. We were in the front row.

Without warning the carriage dipped at fifty-two degrees, which left us gasping for air. The average descent was forty-

five degrees after it completed the first section, which was steeper to fit below two big rocks hundreds of feet high. A large gap in the rocks left us with the most magnificent views. I was speechless, while others screamed at the shock. To me it was an unbelievable experience; one I was destined to repeat many times over the years.

The sight was one to behold. I was so fortunate the sun glittered through the mountains and there was no glare. The sides of the giant rocks acted as blinkers for me and I was able to enjoy its full beauty: the large cliffs, the valleys and mountains in the distance, the enormous array of treetops that formed the canopy for the valley below; it was marvellous. The entire camp was worthwhile even if only for this one experience. Any discomfort and difficulties I was experiencing faded into insignificance. It was sights like these that allowed me to push my problems into the background and I was determined never to let anything stop me from enjoying life.

Life was full of pleasant surprises. I thought I had already discovered girls, but how I was mistaken! Our fellowship group was returning from a day's outing when Stephen's sister, Julie, called from the back of the bus, "Paul, come and sit with us." 'Wow!' I felt my way in the dark, using the seats as my guide. Julie had saved the seat beside her for me. I was sweet on Julie, but sisters of best friends were out of bounds. "This is okay," I thought. It was a two hour trip home. I was having difficulty keeping up with everything that was happening around me, as the interior lights of the bus were turned off, although I didn't need good eyes to play the game the girls had in mind.

"Dare you Paul, to kiss Julie," one of the girls called out. "Julie may not like that," I replied. I just sat there not knowing what to do.

“Leave him alone,” Julie told her friend in a voice that seemed to be saying, ‘Dare him again.’

“Go on, kiss her,” the girl repeated. Realising I was uncomfortable, Julie turned and whispered in my ear, “Have you kissed a girl before?”

I reluctantly whispered back, “Well sort of, not really .., mmm, no.”

“I’ll teach you, it’s fun,” she told me.

‘Let’s hope you get this right Funnell, this is not your eyes we’re talking about.’

“Okay, but you start,” I suggested.

“Follow me and do what I do.”

Then she slipped her soft, tender lips on to mine.

I lied. This was one time I did see stars!

‘This is great! I have to learn more about this,’ I was thinking. Over the next twelve months, Julie helped me perfect my style. We spent many an afternoon walking in Macarthur Park. I also took every opportunity to improve my technique with the girls I met at the fellowship camps over the years.

In retrospect, maybe I should have considered Julie as my childhood sweetheart and asked her to be my life partner. I know her mum and dad would have approved. Perhaps, with the pressures of modern day life, our relationship may not have lasted. At least today I still have a very good friend.

In my teens I learnt that hope and faith are two important ingredients in life. Having my birthday in January gave me good reason to approach each year with renewed hope, by placing the old behind me and looking forward to the future. I have always had faith that the year ahead would be better than the previous one. This positive attitude gave me the confidence and energy I needed to succeed.

The following year, 1964, was to be a special year for me. It was my final year at high school and I was only too mindful of my dismal past, the wasted time and the trouble I had been in. I had six weeks over Christmas to think things over, and to reflect on various pieces of advice given to me by the positive teachers at school. One in particular was our music teacher, Mrs Bieman, who on one occasion had had a 'gutful' of the group of boys I was sitting with. She went off her brain and let fly with a tongue-lashing that was amongst the best I had experienced. Struggling to maintain control, she screamed, threatening disciplinary action at my group, then for some reason she looked straight at me and paused before starting again. "You fool, Paul Funnell! You fool!" she screamed, as her face went red. "Why do you hang around and waste your time with a mob of losers like them?" She proceeded to name those to my left one by one. "Paul Funnell, you could achieve anything you want, but you choose to waste your life with this mob."

She turned away from the class in disgust. No one dared to speak; the hall was silent. After gaining her composure she turned back and dismissed the class early.

I waited for the hall to clear, then walked up and stood watching the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"I'm very sorry, and thank you for caring," I told her. "For whatever reason you cared enough to do that for me, I owe it to you and I will do well, I promise."

She stood quietly looking at me. I turned and walked away. "Thank you Paul," she whispered.

It was time to get serious before life passed me by. I had been exposed to two groups of people; the total fools I hung around with at school, and the world of successful business people I had experienced with my family. I was at the crossroads and had a choice. The two signs were big and bold. One pointed in the direction that had a slight downhill

slope, beautiful winding roads and it said, 'Losers, this way'. The other said, 'Winners, this way': it pointed to an uphill climb and it looked rough and difficult.

I had a desire to turn my life around and to be successful. 'Sure, I have stuffed school up,' I thought. 'One more year and my work life will be here.' I didn't share my thoughts with anyone; they wouldn't have believed me anyway. The bullies were leaving me alone and I had positive things happening for me. Joining the cross-country running team was part of my plan to work hard. My attitude was, 'It's never too late to change'. I had confidence and belief in myself, and it was up to me to show people the new me.

Training for cross-country running team found me crashing into fence posts and streetlight poles. One morning I smacked face first into a pole so hard it sent me flying backwards with blood pouring from my face. For me the pain has never been about the physical damage or hurt. It has always been the humiliation when I make a fool of myself, that is the hardest to cope with.

Part of the new me - 'I'm going to do well' - was taking every opportunity that came along. One afternoon on my way home from school I saw a sign hanging in the Woolworths shop window. 'Boy wanted for packing groceries. Apply to the manager.' I read it a second time to make sure I understood it. I took off home as fast as I could; I was out of breath when I reached the back door.

"Mum, Mum, where are you Mum?" I was trying to get out.

"Slow down. Who's hurt?" She asked.

"No, no." I was breathless.

"Sit down,"

"No, there's no time."

"What is it?" she insisted.

I told her exactly, word for word, what the sign said.

“Well, what are you saying, Paul?”

“Should I apply? I am fifteen.”

“Don’t let the grass grow under your feet,” was all she said.

“What the hell does that mean?” ‘Who cares?’ I raced to my bedroom and changed my clothes. It didn’t contain the word ‘no’! My first job interview. This was what I wanted. I arrived at the shop and walked up and down the aisles looking for the manager. When I found him he took me to his office, and the rest is history.

I ran all the way back home to tell Mum that I was to start on Friday. She was so pleased for me, it was written all over her face. I was going to be rich! I was now a paperboy in the morning and a grocery packer after school.

The job was great. It suited my eyes, as the shop was well lit and the items I packed were large and easy to see. The job also came with some unexpected perks, although I didn’t know at the time that they were not management approved. A fresh food company ran a promotion in which a customer received five free tickets for rides at Luna Park on Sydney Harbour’s north shore. The nineteen year old manager was kind enough to give me fifty tickets and invited me to go with him the following Saturday after work. We had been there for three hours when I realised our tickets would never run out that afternoon. He had been keeping the tickets for himself rather than giving them to the customers, and we had literally hundreds, a virtually unlimited supply. I did wonder about his actions, but there was no doubt we had the time of our lives. If this was growing up, I couldn’t wait for the next stage! I realised working hard provided money to have the fun I wanted.

During the final months of school, I started thinking about my career. The Woolworths manager had talked to me

about becoming a permanent and working my way through to the position of manager. Unfortunately, I didn't have anyone to give me advice on this topic. The little I was able to find out about such a career was not encouraging and I decided that it would be a dead-end job. This of course was not correct, as it's a fact that many of the top Chief Executive Officers for large corporations rise through such ranks. Also, I would have been exposed to the best management training I could have received.

I gave consideration to the various jobs in the career book we were given at school. It must have been the first book I actually read right through. As I thought about each category, I knew my eyes would be a problem, whichever career path I chose. The thought of becoming a motor mechanic appealed to me; being able to hot up my own car was an exciting thought. The reality was I wouldn't be able to see in the dark areas of a motor for small screws or other items. Accountant, solicitor, or anything else academic was out; I had no expectations of being able to achieve the necessary qualifications. No matter what I picked, my eyes seemed to be a potential stumbling block. Typewriter mechanic, French polisher, I went through the entire list; nothing was eliminated without consideration.

There was another problem haunting me. I had been in so much trouble with the school's headmaster, Mr Brownie, he had told me never to ask him for a reference. I stuck to his request. I couldn't help thinking, 'Stuff you! I will never give you the satisfaction of me grovelling to you for anything. I will do it without your help.'

At one stage of my schooling, he had supposedly told my father he would have expelled me if the public school system had allowed him. At the time it was devastating for me to hear this. Later I wondered what Mr Brownie actually

did say and I'm fairly sure my father fabricated the entire story. After I left school, Mr Brownie asked my employer's mother-in-law how I was doing. She gave me a glowing report. "I knew he would do well when he got away from his father," Mr Brownie told her. When this was communicated to me, I was amazed. Here was a person I was not even game to ask if I had passed my final exams. That's right, even today I don't know my final year school results from Camden High School. Even more surprising, there has never been a point in life where I actually needed to know. I have never been asked, even though I have completed formal courses, been a lecturer at university and written technical books.

The Sydney radio announcer, John Laws, once said, "The only luck in life, is being in the right place at the right time. What we then do, has nothing to do with luck."
I agree.

I was just two weeks from the end of my school life, with my exams finishing the following week. I was in the tuckshop line waiting to be served and listening to the ladies talk. Actually it sounded more like gossip at times. This particular day, Mrs Betts was making a comment about her son-in-law, who was a plumber and was having difficulty in finding an apprentice. That night I asked my brother, David for his advice. He had an electrical apprenticeship and was doing well, and I respected his opinion. I liked his answer; he made time for me, which was a pleasant experience. He told me if I were a plumber I would never be out of work, not even for one day, and that people would always want my services. This turned out to be very true.

The next morning I went to the tuckshop early and waited for Mrs Betts, but she was not to arrive for another hour or so. During the morning class I told the teacher I needed to

go to the toilet. I went straight to the tuckshop and spoke with Mrs Betts, who arranged a meeting for me with her son-in-law, Victor Eddison. The meeting took place in our home in the lounge room a few days later. I got the job without much trouble and started immediately. I must admit I didn't understand what a plumber did, even though Vic had taken some time to explain it to me.

In my excitement over my new career, I was telling a friend of my good fortune, and she asked me what a plumber did. I tried without success to explain to her that it was about water.

“Like boiling water on a stove?” she asked.

“No, nothing like that.”

I gave up and changed the subject. I didn't really have an adequate response.

For me this was the real start of my life. No matter how hard I had to work or what it took, I was going to succeed. Failure had no place in my life. I was going to take my worst subject, ‘plumbing’, and study it until it became my best. This was my life's challenge; I didn't know what a plumber did and yet I was going to become one of the best.



Hail! the leader

