

CHAPTER 4

(1972 – 1980)

Family And Career

It has been said there are three types of people: ‘those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened’. I wanted to believe I was in the first category. From the time we made our decision to relocate to Queensland, it took only eight weeks for the mission to be completed. Garry was a great supporter who was quick to accept my decision without reservation and assisted me in making the move. Most of my other relatives were openly critical of me and questioned why it was happening, or stood with their mouths open wondering what I was doing.

There were even some people who predicted that I would be back to Camden within two years with my tail between my legs. As much as I wanted the relocation to be permanent,

I accepted it was possible the new life we were embarking on may result in the critics being proven correct. However, their comments made me even more determined to succeed. Two years became my target to settle in, establish myself and prove them wrong. I again found strength from my religious upbringing. My mother often said, “You have put your hand to the plough and you must never turn back.”

In the seventies, Queensland was unfairly considered to be ten years behind New South Wales and Victoria in terms of culture and technology, although it's true the lifestyle was at a slower pace and more laid-back. Keryn loved Tweed Heads from day one, and so did I.

Being on the border of New South Wales and Queensland gave us a foot in each state. The Tweed is a beautiful region, and Tweed Heads, which is the northernmost city on the New South Wales coast, is a holiday destination for many people, and the gateway to Queensland's Gold Coast. The Tweed River runs adjacent to the city and flows strongly into the South Pacific Ocean. The river provides perfect conditions for fishing enthusiasts, while water-skiers venture a little further upstream where the waters are calmer. Greenmount Beach was my favourite, only a five minute walk from our home unit in Bay Street. I thought that living in this paradise was so good, I almost felt guilty. I often wondered, 'Is this really what life's about?' Mum and Dad spent thousands of dollars dragging their caravan to the Gold Coast for their annual holidays, and here we were with it all on our doorstep.

Queensland is notorious for its cyclones, and we didn't have to wait long to experience our first. Just three weeks had passed when in mid January, 1972, one of the worst cyclones recorded for the south-east region of Queensland hit the Gold Coast. I recall watching it from our bedroom window

which overlooked the main street. Winds blew at over one hundred and fifty kilometres per hour. Trees bent, forming arcs as their tops almost touched the ground. Other trees were uprooted and hurled down the street. Electrical power lines lay on the ground and water mains burst, spraying water high into the air. Sheets of corrugated iron peeled off the roofs of houses and were carried away by the wind. The cyclone caused massive damage. Beaches along the coast were eroded, and million dollar homes and high-rise buildings on the foreshore were threatened, as the sea came close to undermining their foundations. It was obvious to anyone watching that the crashing waves could easily have swallowed these buildings whole.

The following weeks were busy with a massive clean up. I was emotionally moved by the disaster and wanted to assist, even if my contribution was only small. I took my place in one of the many human chains, passing large rocks from person to person, while others placed them in position to form a large wall intended to hold back the vicious sea. The difficulty I had in seeing what I was doing is still fresh in my mind. Keryn was concerned for me, questioning my ability to assist effectively, and that I may get hurt, which would only cause more problems for us. She made it clear that she felt I was being foolish. There were people in need and everyone pitched in. The thought of not helping these people played more on my mind than any possible danger that I may have been in. Common sense is not always easy to apply in these situations.

January is also the month for the Gold Coast king tides, which made the working conditions even more difficult. The crashing waves continued to wedge new entry points through the man-made walls, threatening even greater devastation.

Political controversy usually results when a disaster strikes, and my first taste of Queensland politics came with the cyclone. A fiery debate broke out between two of Queensland's most colourful politicians, the Queensland Premier, Sir Johannes Bjelke-Petersen and the Gold Coast Mayor, Sir Bruce Small (neither of whom was actually knighted at the time). In true political fashion, passing the buck was the name of the game. The debates began over whose responsibility it was to plan and implement an erosion mitigation program for the beaches. Most Gold Coast residents believed the property owners on the beach foreshores should pay their own way.

The Queensland Government held the view that the beaches came under the council's control and they should take responsibility. The Gold Coast City Council, correctly pointed out that the government was deriving large amounts of revenue from the region and it was considered to be Australia's top holiday destinations. Sir Bruce made it clear the government must pay. When the dust settled and sanity prevailed, the problem was solved with a joint effort by both levels of government.

Thirty-five years down the track the Gold Coast is now a holiday playground for people from every corner of the world. The city council pumps millions of cubic metres of sand onto the beaches every year to keep them in pristine condition; after all, they are the welcome mat for the tourists.

It didn't take long for our lives to return to normal; our holiday was over. It was back to work for me. There was a great deal of building and construction development happening on the Gold Coast in the seventies. There were industrial and commercial buildings as well as high-rise home unit developments. Up to this point in my life I had

never needed to apply for a job. It was a new experience for me. My desire to become a design engineer was still lingering at the back of my mind. In fact, I often stood outside design offices in the Southport business centre and pictured myself in a white shirt and tie sitting at my drafting desk. The difficulty was that I didn't have any idea of how to make the transition from being a tradesman working on construction sites, to being a professional office worker.

For some reason I had thought I might want to be a sales representative, and felt this was a good time to find out. In the seventies, sales people made big bucks on commission deals. There was an opportunity for me to earn a lot more money than I could in my trade on a weekly wage. An acquaintance at the time asked me how much I thought I was going to earn as a sales representative. I told him ten thousand dollars a year. He laughed and suggested I was dreaming. The average wage at the time was only three thousand dollars per annum. I knew I wasn't dreaming, as I was aware of some sales people earning much more than that.

I scraped together seven hundred dollars from money owed to me from my previous business and enrolled in a six month part-time professional sales course in Brisbane. Even though I only spent a little over twelve months as a sales representative, it turned out to be one of the most valuable investments I ever made. Over the years it was impossible for me to quantify the number of projects I was awarded by architects and developers because I understood the importance of selling myself first, rather than the services I provided. Of course, closing the deal was another valuable lesson I learnt. Very few professional people understand how to ask for the order and close the deal.

Keryn and I had some wonderful times living at Tweed Heads. In the early part of our marriage we had a lot in common, and without children we were free to enjoy the never-ending activities the coast offered. Sadly, our great lifestyle only lasted four months. I thought it was too good to be true and I guess I was right. It was disappointing to learn that in the seventies, Gold Coast companies were only interested in employing people who had established themselves in the area. Drifters made a habit of applying for permanent jobs, only to quit and move on within a short period of time. This made it hard for genuine people.

During our short stay on the coast, I started to experience the major difficulties with my sight I would inevitably encounter on construction sites. I was working on a high-rise holiday apartment building overlooking Coolangatta beach, but the job only lasted a few weeks. At the start I felt blessed; this was exactly the type of work I wanted. But my good old eyes let me down. The pipes I was installing were in very poorly lit areas. I wasn't able to organise a large light similar to the one I had utilised while working with Vic.

It was an embarrassing experience for me when the foreman handed me my pay on the Friday afternoon and it included a DCM (Don't Come Monday) notice. I was told I was too slow and that the supervisor had stood and watched me for thirty minutes without my knowledge. Of course, I knew the truth and why it had happened. It didn't alter the fact it hurt my feelings. I knew I had to find a way to overcome such setbacks. There was no doubt, there would be plenty more. In order to achieve my dreams, this incident could only be considered as a small hurdle. I found that such setbacks were only placed before me to test my character and make me a better person.

I did find another job installing large diameter stormwater

pipes in a new water canal housing estate. It was situated on the edge of Surfers Paradise where Sir Bruce Small developed large parcels of land. The job was the pits; I think it was the worst job of my life. We worked in large three metre deep trenches. The ground was mostly sand and it just happened to be the tropical wet season. This was a recipe for disaster. The rain poured down and the sand continually caved into the trenches. We manually removed it over and over again. I tried to tell the foreman we needed to use shoring to stop the cave-ins, but what would I know? They knew better. It didn't matter; I had a bigger vision of my future, and I told the boss to stick his job. I heard later the contractor went broke, which didn't surprise me.

Unable to obtain what I considered suitable employment on the Gold Coast and with very little money to our name, Keryn and I relocated to Brisbane. This was an extremely tough time in our lives and we were close to destitute. To pay the relocation expenses, we sold some of my trade tools and had to pawn pieces of our beautiful furniture. Today pawn shops are called 'Cash Converters' and are considered an acceptable method of raising cash. In my day, pawn shops were a method of last resort for raising money, and only patronised when people were absolutely desperate. Pawn brokers were the biggest rip-off merchants I have ever known. I put up with them for about eighteen months before I was able to clear my debts. I had totally lost my direction over this period of my life. I was working as a sales representative for a company called Tasman Building Society, but my idea of it being a potential career and big money earner turned out to be a disaster.

Regardless, I found I learnt something worthwhile from every experience. The sales position required me to attend meetings in the city. Brisbane, being the capital city of Queensland, gave me an action-packed feeling. The busy

activities happening around me and the multitudes of people coming and going actually excited me. It was very different from my Camden days.

One particular Monday in May, 1972, I took a walk up Edward Street to Spring Hill, a suburb in the Central Business District, only four blocks from the General Post Office. Spring Hill overlooks the city. Back then there were unobstructed views to the Brisbane River. This particular day, I stood leaning on an old wire fence that surrounded a large hole in the ground that was ready for a building development. Pondering my life, and feeling sorry for myself, I knew my first business experience in Camden left a lot to be desired. I felt I would one day like to try again, but there was a major problem to overcome. My vision continually stood in the way of most things I wanted to do. It was like being slapped down and reminded of my place in life. How could it be that a person so desperate to achieve success could be held back by his vision?

The reality for me has always been: 'Life is like a deck of cards; I have been dealt a hand and it is not for me to question.' It is what I did with what I had that would determine my quality of life in spite of my eyes.

Life had its share of self-doubt for me. I started to wonder if I had the right to dream such ambitious dreams. There seemed to be no hope of ever achieving them. Had I set the bar too high? My dear old mother's thoughts and sayings were never far away, and this was a period when I took comfort in them, especially, "Remember Paul, you will do something special in life." At the same time, the thoughts also had a tendency to frustrate me. It was like looking for the lost treasure. What was this special task and how would I recognise it?

Over the years people have complimented me by saying to others, “He may have bad eyes, but he doesn’t miss much.” That memorable day in Spring Hill must have been one of those days, because I was able to see what was actually missing. Moving my head very slowly from the left to the right and simultaneously up and down, I was able to take in the view before me. For a city on the move, there should have been more high-rise buildings; however, there were only four, and a couple of cranes for new construction.

My thoughts flashed to the new Riverside City Expressway, which was being constructed at the south-west corner of the Central Business District. The fact that the freeway was being extended to the Gold Coast meant the government was planning for expansion. A feeling of excitement came over me as I predicted Brisbane was about to embark on a massive building construction boom. I believed I had found my place in the plumbing industry. I realised it was no accident that I was standing there in Spring Hill; I had been guided by my Greater Power. That day I vowed that I would become part of the new growth and development of Brisbane.

Like any mountain top experience, I came down from it the next day. I realised I had to make something of the experience and not let it go to waste. It didn’t matter what my desires were, I had to earn money now. Keryn was turning the heat up for us to have children. For me to earn better than average money, I started installing swimming pools for a local company. It was a far cry from my dream job. I thought the pumping and filtration systems for swimming pools would be right up my alley, but such technical work is a very small component of pool construction. The experience did help me in later years when I was designing pumps and filtration systems for ‘aqua farming’ projects. Swimming pool construction sites

were very dangerous because of the large quantities of steel rods lying around. I often cut my legs on the steel reinforcing. Once I ripped my leg open so badly that it became infected and almost turned gangrenous.

Through this trying period I retained my motivation, believing there was something good around the corner. At times it could have been so easy to just give up. I came to realise I needed to make a plan and find my direction, then make things happen. While formulating my plan, I concluded that I would earn more money by doing what I was best qualified for, and that was plumbing. My research indicated I had five choices where I could be active in the industry and my eyes should be less of a problem. They were: trade teacher, local authority inspector, project foreman or supervisor, estimator, or design engineer. The last two appealed to me the most. As a believer in fate, I was willing to take whichever came along first.

Having a dream was the easy part, but making it happen was a very different thing. I had used most of my money repaying my commitments from my first business in Camden. My expectation of being paid by those who owed me money was unrealistic. While I worried about the lack of money, Keryn concentrated on her dream of having children. She had a couple of miscarriages which were upsetting for her. We decided to adopt a baby; however, during the adoption process, everything changed when Keryn started attending the Brisbane Mater Hospital. They were much better equipped to assist her with her medical problems than previous doctors in Camden. In mid December, 1972, Keryn confirmed she was well and truly pregnant; six weeks in fact, with every indication that it would be successful. This was the first time I actually became excited and saw it as good news.

I thought about the added responsibility and how it was important for me to be a good provider. Blessings seem to come in groups. Overnight, life took an unexpected and pleasant turn. Our minister from the West End Methodist Mission, Brian Whitlock, visited our home in Highgate Hill, an inner Brisbane suburb. Keryn was not doing too well with her pregnancy. Brian sensed there was some tension in my voice.

“Paul, how are things really going?” he asked with a caring tone.

“Actually, they are a little rough,” I explained. “Keryn is five months pregnant, she’s not well, and this house is unsuitable for her with the steep stairs at the front.”

“What can we, as a church family, do to help?”

I had my pride; I was not accepting charity no matter how low I got. I had sat many times in church and listened to stories of destitute families and I had no wish to be placed in that category. There was no way I could ask for help.

“Possibly nothing,” I told him. “It looks like we will have to move further into the outer suburbs where it’s cheaper and the homes are more suitable. Our problem is, we don’t have much money to move at the moment.”

“Just a minute,” he said. “We can’t afford to lose young people from our church. You are part of the family and the future and we mustn’t let this happen.”

“Short of a miracle, that is what has to happen.”

“Don’t do anything until I get back to you in a couple of hours. I have an idea,” he suggested.

We weren’t going anywhere. It was Saturday afternoon and Keryn was flat on her back.

Brian returned within the hour and offered a deal that turned our lives around forever.

“The Methodist Mission has a home unit on the property, adjacent to the church, and it’s vacant,” he told us. “I have

spoken with the Chairman of the Church Property Trust, and while it will have to be ratified at the next meeting, we would be happy for you to live there.”

“Sounds good. How much rent would we have to pay?”

“Well, that’s the thing. We’re not allowed to charge you rent. You would be required to spend a few hours a week keeping the hall and the grounds clean.”

I looked at Keryn, who was keen to check it out.

We arrived at the unit and his offer only got better. Brian explained they would install a new bathroom, kitchen and hot water unit. The arrangement worked well for the church and allowed us to get back on our feet financially.

Within a short time of moving into the West End unit, I secured a good paying job with the Barclay Brothers Construction Company. They must have been happy with my performance, as they made me a leading hand within a few weeks. This gave me confidence in my skills. I was rewarded with a promotion over others who had been there much longer.

It became a very busy, full-on period in my life. Every morning I rose at 5.00am and arrived at the Barclay Brothers Fairfield work yard before 5.45am to be transported by bus on the one and a half hour journey to Canungra Army Barracks in the Gold Coast hinterland. After a day’s work, we left at 4.15pm for the return trip home, arriving at the yard by 5.45pm. Three nights a week I travelled to Eagle Farm TAFE College, which was a thirty minute drive. I was enrolled in the Plumbing Supervisory Course to advance my industry knowledge. At 9.30pm I returned home to West End, where I completed some caretaking duties before retiring for the night.

One night, Keryn expressed her dissatisfaction to me and

complained that we had not achieved much in our married life. She was particularly disappointed that we still didn't have our own home. I felt this was a thoughtless statement. We didn't have a home because with only one income, and a lot of the money having been used to pay off old business debts, of course it would be hard. It was obvious that the way each of us viewed life was very different.

I took her comments on board as a means to motivate myself, rather than allowing her negativity to get me down. Her words made me more determined to make the next stage of our life happen. I was keen to save the deposit for a home and make another of our dreams come true. It was not going to be easy. I used the same approach as I did when I wanted my first car: I worked seven days a week. Finding weekend work was easy around Brisbane's inner suburbs. There were literally thousands of homes requiring new gutters, bathrooms and general plumbing repairs, which were all in my line of expertise.

During this time there was one day that surpassed all others. It was an extra special day in our lives that brought us joy beyond comprehension. On Saturday July 14, 1973, Keryn gave birth to our first child, a daughter, Rebecca Anne, a most beautiful baby indeed. I was amazed that a baby could be so small. Keryn was unlucky this time; she had chosen a boy's name, but I had chosen the girl's. Rebecca was my first and only choice. There was never any doubt in my mind. I wanted her to have what I believed was the prettiest girl's name I knew. I wiped tears from my eyes that threatened to expose my emotions. My love for her was overwhelming.

The second special day arrived just thirteen months later, on Sunday August 25, 1974. Keryn gave birth to a handsome baby boy, and now it was Keryn's turn to choose the name.

He was to be Adam Paul. I was so excited, that after visiting hours had finished that evening, I ran down five flights of stairs at the Brisbane Mater Hospital before I realised I could have taken the lift. Having the two children gave me some very serious responsibilities that I hadn't had to shoulder in the past. My priorities quickly changed and I made more time for fun, games and family.

Our lives were full of joy, while sadly others had to face adversity. Every person living in Brisbane in 1974 will remember the Australia Day long weekend. During the week leading into it, no one could have predicted what was about to happen. Brisbane encountered one of its greatest disasters. It started to unfold on Thursday January 24. A weakening cyclone, called Wanda, crossed the Queensland coast one hundred and fifty kilometers north of Brisbane. It didn't mean a lot to us. Cyclones were nothing new to Queensland. Heavy rain continued to fall over the next forty-eight hours, dumping water in already saturated catchment areas. There was 1380mm recorded in the catchment areas and 820mm in Brisbane alone. The worst ever city flooding in Australia's history occurred that weekend.

Living adjacent to the West End Methodist Mission, gave us an immediate role in assisting the teams of helpers which assembled at the first call. The Mission was turned into a refuge for people who had to leave their homes. They were fortunate to escape the flooding water which had burst the river banks during the night. Floods were not new to me. Camden had a habit of flooding on a regular basis and as children we spent many hours watching the waters rise and fall. This time it was different, and I hope I never again witness another flood on a scale such as this. It was all hands on deck; everyone did whatever was needed to help those in greater need.

Coming to grips with the magnitude of the devastation that was unfolding before us was difficult to cope with. The day stretched into night, then into the next day and the next night. Volunteers worked with little or no sleep and they grabbed a feed on the run where and when they could. The 1974 Brisbane flood left sixteen people dead, three hundred injured and eight thousand homeless. Fifty-six homes were swept down the river. Another one thousand six hundred were submerged in water, and a total of thirteen thousand buildings were affected by insurance claims. The estimated final cost was \$980 million.

It was difficult to comprehend that an entire city and its suburbs were being affected. I was so focused on what was happening immediately around me, it was not until things settled down that I learnt my close friend, Vivian, and her sister Lise, and their family had lost everything they owned.

As the waters slowly receded, it left thick layers of mud and slush for teams of people to shovel away. It was an impossible situation. Home owners had their assets and lives' work ruined. People in home units on the St Lucia riverbank were stripping their carpets and tossing them into the river, which was still swollen and flowing around their properties. Their ruined furniture also went straight into the river. The swiftly flowing currents swept the rubbish kilometres downstream and out to Moreton Bay. There was no other way to clean up. It was a race against time to beat the threat of disease, which was fast becoming a reality.

As in all local disasters, the people of Brisbane drew closer together to make the best of what they had left. Many never got over the floods, although somehow most did pick up the pieces and moved on, so eventually the disaster

became just another chapter in the history books. To ensure such a disaster never happened again, the Queensland Government built the Wivenhoe Dam to control future heavy rains. Oh, how times can change! In 2007, the dam was down to less than eighteen percent capacity, as Queensland experienced its worst drought in history.

During 1974, I concentrated on my goal of purchasing a family home. The opportunity came sooner than expected. My good friend Rex Tom, who in the seventies worked for the Queensland Housing Commission, encouraged me to take advantage of a special home loan the government was promoting. The Housing Commission was generally associated with low cost public housing for people on lower incomes with special needs. The Queensland Premier, Sir Johannes Bjelke-Petersen, decided he wanted to stimulate the housing industry before a pending election. He introduced a 'Treasury Finance Loan', which had strict conditions attached; conditions that I was able to meet and happened to suit me nicely.

The loan was restricted to eighteen thousand dollars and it had to be repaid within ten years. The borrower needed to be on an above average income. Also, the home had to be a new construction. The attractive part for us was that the interest rate was fixed at seven and a half percent, reducing, for ten years. At the time, eight and a half percent was the going rate, with indications that interest rates would rise, which they did. Rates climbed to fifteen percent during that ten year period and sent many people bankrupt. This was one time Rex's offer was as good as it sounded. It meant the saving in interest was around thirty thousand dollars, which I would have had to pay had I been forced to take a traditional twenty-five year loan. This was more than the house was costing me. The best news was, I complied in every way for the loan.

Over the coming months, Rex hounded me not to miss the deadlines and toss away an opportunity. Material things didn't excite me and my reluctance must have shown. We found a suitable house within our price range and on December 24, 1974 we signed a contract for a high-set chamferboard home in Springwood for twenty-five thousand dollars. Springwood is a suburb of Logan City, just twenty-five kilometres south of Brisbane and sixty kilometres north of the Gold Coast.

My mother-in-law, Peg Hatherly, was visiting that Christmas and checked out the new house. She took me aside so others wouldn't hear.

"Paul, I'm happy for you. Everyone is excited when they purchase a new home. In your case you deserve it - hell, you work hard enough - but I'm not sure you realise what you've purchased. Can you see the work you need to do in the yard?"

"Possibly not Peg, but I'm going to make it fantastic in no time."

"Fantastic it might be, but it will take a lot of work," she tried to explain.

"Maybe." Her comments didn't phase me. That is what life is about. I had a vision of the final result and didn't think about how much work I had to do to achieve it. Sometimes, if we could see the whole picture nothing would ever get done.

To this day I am convinced Peg was right. I could only see the end product, and how the yard would look when it was completed. This is a talent that can make people a lot of money in real estate. It is also a talent of innovative people who see the solutions to age-old problems and then create new technology to solve those problems.

We took possession of our new home in early February,

a few days before Keryn's twenty-fifth birthday. Keryn seemed to understand my needs. She helped me set up the home to suit my situation; everything had a place and she did her best not to move anything without telling me. I was able to move freely around without hurting myself. Lamps were placed on the coffee tables and TV to give me focal points at night. We also installed additional lighting around the outside of the house to assist me after dark. Of course I continued to do silly things, but I did learn to develop new ways of coping in my new environment.

My dream of working in an office remained with me as I continued to search the 'Positions Vacant' pages every Saturday in the Brisbane Courier Mail newspaper. I noticed my employer, Barclay Brothers, had been advertising for a plumbing estimator. The advertisement had appeared on two occasions and now for a third time, which led me to conclude they were finding it difficult to fill the position and an opportunity may exist for me. I kept telling myself to give it a go, and that it could be mine.

At the time I was a foreman on the Sandgate Freemasons Retirement Home, north of Brisbane. I was gaining invaluable experience in plumbing systems very few plumbers get the opportunity to work on. I didn't want to miss out on learning all I could, but opportunities like the estimating job may only come once. For me it was now or maybe never. My mother's words were fresh in my mind: 'Don't let the grass grow under your feet.' I went for it like I did all those years ago when applying for the Woolworths job.

I had confidence in my own ability. During the previous few years I had been selected over other tradespeople on a number of occasions to take on additional responsibility. This exposed me to the more technical projects. In a short

space of time I had been transferred from the everyday style of installations to special projects, such as the Animal Laboratories for the Long Pocket CSIRO project, and the Freemasons project, overseeing the mechanical plumbing services. I was also nearing the completion of my Advanced Plumbing Supervisory Certificate, which boosted my self-confidence even further.

My project supervisor, Allan Leasegang, was a supporter of mine. On the Monday morning he arrived at the Sandgate project for his weekly inspection. I called him aside for a private chat. He was in a hurry and asked if it could wait. I explained it was important and I'd prefer we had the talk immediately. I am sure he thought I was going to resign and wanted to delay it. I briefly explained that I wanted to talk about the job as an estimator at head office.

"You have no hope of getting that," he told me.

"Can we talk Allan? Yes or no?" I asked insistently.

"You know where I live, don't you? Come over for a cold beer after work."

I arrived at his home as we had arranged. He set about telling me all the reasons why I should not and would not want the job. However, my mind was filled with visions of myself sitting at my office desk estimating, just like I had imagined while on the Gold Coast a few years earlier. I explained that I had already submitted my application and that I wanted him to organise an interview. I also made it clear, the only favour I was looking for was the interview, and he should feel free to tell the manager whatever he wanted about me - good or bad, as long as it was the truth. I was prepared to stake my entire future on his judgment. I had no idea what he would tell them, but I was confident it would be good.

"Get me the interview and I will do the rest," I begged him.

"I'll try."

“No Allan, please! I want more than trying. This is important to me. Please get me that appointment!” were my closing words, as I stood wondering if I was ever going to get off the construction sites. I think he saw the desperation in my eyes. “Please Allan, please!”

The Sandgate construction site was an hour’s drive from head office; still, the following afternoon Allan made a special trip. He called me into the site shed and didn’t say a word for what seemed a long time. It was obvious he was working out how to let me down gently.

“Paul, this is not what I want and I don’t want to lose you. You are a bloody good foreman,” he told me.

‘Not a bad way to tell me the bad news,’ I thought. ‘The old sandwich method. Tell me how good I am, give me the bad news, and then finish with a compliment to soften the disappointment.’

“Don’t come here in the morning. Go straight to head office at 8.30am for your interview,” he said.

I flung my hand out and shook his, thanking him profusely. He went on to give me all the pointers he could, including the obvious one, which I’d already considered: this was their third attempt at filling the position. The previous two people hadn’t worked out.

The acting manager, Tony Lowe, interviewed me for a couple of hours. The big crunch came when he asked, “Paul, why should I give you the job?”

I had the answer ready for him: the first part was easy, the real test was to come at the end. Would I be game enough to tell him what I really thought?

I explained how I understood that estimating was a specialised profession, with the need to pay attention to detail and accuracy; that with me he would not only get someone who wanted the position, but he would get a

person who would work hard at being the best possible estimator. I was confident I could one day fill the position of chief estimator. I explained how the company would benefit and that I would be an asset. By this time, he had assumed a laid-back position in his large executive chair, relaxed and listening intently. His body language was clear: 'I like what you are saying. Keep going, you have my undivided attention.'

I plucked up the courage to deliver my final pitch. I knew it would either make or break me. I decided to go for it.

"Tony, there is one other reason you should choose me.... In the last hour, I have judged you to be a reasonable person and trust you will take my comment in good faith."

"Keep going, you seem to be doing fine," he replied with a small laugh, as if he was amused that I had now taken control of the meeting.

"You have had two attempts at filling this position and it has not worked out on both occasions. This may have nothing to do with you personally. The fact remains, it will not look good for you if you were to get it wrong this time. In my case, I will not let you down; you have my word on that. You will be pleased you gave me this chance," I concluded.

Allan was lingering outside the office waiting to see if he could get the inside information on my success or failure. Tony invited him to join the meeting. Tony had not given any indication of what he was about to disclose.

"Allan, you have a problem..... Paul will be joining us in here as an estimator, as soon as you can let him go."

"Congratulations Paul, and welcome aboard," Tony greeted me again. Allan was also quick to shake my hand and offer his congratulations. He turned to Tony. "I am not happy with you pinching my best bloke," he told him.

"That's okay. It's what Paul has worked for, and I'm pleased to be able to help him achieve his goals."

Oh boy! Just five years out of my apprenticeship and I had snagged an estimating job with one of the largest and most reputable building companies in Australia – a one hundred million dollar a year company. I had my chance and there was no way I was going to stuff it up. Later, when Tony came to know me better, he confided in me that he had decided to give me the job halfway through the interview, unless I did something stupid in the second half. He went on to explain he became most certain of his decision when I delivered my closing statement. It reminded him of when he applied for his position with the company. The owner, Mr Ian Barclay, had asked him what he wanted to achieve in life. Tony pointed to Mr Barclay's chair and said, "To sit in that seat." Mr Barclay quickly told him he had the job, but not the chair; it was not up for grabs.

The next three years were good for Keryn and me and life was on track. I had completed my Advanced Plumbing course and had commenced a certificate in Business Management at Kangaroo Point TAFE. The best part was I had a job where my eyes were not a big issue, although I still had to find ways to compensate in the many situations I found myself. The lunch room was one place I avoided. It was always crowded, with people moving between the crammed-in tables and chairs. There were one hundred and ten employees in the company's head office. I had to remain vigilant in situations that could lead me into trouble.

Life was good! We had a nice car, modest home, and we were paying our bills on time. Of course, having two great children was a bonus. My favourite pastime was our trips to the beach, which I think we all enjoyed.

Before 1974 came to a close, Australia's northernmost capital city, Darwin, was to experience Australia's greatest national disaster. It was even worse than the Brisbane

floods earlier in the year. On Christmas Eve, instead of Santa Claus arriving, Cyclone Tracy came in his place. Winds of two hundred and seventeen kilometres an hour swept through the city, dumping 255mm of rain in twelve hours. The destructive force of Cyclone Tracy wiped out everything in its path. Television news reports several days later showed homes flattened like match sticks. Sixty-five people were killed and another six hundred and forty injured. The final cost for rebuilding the city was \$800 million. Barclay Brothers was the major contractor in the rebuilding program, which meant I gained valuable experience estimating and costing thousands of new houses. I learnt more in six months than I had in the previous five years. I was proud to have been part of the new technology, systems and building methods introduced for rebuilding Darwin.

I continued to enjoy my career and I was proud to tell my friends of my professional position. It was fantastic to be in a clean, neat, work environment with air-conditioned offices. It was certainly a contrast to the dirty, untidy construction sites that were too hot in summer and too cold in winter, and where I often hurt myself on the steel scaffolding. I also enjoyed my business management studies. It was mostly two nights a week and sometimes three, but I had become accustomed to the longer days and it didn't bother me. I studied hard and found it even more enjoyable than my trade studies. I knew I never wanted to return to work on building sites again. I was of the belief that the more knowledge I possessed, the better my chances of success - which turned out to be correct.

There were many times I became extremely disappointed with the lecturers, who sadly treated their lecturing as just a job. Yet I felt they were privileged and had a unique opportunity to guide and shape young people for the business world. They had a chance to influence the

direction of the young lives of those who sat before them, listening intently to what they had to say. I recall one evening when I became so disgusted with one lecturer that I refused to return for the second half of his lecture. That night I vowed that if ever I was given an opportunity to educate others, I would not only take it, but would make sure I delivered quality lectures for the students, whom I believed deserved better. Another night, the lecture was so bad that as I left the classroom I leaned over and whispered in the lecturer's ear, "Watch your job. I will have it if you don't do better."

Was this arrogance on my part? Possibly, or maybe it was a conviction that I knew we didn't have to settle for second best. He did lose his job; while I went on to write the textbook which is now used for teaching that subject.

My dream of becoming a design engineer never faded, although my life was taking a very different direction at that time. The decision to change professions was becoming more difficult. I had settled into a good career which offered a secure future. I accepted that this job may have been the destiny I sought, so I went along with what was happening in my life. Never did I dare to think that it was simply another step on the ladder. In my job I was answerable to the chief estimator, not to Tony as I had hoped. The chief estimator was difficult to work with; he was unwilling to allow me to exercise my talents as an analytical and well-organised person. He was a poor communicator, with a compulsive need to point out that there was always another viewpoint to everything I said. Hell, of course I knew that!

There was an instance in 1976, when a new multi-storey building was under construction at the Brisbane Mater Hospital and our management team had decided not to submit a tender. They claimed we didn't have the time or

resources that were required. I let it be known that I wanted to price the project, and was prepared to estimate it on my own time. It was a twenty-storey hospital and the plumbing work was valued at over two million dollars, which was a very large contract at that time.

I applied what I thought was a forward-thinking, innovative idea which suited the unusual way that the tender had to be presented. After giving it a lot of thought, I decided to bypass the chief estimator, knowing his negative attitude would provide me with an outright rejection. On the other hand, I believed Tony would approach it with an open mind. I was proposing that we could win the project by following my strategy, even though our tender may not be the lowest price when the tenders were opened.

Tony listened intently to me, only interrupting to ask questions and challenge my theory, his calculator working flat out as I explained the finer details.

“Okay, I think that will work.”

“It’s conditional,” I told him.

“Oh?.....On what?”

“You claim it as your idea.”

“No way, I can’t do that! You should get the credit.” He was emphatic.

“Think about it Tony. Why did I come directly to you?.... Because you listen and consider my ideas. That doesn’t happen with my mate outside.”

“Okay, but you should get the credit with higher management,” Tony insisted.

“Trust me Tony, tell them it’s your idea and they’ll love it. Tell them it’s mine and it won’t go anywhere. I get the satisfaction, and we both know the truth. It’s not like you’re stealing it, you’re doing me a favour.”

I attended the opening of the tenders with the chief

estimator. There were only four companies tendering. I was very disappointed when we were announced as the third highest. I did expect to come in second. We returned to the office and the chief estimator told me to file the job away and not to feel bad about the result.

‘Damn it, I really wanted to win that one.’

Tony intervened and gave me different instructions. He wanted the file placed on his desk. A few days later, Tony attended a project meeting for the job and he returned with the announcement that we had been awarded the contract. The final assessment indicated we would be the cheapest by around two percent, after both stages one and two were taken into consideration. This result was a pleasant victory. My career took off. Tony made sure I was given prestigious projects to tender, which I obviously enjoyed, and I gained more experience in a shorter period of time.

Another saying of good old Mum’s was, ‘When one door closes, another door opens’. My version of this was slightly different. I figured, ‘When one door slams, you had better make sure another opens quickly’. My superior, the chief estimator, became impossible to work with. On a number of occasions I told him, “I may not be right all the time, but let me promise you, I am not wrong all of the time either.” He had me very stressed out, limiting my progress to that of his own ability. This caused me to start looking for a new job and rekindled my dream of becoming a design engineer.

One day during my lunch break, I had the Courier Mail newspaper open at the ‘Positions Vacant’ pages. My elbows were on the desk and my head was resting in the palms of my hands. I was disgusted at having to look for a new job, and it was obviously troubling me more than I realised. There were lots of tradespeople who would have loved to have been in my position. I peered down at the newspaper

to continue my search. There was a single tear which dropped from my eye. For some reason I read the entry next to it. The advertisement was for a hydraulic services consultant. This was definitely a sign, not just a coincidence. The time to move on had arrived. There were two suitable positions offered to me, and after an interview for each, I accepted the offer from the professional engineering company, GHD Engineering.

This was incredible. Just eight years after making my decision to become a design engineer, and at only twenty-seven years of age, I had achieved my dream. My colleagues at TAFE were right; it was for someone else and not them. I just happened to be the other person.

My family was playing an important role in my life. Rebecca, aged four, and Adam, three, were my pride and joy. It was important for me to know if they had inherited Retinitis Pigmentosa from me. I was aware of the ease with which they moved around the house in the dark. I was always thankful that both children enjoyed excellent health and that they didn't show any signs of having problems with their sight. To test Rebecca, I gave her some small 'go and fetch' exercises in the dark, disguised as a game, even though I couldn't see the objects. Much to my delight, she was able to see everything I asked for.

I was more daring with Adam. One night he was on the top bunk of his bed. I asked him to jump into my arms which were open ready to catch him. With total faith in his dad, he jumped while I prayed he would get it right. No problems for my little boy.

I was confident they would enjoy a normal life and I never had to worry about their eyes again. Both Rebecca and Adam were a tremendous help in assisting me to move

around. We were able to enjoy outings that may have otherwise been virtually impossible for me. Shopping centres were particularly difficult to navigate, and even today I avoid them. People have a habit of walking in different directions and crossing my path, and they often bump into me. Of course it is always my fault, never theirs!

I had to develop tactics that allowed me to move through a shopping centre safely. Walking square to walls and large objects certainly helped. I also stayed parallel to the shops, or followed a pattern on the floor covering to reach my destination. My knowledge of building construction helped, as I was aware patterns in floor coverings were always laid square to walls. I also used the large concrete columns to my benefit. They are on a grid system, and I would walk with my hand out from my side and touch them as I passed, this allowed me to know I was walking straight.

Having Rebecca or Adam with me was the perfect solution to my problems. They made a big contribution toward my safety and allowed me to live as normal a life as possible. I don't think Keryn appreciated the problems I encountered, and when I was taking time to focus on people so I didn't walk into them, I discovered from later conversations, she thought I was perving on the ladies.

During 1988, the World Expo was staged in Brisbane, and it was only through Adam's understanding and assistance that I was able to enjoy the event. The Expo was over a six month period, and for me to move around freely, I would place my hand on his shoulder so he could guide me through the massive crowds. No father wants to look weak or inferior in front of his son, and not once did Adam ever allow me to feel that way. He was getting quality time with his Dad and that was what was important to him. It was 1978 and life was progressing well. Everything was

falling into place like I hoped it would. The one thing missing was that I didn't have my own business, although it wasn't of any great concern to me. I was still annoyed at myself for failing in my first attempt in Camden. I started to consider that my future may not include owning a business, and that it may not be my destiny. After failing at my first attempt, I adopted a strategy, which to some may seem incomprehensible. Remembering that failure in my life was a big deal to me, I believed I had committed a crime against myself and decided I should be punished.

I gave myself an indefinite sentence to spend all my spare time studying and advancing my business knowledge until I was well prepared. The subject that had caused my failure was Business Management. Therefore, as part of my punishment, I took Business Management and studied it until it became my best; although it took some time. My self-imposed punishment lasted eight years. Of course it was never really punishment for me, I enjoyed every minute of it, and it was a privilege to be able to acquire such knowledge.

During my first twelve months as a design engineer, I was involved in the design for many of Queensland's leading hospitals. I gained valuable experience and developed expertise that in time placed my services in demand. Never once did I take my job for granted and I made the most of it. Within twelve months a head-hunter approached me on behalf of a young and progressive company which needed a design engineer with my level of expertise. It was the first time someone actually wanted me and I felt acclaimed and valued. At the time I was tempted to consider the position, but I was reluctant to give up the security I enjoyed. Both my current position, and my previous position with Barclay Brothers, taught me that there was more than money to consider with a professional career.

I had grown accustomed to a good working environment, which included well-appointed offices and access to other qualified engineers. In addition to my everyday duties, I was learning best practice business methods and procedures that were necessary in running a successful enterprise, and also how the corporate structure went together. My work desk was immediately outside the manager's office, which gave me the added benefit of observing one of the most efficient people I have ever worked with. I learnt the art of multi-skilling, handling up to eight things at once. Giving up what I had, to transfer to a smaller organisation seemed like a step backwards, and I decided to decline the offer.

Good old mother was never far away, and another of her favourite sayings was: 'Whatever will be, will be'. The following week, my 'Eight-Things-At-Once' hero manager asked me to design a project that was actually civil engineering work, which was outside my expertise. I explained this to him, but he told me it was part of the job and to learn how to design it. I returned to my desk, picked up the phone and asked the head-hunter to make the appointment. By 6.30pm that evening, I had a new job and an agreement to design the plumbing services for the new Rockhampton Base Hospital, with the Brisbane firm Burnett Chilton and Associates.

I was on a mission in life, and I derived great pleasure from returning to my 'Eight-Things-At-Once' manager on the Monday morning and reminding him of his instructions to me. I told him I thought he was right. He looked at me with a smile and said, "Then go and do it."

I then delivered the news that wiped the smile from his face. "Under these circumstances, and having given your instructions much consideration, I am resigning."

My former hero manager could only handle one task for the rest of the day. He needed to find a replacement.

It was difficult for me to keep up with everything that was happening, life was moving so quickly. I was continually compensating for the difficulties I encountered with my vision, on a daily basis. I think the fear of returning to work on construction sites drove me to succeed; although I now realise that was unlikely to have eventuated. The thought of a new job made me nervous, and there was also the element of the unknown. What did the partners of my new company expect my contribution to be?

The redevelopment of the Rockhampton Hospital was a major project and I started to think they may have been appointed to a project which they knew very little about designing; however, this turned out not to be the case. I was pleased to be involved in high-rise home unit developments, as well as commercial and industrial buildings. It was rather ironic; here I was designing the plumbing services for buildings that only a few years earlier, a supervisor didn't think I was capable of installing. I was also gaining experience in some very different areas of business management a smaller office sometimes provides. Sadly, for the owners, it was how not to run a business.

One of the partners was a member of a Rostrum Public Speaking Club. Coincidentally, I had been researching such clubs only a few months earlier. Without hesitation, I accepted his invitation to attend an inner city Brisbane club, which was the start of another exciting and positive aspect of my life. For twelve years I remained involved, and in that time I became an accredited critic for judging other members' speeches. I was also privileged to judge the 'Voice of Youth' competitions in Queensland high schools.

During my years in Rostrum, I had the opportunity to achieve one of my most desired dreams; to win a competition for being the best. I became club champion on

four occasions. Disappointingly, a trophy was not part of the prize. I was also awarded runner-up at the Queensland State Championships on two occasions. But never did I receive number one. Well, that's life!

Public speaking allowed me to achieve one of my other dreams. I was privileged to be a keynote speaker at the Fourth World Plumbing Conference in Chicago, USA, in 1996. While I was not in the same league as Billy Graham, I did learn to be articulate, concise and structured in my communications, and adept at detecting and interpreting the feedback from people's faces (when I could see them). It taught me to use my eyes better when talking to people, in that I now scan my audience, who don't realise I am unable to see them. Talking to people one on one, I use a similar tactic by scanning the person's face.

On one occasion in Sydney, I was delivering a sales presentation and a friend was working the computer from which an image was projected onto a big screen. Knowing the room was about to become dark, I quickly scanned the room, taking particular note of where each person was sitting. I felt how high my head needed to be lifted to line up with the back row and how low it tilted to line up with the front row. The orientation and position of my body for the extreme right and left of the rows was important to me as well. I also managed to pick up guides from light filtering through the blinds.

On completion of the presentation, and with the lights turned back on, my offsider walked up to me and said, "I don't believe you have a problem with your eyes. There was not one person in this room who didn't think you were talking to them." Apparently I had looked at everyone without any trouble, which I considered an achievement, because all I saw was pitch darkness. Over the years I have worked hard

to perfect such tactics and divert people's attention away from my difficulties. Instead, I encourage them to focus on what I am saying.

To me, recognising opportunities has been half the required skill to achieving success in life. The other half is having the courage to act on such opportunities. In the winter of 1980, at a time when I was working in the consulting office, a sales representative arrived for his routine product update meeting. I was the only design engineer in the office at the time, along with three other staff members. Out of the blue he said, "I don't know why you and Chris Bristow don't get together and form a partnership."

"Could you step into this office? It's more private. What are you saying? And who is Chris Bristow?" I asked.

He repeated himself and went on to explain how good we would be as partners, suggesting Chris would be good at heading up the design division, and my forte would be public relations and bringing in the work. I told him he was dreaming. What had happened to me in Camden was fresh in my mind, and now I had a house, car, family and a pleasant lifestyle to consider. He left the office basically telling me I was mad not to consider it. It only took twenty-four hours for me to realise that what he had suggested was potentially another chapter in my life that may be about to open. I would not be true to myself if I didn't at least pursue the prospect.

A meeting was arranged between Chris and me, and to my surprise I discovered there was an assumption on Chris's behalf that our partnership in a design engineering business was a foregone conclusion. I wasn't about to admit that I was only there to talk about the idea. I quickly decided to speak in the affirmative, as if it was going to happen. We spoke about the opportunities, and I started

gaining confidence as the meeting progressed. The different aspects of training I had completed during my eight years of business exile were starting to shine through and I was about to reap the rewards. Owning my own business was something I had hoped for, but I was never convinced it would happen. Being an equal partner would be even better. Chris's proposal began to sound very compelling. I knew I had a positive contribution to make which would help guarantee the success of the company, and it was also evident I was well qualified for the task.

Over the coming weeks, Chris and I negotiated an agreement after discussing important aspects of running the company. We never had a written contract and never needed one; everything was on a handshake. Before the final decision was made we asked our accountant's advice. He only had two questions.

"Chris, do you trust Paul?"

"Well...Yes," Chris replied. He appeared a little uncomfortable that he should be asked.

"Paul, do you trust Chris?"

"Yes I do," I replied without hesitation.

"Then I recommend you go into business," he concluded.

I wanted us to take an office in Spring Hill, in the Central Business District; the same suburb where I had been moved by the desire to be part of the growth of Brisbane. I explained to Chris that first impressions count and that we could give our clients the impression we had been there for some time and were already successful. He reluctantly agreed, and together with his professional design of our stationery, we embarked on one of the best marketing strategies I have ever been involved with.

In October 1980, I had to pinch myself to make sure it was really happening. I stopped and reflected on recent events.

I was only thirty-one years of age and had achieved my most desired dream. I owned a professional consulting and design engineering business with a trusted partner. The difference this time, was that I had the qualification to back it up: my plumbing trade, my Advanced Plumbing Certificate, my Business Management Certificate, and my experience as an estimator. Of these, I knew the most important of all was the business management qualification.

It was time for me to 'Soar with the eagles'.



Paul - 1980

