

CHAPTER 5

(1981 – 1984)

Soar With The Eagles

In January, 1981 I celebrated my thirty-second birthday. It was time for me to try and understand what Retinitis Pigmentosa was, and why it affected my life the way it did. In the past I had avoided the subject; if I knew the facts it may not have suited my long term plans. Imagine someone telling me, “You must never drive a motor vehicle again.” Which in fact, was exactly what should have happened. A person with my condition should never be eligible for a driver’s licence. No one actually uttered the words to me, although they may have thought them. So, I continued on my way, and had anything bad happened, I possibly would have claimed ignorance.

My daily routine of bumping into furniture and walls continued. Covering up for silly incidents such as knocking

over cups of coffee or glasses of wine when dining in restaurants, and not seeing items on my desk as clearly as I'd like, seemed normal for me. Often I had business meetings in my office and the visitors sometimes borrowed my pen to take notes. When returning the pen, they usually placed it in a different location. I took ages to find it again. Everything had a place, and pens belonged at half an arm's length and forty-five degrees to my right. Obviously, explaining this to every person who walked through my door would have been tedious. At this time of my life I still tried to conceal my problem. I didn't want people to pity me or think I was incapable of performing my job to their expectation. I finally worked out that pity had nothing to do with it, and delivering good results was what mattered.

I was still not sure if other people had similar problems and knew how to handle them better, or if I was actually different. I think I really did know there was a problem. I just didn't want my plans for living my life the way I wanted, to be interrupted. Enjoying the normal things in life is important to everyone, even when they have a disability. I was aware I had tunnel vision and no night vision; even minor glare was a problem. It is possible for me to see objects in the central location, but there is almost no peripheral vision.

Yes! I did know there was a problem and I was slowly coming to accept it. What to do about it remained a mystery for a few more years.

I ventured once more to my eye specialist on Wickham Terrace in Brisbane. The results were disappointing and did nothing for my already confused state. The tests indicated I was now restricted to less than five percent peripheral vision, but there were still no clear answers, no explanation, no offer of support, no advice on where to get assistance

that would help me to understand, and no ideas on what I should do next. I walked out onto the busy city street a very lonely man. People with disabilities can have all the carers available, but the fact remains, at the end of the day we are alone to sort it out for ourselves. In my case, you guessed it: the problem went into the too-hard basket. Maybe I was like my father; I just didn't want to deal with it.

A quote from a medical article I found on an RP website some years later, stated:

'Retinitis Pigmentosa is an eye disease that affects a person's night vision and peripheral vision. It is a genetic disorder that is usually hereditary. Symptoms start with decreased night vision and later progresses to a diminishing of peripheral vision. The rate of decline varies depending on the genetic make-up of the disorder and also varies somewhat between individuals.'

The article continued, *'Usher Syndrome affects the hearing and the eyesight, which means a Retinitis Pigmentosa sufferer can also find themselves losing their hearing as well.'*

I was fifty-six years of age when I learnt that I also suffered from Usher Syndrome. The specialist gave me the news as a passing comment, but it came as a complete shock to me. I noticed he had less difficulty in telling me, than I did receiving the news. I could not help thinking, 'Hell, another problem to look forward to!' For a man on a mission I was certainly running out of time.

There was so much happening in the early eighties. It was the time for entrepreneurs. There was a lot of money in the economy and property developers were borrowing more than their fair share. The economy was out of control;

interest rates were soaring and the rate of inflation was high. Architects and design engineers were doing well financially; their success came on the backs of the developers. We were part of the boom and I loved every minute of it. It was difficult to keep track of my life. I was certainly on a high and determined to enjoy everything that was coming my way. I had one life and I intended to make the most of it. The possibility of my eyes becoming worse was of little consequence to me. I was simply too busy to worry about them.

My mother drummed many sayings into me and another was, 'Make hay while the sun shines', advice I most definitely followed.

Rebecca was eight and Adam seven years old, an ideal age for parents to enjoy their children. They were past the baby stuff and into the innocent age of growing up. Both Rebecca and Adam enjoyed good health and were excellent swimmers. We were fortunate to have Laurie Lawrence in our district. He had a swimming academy that Rebecca and Adam attended from a very young age. At that time Laurie was an Australian swimming coach and for many years was a motivator of the Australian Commonwealth and Olympic Games teams. Often we hear of family tragedies involving children drowning. Fortunately Keryn and I never had to endure such events. We were blessed.

Rebecca was into the typical young ladies' activities like ballet dancing, dolls, and much to my delight, schoolwork. Adam was a typical Australian male, and his days were filled with bikes, football and skateboards. I had a phobia that he may grow up a softy. I was greatly relieved that it was not to be. He certainly didn't disappoint me, not in any way. Adam was a practical joker. On one occasion he offered to help his friend prepare his birthday invitations.

What his friend didn't know was that Adam deliberately put the wrong address on the invitations. When the day arrived, everyone went knocking at the house five doors down the street.

He was also a Dad's boy and spent endless hours with me landscaping our yard, building fences and helping me to mix concrete. We built his mother a greenhouse nursery for her extensive pot plant collection, and constructed retaining walls around the perimeters of the property. Adam was developing into a tall, slim and strong young man. It was a period where we forged a bond that later I described as too much like best friends, rather than a father and son relationship. I was scared that one day it may be taken from me and I would be left with a void in my life.

Rebecca was more her own person. She spent a lot of time with Keryn, and grabbed opportunities to be with me as they became available, although I was not good at girls' stuff. Still, there was a healthy father/daughter relationship that blossomed. I knew Keryn lived for the children; to her, they were the most important part of our family unit. I took great care not to spoil that relationship. I felt if for any reason Keryn didn't have the children, it would destroy her. I don't believe I ever placed Rebecca or Adam in a position to compete for our affection.

I was always of the opinion that Keryn did a good job raising our children. They were polite to everyone, were never in trouble and we were immensely proud of them and their achievements. This was contrary to my own childhood; I was a little devil, I gave my parents a hard time and I was in my share of trouble, although it was never serious trouble. I expressed my appreciation to Keryn on a regular basis for the good work she was doing with them. I knew if their care was left to me, I would be a disaster.

It worried me that one day our children may be taken from us. It was possible they could be in an accident, or be struck down with sickness. It may be that they would marry and move a long way from us, as I had done with my parents. I'd remind Keryn they were only on loan to us and that we had no control over the final outcome and we could only do our best. Of course I said these words of wisdom, not believing any of them would ever come true.

Our favourite family outings were trips to the beach, which brought us together for a few hours each weekend. Living at Springwood, south of Brisbane, meant the drive to the Gold Coast was just forty-five minutes. Today there is an eight lane freeway and it only takes about twenty minutes. We always left around 6.00am to beat the heat of the day and were back home shortly after lunch. Any later in the afternoon and the highway became clogged with traffic returning from the coast.

Rebecca and Adam loved surfing the waves with me; they each had a boogie board and I would help them catch waves into the shore. I know their favourite pastime was to dig a big hole in the sand for me to lie in, after which they would proceed to cover me up. They placed a towel around my neck, a hat on my head and sunglasses to stop the glare; then mum turned up with the camera. They were memorable times.

My business partnership with Chris Bristow was still in its infancy, which meant long hours and hard work. Being away from home so much possibly contributed to the problems Keryn and I were experiencing in our marriage. There was little doubt I focused on being an entrepreneur, a high flier, a successful business person; that was my dream and I was prepared to work for it. I justified my long hours in the office, weighed against the fact Keryn didn't want

to have a paid job and make a contribution to the family finances. She wanted to be the homemaker and I reluctantly accepted her role, so I figured she had to accept me working long hours. It was nothing for me to leave for work at 2.30am and have my first project completed by 6.00am.

Chris was five years my senior, a distinguished looking man, considering he was only in his thirties, always immaculately dressed in smart business outfits, well-pressed shirts, colourful ties, dark slacks and sports jacket; he was every bit the professional engineer. Chris was quietly spoken and reserved in his approach to people and he held strong opinions on most topics. He was confident and articulate in expressing ideas and opinions on a wide range of subjects. When it came to engineering matters, he was particularly gifted in dealing with fine details. Personally, I was a big picture person; the broad brush concepts were more my style. I had to slug away at the fine detail, but for Chris it came naturally. We were opposites in many ways, and this was one, yet we still made a good team. Chris had had a similar career path my own, in that he was a plumber by trade. He had been fortunate in making his move into the design field at a very young age, although he claimed it did have some drawbacks.

Architects and property developers perceived Chris to be lacking in experience, based on his youthful appearance, which was possibly a fair assessment. Experience comes with age or the length of time in a job. To overcome this barrier he grew a beard, thus presenting an older, more distinguished image. The beard remained and he still has it to this day, I suspect more out of habit than necessity.

Everything I ever dreamed of was before me; it was there for the taking. Sure, I had to make it happen, and of course I had limitations with my eyes, but otherwise it was not so

difficult; after all, success was an obsession for me. Things I had learnt in my business management courses were well embedded in my subconscious. Looking back, I must have recalled helpful information on a daily basis without even realising it. I now know those many nights I spent attending college over the years were a tremendous benefit, and gave me a competitive edge.

The building and construction industry was in the midst of a boom throughout Queensland, and I don't believe my participation was an accident, it was definitely part of my destiny. I felt an obligation to follow the path that had been laid out for me and I couldn't accept that it was just a coincidence. The fact that I had a burning ambition to achieve my goals and now was living out my dream was, in my mind, part of a bigger plan my Maker had in store. Perhaps it was linked with my mother's theory that I was on this earth to do something special. Only time would tell.

I deliberately targeted construction projects in Far North Queensland. I enjoyed the travel, flying to new places, taking boat rides to the many island resorts off the Queensland coast, staying in modern accommodation, eating in nice restaurants, meeting new people, being the decision maker on important design matters, and marketing our company to architects and developers. I enjoyed it so much, that I started spending a lot of time away from home, which suited me, considering the decline in my home life.

This lifestyle came at a price. Each step of the way had its obstacles for me to overcome, and still does today. Lining up in queues at airports, finding light switches in hotel rooms, or something as simple as flicking through channels on a television set, were all difficult. While boarding large boats when travelling to island resorts to inspect construction on projects, I would lose my footing if the boat

moved as I was stepping aboard. The swirl of the water from passing boats left a gap between the jetty and the boat, and on a number of occasions, I almost found myself taking a swim. Regardless, I enjoyed travelling to places many people never experience; it was exciting and worth the minor difficulties.

Attending official functions was another activity I enjoyed. Again, I had to battle with my sight. The functions were mostly held in the grand ballrooms of five star hotels. Keryn accompanied on most occasions, although she didn't seem to enjoy them. In fairness to her, many of those attending were people who had made it to the top on an easy ride. We had worked hard for what we had and done it the tough way. The entire evening was about networking with prospective clients. Possibly I was focused more on working the room than on Keryn's comfort. In the dim light nothing was easy. Landing the next large project was what it was about. Keryn was down to earth and not turned on by the hype. The who's who of the social scene didn't impress her like it did me. If the truth be known, others may have viewed us as being pretentious, in the same way we did them. After all, my speciality was taking potential clients to dinner. We would collect them in a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce for an evening at an exclusive restaurant. They were always impressed and we walked away with the next big project.

Politics was another important part of business life; an ingredient in the success formula. 'Know your politicians' was my motto. Keryn and I were on the invitation list of Lord Mayor Sallyanne Atkinson, the Minister for Justice, Sam Doumany, and many of the special events run by other members of parliament. Being well informed and knowing what was going to happen before it was reported in the newspapers was a sound business strategy. My role as assistant campaign director to Sam Doumany was an

exciting one; I was always well informed and enjoyed his friendship. He listened to the general public and sought opinions on how the average person felt about a policy that was being debated in parliament. I often spent long hours in the public gallery of Queensland's Parliament listening to the speeches. I thought it was better than paying money to attend a comedy show. If I were a headmaster writing a report card for some of the members, it would read, 'shameful, disgraceful. They make Paul Funnell look like an angel'. How they could sleep at night, knowing their behaviour was worse than that of most school children, is beyond me. Twenty-five years on little has changed; I understand it has become even worse.

Despite my less than complimentary thoughts regarding members of parliament, my ego suggested I could make a difference by becoming one. I had always thought that with the success of my business, and the offer I received from prominent Liberal Party members to contest a seat in parliament, that Keryn would be supportive. There was no way I could move around official functions carrying out public commitments without a partner to help me. It was impossible for me to see a person putting their hand out to shake mine. Over the years I have overcome the embarrassment of not realising a person is offering their hand in friendship by beating them to it and holding mine out first, thus placing the responsibility on the other person.

I recall on one occasion being on a sales trip in Dubbo, a regional city north-west of Sydney in New South Wales. Prior to my presentation I offered my hand to a guest, not realising his hand was already waiting for mine. The following day he phoned me and said, "Paul, you have RP don't you?"

"How the hell would you know that, John?"

“As you went to greet me, you couldn’t see my hand. Also, I was diagnosed with RP last year. I am now thirty-three.”

We spent a short time exchanging what we knew and I was pleased I could share my frustrations, not just because it helped me, it was also good for John to know what to expect. Other than knowing we had the same symptoms, there was little time to exchange ideas on how we each overcame our daily difficulties. Maybe it was still too hard to be open about the problems.

A frustration for me occurs when I am standing talking to a person in dim lights that are part of setting the mood at cocktail parties and similar functions, only to realise the person has moved on and I am talking to thin air. It happens all the time. In fact, it is not restricted to venues where there is dim light. Even in natural light, I often look to see why a person has not answered me, only to find they have left without telling me.

My need for Keryn’s support was paramount, but it wasn’t always forthcoming. One evening over dinner I challenged her lack of support. Much to my amazement, she informed me she had no intentions of being the supportive wife. She actually ridiculed me for being successful. With her voice rising, she told me she didn’t know I was going to be so successful and made it clear it was what I wanted, and that she had never asked for it. In no uncertain terms she told me never to expect her to be there supporting me.

Well! I guess I just got told! I definitely knew where I stood and her attitude drove a wedge between us. I knew this was the beginning of the end. I thought I had been clear in what I wanted to achieve and had taken the time that night in 1968 at the Camden Go-Kart Track to outline my dreams and be certain there was no confusion. Could she have thought my ambitions were only just dreams? What

was happening in my life was no accident; my ambitions may have started out as dreams, but I was driving them to make them come true.

For some people a career in politics is their life's ambition. I saw it as an opportunity that sounded good. With that approach, there was never going to be a Queensland Premier Funnell. Not to worry, that's life!

If there was any doubt in my mind, the final straw came when I received a phone call from Sir Lew Edwards, who at the time was Deputy Premier and Treasurer of Queensland. He was supporting me as Liberal Party Chairman for the Griffith electorate. A similar phone call came only a few hours later from the Liberal Party President John Heron, who went on to be the federal minister for Aboriginal and Islander Services during the nineties. Then the plot thickened with a call from Sam to reinforce the real rationale for putting me into the position. There was a concern by the Liberal members of parliament that some party members were trying to undermine and toss out the coalition agreement that had existed between the Liberal and National Parties for over a quarter of a century. If such a move were successful, the Liberal Party ministers would be banished to the backbenches, with a massive reduction in pay, loss of superannuation and retirement benefits. The way they figured it, being aware I was a coalition supporter, if I were chairman of the Griffith electorate, it would make their jobs safer.

The joke was, even with the powerbrokers backing me, I was rolled thirty-one to ten by the Ladies' Guild. That was enough for me, I was out of there. I couldn't see an intelligent person placing themselves in a position where keeping their job was dictated by the general public. I did try to get involved again some years later, only to find the

Liberal Party was still doing things as it did in the seventies and had not moved with the times. The Labor Party was even worse; it didn't have a clue about running a country.

I was going to be master of my own destiny: 'To my own self be true'. If I failed, it would be because of me, and no one else would be held responsible. I wanted to be in a position to say 'I had a go'.

The partnership with Chris could not have been working out better. Chris had designed our professional stationery, which was brown print on bone linen paper. What made it stand out, was that the letters were typed with brown ink rather than the traditional black. It looked very smart.

Margaret, Chris's wife, spent many hours extracting the names and addresses of all the Brisbane architects from the Yellow Pages phone book, and addressing envelopes to each of them. We prepared a very professional letter of introduction, and in November 1980, just four weeks after starting our new business, named Bristow Funnell and Partners, we achieved one of the most successful promotional campaigns ever launched in the engineering industry. Work poured through the door immediately; not just any job, they were some of the most prestigious projects on offer.

Within a few days of the promotion, I received a phone call from a leading Brisbane architect whose opening statement was, "Would you like to come down and pick up a job?"

"Of course."

"Be here at 10.00am on Wednesday."

I arrived on time, and discovered the project was the prestigious Russ Hinze Stand at Albion Park Raceway. The Honourable Russ Hinze was the Minister for Racing at the time. He died in 1991, after a colourful political career.

That year, our friend, Gordon Spreadborough, invited Chris and me to attend the Caroma Christmas party. Caroma is the largest manufacturer of bathroom fixtures in Australia. The response for the lunch was so good that it needed to be spread over three days in succession. Architects greeted us as old friends. I had met only a few of them before that event, still they remembered our stationery and had the impression that we had been in business for many years. They promised us work, and they kept to their promises. To my standards, the professional fees we received were like having a license to print money. I had never been so well off in my life.

The early eighties saw the beginning of the new era of modern office technology. It may be difficult to believe, but when the facsimile machine was first introduced, people didn't understand it. I recall Chris returning from a Brisbane architect's office, which had an associated office in Papua New Guinea. Chris explained how he watched a sheet of paper with a building plan drawn on it, go through the fax machine and simultaneously the image was received on another piece of paper in the New Guinea office around three thousand kilometres away. It was too difficult to comprehend. On another occasion, a deputy headmaster of a private school asked me how the actual paper was transferred through the air or over the wires to the other office. I wanted to tell him that it was lucky it didn't get wet. It did however, demonstrate that if it was difficult for an educated person to understand new technology, the average person had little hope.

Desktop computers became popular during the eighties. In the seventies, computers were very large pieces of equipment that needed to be housed in large rooms under a controlled air-conditioned environment. Once the desktop computer was developed, it soon became an affordable

item within the reach of most businesses. Our company was quick to invest in the new generation technology. We proudly placed our new computer on the front reception desk for everyone to see that we were an upmarket and modern company. The trouble was, we had no idea what a computer did, or how we should use it. The computer just sat there making our reception area look modern and it became outdated before we ever turned it on.

Computers quickly became the machines every business needed. The rate of development in computer technology was staggering and difficult to keep abreast with. The government told us computers were going to provide workers with more recreation time and more time to spend with their families. They were absolutely right! People were laid off as computers took over and made their jobs redundant, and families broke up due to financial difficulties. Recently an Information Technology manager of a large company which specialised in gambling, explained to me that they had designed and developed software which did the same work as three hundred and fifty employees. I scratched my head and wondered how people could enjoy their recreation time, if they had no job and no money to spend.

By the end of our second year in business we were debt free, having paid off our twenty thousand dollar bank loan, we were cashed up and looking to reduce our taxes. Our cars were old and certainly nothing to get excited over. When we set up the business we decided to make do with the cars we had, to keep our costs down. Things were different now; we needed tax deductions, and new cars seemed to be a good way to obtain them. I recall our accountant suggesting we were asking him for advice on tax evasion, which was not the case, we simply wanted to minimise our taxes. The late Kerry Packer, a well known business tycoon, once told

a parliamentary enquiry that any person who did not look to reduce their tax was a fool, because the government shouldn't be given any more money than necessary, due to the lousy job they did of spending it.

The night before meeting with the accountant, I told Keryn that we were going to speak with him about new cars. I explained they would be small, standard style vehicles, nothing fancy. The next day during the meeting, the accountant asked, "Do you like prestige cars?"

"Hell yes!" we replied in unison.

"Go and buy yourselves a decent car each."

Chris wanted a BMW and mine was to be a Ford Fairlane.

When I arrived home that evening, I was greeted in the kitchen by Keryn.

"Well, are we getting a new car?"

"Yes but not what you think." I had turned away, not to give away the surprise.

"What then?"

I was beaming; I realised I had achieved another of my dreams. I slowly turned as she waited for my reply.

"What's that smile for? Is it out the front? You should have phoned me."

"No. It's going to be a brand new top of the range silver Ford Fairlane."

"Not one of those big Yankee cars you see on 'Hawaii Five-O', is it?"

"No, you will love it." And when it arrived, she did.

On numerous occasions I have been told I am too analytical. I understand it is difficult for people around me, but that is who I am. I always looked for the lessons in my daily life, in my achievements and my failures when they came along. In this case, I found myself reflecting on the sales course I had completed ten years earlier and the many

sales seminars I had attended over those years. A practice with sales people, when they wake of a morning, is to jump out of bed, clap their hands and tell themselves it is going to be a good day. It is called 'an affirmation', the idea being, if you tell yourself something often enough, it will happen. To me, if it is a lie, it will remain a lie no matter how many times you say it. You are only kidding yourself. Most lies work that way; the more you tell them the more you believe them. That is, if you are a fool. Affirmations are useless unless they can actually be achieved, thus making them believable.

I learnt in life, that when you want something, you must visualise it in your possession and you will achieve it. Visualisation is used by most elite sports people. It is also part of the secret of life. Sports people picture themselves winning the race or kicking the ball over the crossbar to score the points. It is interesting that in the months leading up to the purchase of my car, I'd notice every Fairlane that went past and without consciously realising it, I visualised myself behind the wheel. Yet, twelve hours prior to walking into the vehicle showroom, I had no idea I was to achieve the dream that had been with me since my twenty-first year. The problem was, the car was only half the dream; the other half was a beautiful speedboat being towed behind the car. At that time all I had was the towbar.

My business brought me in contact with many architectural students who often asked my advice on their assignments. A couple of the students made the comment that they wished I were their university lecturer and they felt I would be good at it. Of course this appealed to me, considering the raw deal I received while studying for my Certificate in Business Management.

I did my research and found that the lecturer for the

subjects in which I had qualifications, was only two years from retiring. Being a forward-thinking person, I wrote to the head of the faculty of Architecture and requested a meeting. I received much more; he granted me a one-only trial lecture on a set topic. The plan was for me to be trained and take over after the lecturer's retirement. Sadly, he died within the same year and I was appointed to the part-time staff at the Queensland University of Technology. I worked hard and gave the students important and relevant information that I believed would help them in the real world of building and construction. I also tried to provide an interesting and stimulating delivery. These were qualities I felt were lacking in many other lecturers' presentations.

As university lecturing was a new world for me, and to accommodate the difficulties I had with my sight, I needed to devise and develop new strategies to cope with the situations I would encounter. One of the procedures I adopted was to arrive thirty minutes early. This was important, as it was still daylight and it was easier for me to see while walking through the university grounds. It also gave me time to organise my notes and familiarise myself with the room. Even though I had lectured in the same room just one week earlier, I still needed to familiarise myself with tables, chairs or equipment which may have been moved, thus changing the entire layout from my perspective. Such alterations could cause me harm or embarrassment if I walked into anything. Another trick was to place the handout notes at the front of the room, where the students were required to collect them before they left. The same applied when collecting their assignments.

For many years I had been accustomed to being on the receiving end of lectures; now it was my turn to be the centre of attention for up to sixty students who would watch

my every move. They were very intelligent people striving to achieve a degree in Architecture and I was expected to deliver my lectures fluently. My expectations were even higher than the students'. I wanted to make every night a memorable one for them and for each student to feel it was worth the effort of turning up. My lecture was always their last for the night. Some of the students had been at the university for twelve hours by the time they had finished with me. Therefore, keeping their attention and preventing them from leaving early was a challenge.

My subject was Engineering Services and I went to great lengths to ensure the students didn't detect my poor eyesight, for fear it would reflect on their assessment of my ability to impart the knowledge they needed. As time passed, I realised this was not the best tactic and I became more open. I developed sufficient confidence in my ability that I started my opening lecture by stating, "I have lousy eyesight; however I have been blessed with a very good brain and that is what you have come for. Take every opportunity to gain from the knowledge I have that will make your life easier. Do not be put off by me not being able to see you when you ask a question; it doesn't bother me, so don't let it bother you." It worked every time.

To me, lecturing was worth the difficulties I had to overcome. I was very proud of that chapter of my life and felt privileged to make a contribution toward moulding these young people for their careers. The way I saw it, there are many university lecturers; however, less than a handful are from my industry and are given the opportunity to lecture at a university level. It was most gratifying that for the entire fourteen years, student surveys gave me an eighty percent rating for performance. I interpreted that as fulfilling my goal to deliver quality information in a manner the students were able to understand. Ten years on, I still

received calls from former students asking my advice. It also demonstrated to me that regardless of a person's disability, they have a contribution to make and need to be free to make it, and live as close as possible to a normal life. In 1995 I retired from the position after fourteen years service. I was ready to move on to my next challenge.

My out-of-control desire to be active in the business and social world was keeping me extremely busy. My life was one full calendar. Between 1981 and 1984 I was Queensland President of the Institute of Plumbing Australia, Chairman of the By-Laws Committee, Federal Council Member for the Institute of Plumbing Australia, and member of the Curriculum Advisory Committee for the Diploma of Engineering - Construction Hydraulics. I was an advisor to Chris Bristow for the formation of the Australian Hydraulic Services Consultants Association, which included attending all the planning meetings, and I was an executive member of the Brisbane Development Association, also serving on the Brisbane River Committee and the Tourism Committee. This was all in addition to my part-time university lecturing commitments and running my business. I also served as President of Rostrum Public Speaking Club No 2 at the same time.

I think if I had been Keryn, I wouldn't have been happy with me. I do know she enjoyed the money rolling in from my long hours in the office. I paid off our home loan in less than six years, we had a beautiful car, the days of our furniture being hocked were behind us, and we had money to meet our monthly living expenses. I actually had cash in my pocket for the first time in my life, and within reason, if we saw something we wanted, we got it. We didn't have to stop and think if we could afford it.

Being born under the star sign of Capricorn, meant I was

more interested in success than money or getting rich. I just wanted the success and recognition. Even today, my life is about being successful. Everyone likes it when people admire their accomplishments; sports people and actors are good examples. Succeeding against the odds and doing the best we possibly can with what we have been given, is extremely satisfying. To a lesser extent, it is about accumulating material items that make us happy at the time. Money was only a by-product of success and a means to the pleasures I wanted in life, and purchasing the boat to hook onto my towbar was a classic example.

I would have been about eleven when I first heard my father talking about getting a speedboat, but he never delivered on his promise. I developed a desire to one day have my own boat. I was often riveted to the Fairlane television advertisements because a beautiful boat was being towed by the car. I had mentioned to Keryn on a number of occasions how much I wanted a similar boat; her answer was the same every time: “We can’t afford it.”

Our high-flying lifestyle in the eighties was not about affordability, it was about having what we wanted when we wanted it. Our parents had to cope with the tough times before and during the war years when there was a shortage of money in the economy. They had to wait for what they wanted. It was different for us; we obtained the pleasures of life more easily and didn’t like to wait. High finance was part of our lifestyle and people extended themselves beyond their limits all the time. I was confident we could manage the payments on a boat. Still Keryn’s answer was, “No!”

Late one Saturday afternoon, I noticed our neighbour was about to take an old boat to the dump. It was a plywood fourteen footer. Desperate for anything that floated, I arranged with him to dispose of the boat in our yard. Keryn

stood on the high veranda peering down at me. I may not have seen her clearly, but I did know trouble when I saw it. “No! No you don’t. That is not coming in this yard!” she yelled.

After a short domestic argument that neither of us won, I struggled up the short steep hill to our side yard, almost having a heart attack as I pushed the boat, with Keryn obviously hoping I couldn’t make it.

“Three weeks, just three weeks and then it goes to the rubbish tip. If it’s not working, it’s out of here!”

Time was of the essence. We had a deal and I intended to honour it: floating on the water, or to the dump, they were the only options. I set about patching up the holes and painting it sky blue with red trim. It looked great considering it was really a heap of junk. I noticed none of the family was keen to have it named after them.

The day arrived - the big launch. We decided it would be at Jacobs Well which was only a twenty minute drive from home. We launched the boat after placing our picnic items in it. It was time to set out on our first adventure, even though our three horsepower motor was about five times undersized. There was mother, father, little Adam and Rebecca. We lasted a full fifty metres from shore before water seeped through the bottom of the boat and we started slowly sinking. It was generally a complete disaster. I think Keryn was relieved that the boat had met its fate, although she was visibly disappointed for me because she knew I had tried. Still, “To the dump, to the dump,” she demanded.

Giving up was not what I wanted, not yet anyway. I had one week before the deal ran out and with a two week extension that Keryn granted me, I covered the entire boat with fibreglass and we tried again. On a beautiful Sunday

morning we headed to the Gold Coast to try our luck. I had just arrived back the day before from Cairns in north Queensland, where the company had a lot of work. My former workmates from the old Barclay Brothers days, David Bence and Graham Trembath, had taken me deep sea fishing to Arlington Reef, around twenty kilometres offshore. We caught four Spanish mackerel, ranging from one to one and a half metres in length, as well as a large catch of reef fish. On our way back to the boat harbour, I told them, "I only dream of days like this."

"Paul, we come out every week and we also dream of days like these. You got lucky," David told me.

We arrived at Labrador on the Gold Coast Broadwater and launched the newly waterproofed boat for the short trip to South Stradbroke Island and, of course, the big trial. For some reason we had to wait for boats to clear the ramp. It was a beautiful, crisp day and the sun flickered across the water like crystals. Passing boats left long white wakes from their motors churning the warm, subtropical water. While we waited, I spotted a boat about one hundred metres up the beach. I couldn't be sure, but it looked like an eighteen foot Coxcraft Rum Runner, which I wanted to check out, so I told Keryn I wouldn't be long.

Looking it over, I reflected on our heap of junk and I complimented the owner on his boat, which was obviously new. I explained they had been featured on a television documentary only a few weeks earlier.

"Would you mind telling me the approximate price? I'm interested in buying one."

"Sorry mate, I wouldn't have a clue. I won it in a raffle last week."

Feeling envious, and disgusted with my pathetic excuse for a boat, I returned to the family and gave Keryn an earful of my self pity. "I can't believe it. I work harder than most, I

run a successful business and I deserve to have a nice boat, yet I have to launch this heap of crap!” I must have talked for five minutes without stopping.

“Okay, okay. Go and get your damn boat, but..... if you get a boat, I want a new sewing machine,” she replied.

“It’s a deal.” This had to be the best deal I had ever made, an open cheque for a boat and all it cost me was an eight hundred dollar sewing machine! I accepted the deal before she changed her mind.

Two weeks later I was the proud owner of a seventeen foot Mustang half-cabin, with a ninety horsepower motor; perhaps the best investment we could have made. It got me out of the office on a regular basis and brought the family closer together. Keryn loved fishing, Rebecca and Adam enjoyed tobogganing and I liked to go out before dark, find myself a safe and protected location, then sleep while the boat gently rocked. The others on board spent most of the night fishing. Being protected from the elements was important: the winds could blow up to one hundred kilometres per hour, enough to damage the boat and threaten our lives.

Handling the boat was not as difficult as I first anticipated. My boat didn’t move as fast as a car, which gave me longer to focus. There is less traffic on the waterways than on the roads and boat owners observed the rules more closely than some vehicle owners. Also, boaties invested big in their craft and respected that others did the same. Of course I never moved the boat at night once the anchor was thrown, that was it until the light of day.

During one of our annual holidays, Keryn and I were fishing in Roslyn Bay off Great Keppel Island on the Capricorn Coast, near Yeppoon. The area is known as the forty acre paddock. Being midweek, there were only two other boats

in the area, which were a fair distance away. Keryn had just landed two nice Spanish mackerel around one and a half metres in length; they were her biggest catch ever. Fortunately we had left Rebecca and Adam on Great Keppel Island playing with their friends.

Without us realising, rough waters had been leaking through the motor gully where a rubber washer was missing. We soon knew we were in trouble. We discovered the battery was under water and the boat was starting to sink. We bailed water as fast as we could. Keryn tried signalling the closest boat, which was around four hundred metres away. With our battery out, we had lost radio contact, and valuable time passed as Keryn continued to try and get the attention of the occupants of the other boat. We decided to change positions; Keryn bailed and I signalled. It all seemed hopeless.

Eventually they spotted us and signalled that they were on their way. They didn't seem to grasp the urgency of our situation. Keryn and I saw it very differently. We thought the end was near and that one of my biggest fears was about to be realised: the sharks were going to have a good feed at my expense. Keryn started yelling, and asking who would look after the children. She was also worried about our last will and testament. I had returned to bailing, and in the commotion, I accidentally sent one of her prize fish overboard. I was not popular; the sharks feeding on me now looked a reasonable alternative to the verbal lashing I was receiving. In a situation where we were at risk of losing our lives, and at a time when we should have been talking about how much we loved each other, the damned overboard fish became the issue.

The gunwales at the rear of the boat were now under water; only the top part of the cabin was above the waterline when

help arrived. For a moment I thought they were going to ask for a cup of coffee before they started the rescue mission. The skipper apologised for their delay, explaining it was because they had to land a fish. We finally convinced them the situation was urgent. The wind was blowing harder and the water was even choppier, so fixing a line between the boats was a difficult task. It took several attempts, but we did it. The theory was that the water would self-drain through the drain holes as they towed us. I had to lean over the back of the boat and temporarily remove the plugs as we were moving. It worked: we soon had it under control and were able to replace the plugs, dry the battery and start the motor, then make our way back to the safety of the protected waters.

We were shaken and a little sorry for the experience, but as the old saying goes, 'All's well that ends well', and this was one of those occasions. Keryn quickly forgot the close call and the praying we had done, she was annoyed at me for tossing her fish overboard. Keryn was right about one thing, she was not going to get another chance to hook another fish that big. I was staying closer to land.

Holidays were great, but after an extended period out of my office I was glad to return to work. I liked working on the larger projects. The multi-storey office blocks, five star resorts, commercial and industrial buildings; they all gave me a buzz. I enjoyed being a decision maker and I was determined to be the best I possibly could. Friends told me if I continued to work hard I would have a heart attack. Well, that was a price I was prepared to pay. I just loved my work and appreciated that I was healthy enough to carry it out. I wanted to achieve success to the point that I would have died for my dream.

For a number of years, I was a member of the Brisbane

Development Association and served on the Brisbane River Committee. Our main aim was to come up with ideas for the beautification of the river and associated open spaces adjoining the river. Many of the suggestions the committee made were implemented, and people are today enjoying the outcomes. Due to committees that followed, Brisbane is now known as the River City. It also presented an opportunity for me to meet other professionals in a networking capacity. I befriended leading solicitors, accountants, engineers and architects, all from large companies with influential clients who were potential clients for our company.

There was an underlying motive for me; like many people with a disability, I felt a need to prove I could be involved in normal activities. In retrospect, I am sure I over-compensated, and was involved in too many. I have observed this in sports people with disabilities, who seem to have something to prove to the world. Then there is the person who's always trying to break some sort of record, often for something which is seemingly impossible.

Another committee I was privileged to serve on was the Tourism Committee. Their unofficial slogan was, 'Getting bums in beds', the idea being to attract more tourists to Brisbane who would stay in hotels and spend lots of money, thus adding to the growth of the city. I came up with a simple idea which would hopefully allow local residents to see more of their own city at an affordable cost.

Up to 1983, it was against the law to take a bike on government trains. I presented a proposal to the committee to reverse this, which in turn took it to the Minister for Transport, the Honourable David Hamill. Late one Saturday afternoon, I had been swimming at the Spring Hill public pool, when my attention was drawn to a young

teenager who was mounting his bike. I asked how far he was riding and was shocked to learn he had to ride to Darra, an outer south-western suburb twenty kilometres away. The Spring Hill complex had a large diving tower, which suburban pools didn't, and the kids came there from all over Brisbane. What disturbed me most, was the thought of the busy motorway he had to ride along to get home. One slip, or a driver of a motor vehicle who didn't see him, and it would be, 'Goodbye, kiddo.' Fortunately, the city bikeways have since been extended and the same problem doesn't exist today.

Over the coming weeks, I thought of other benefits. Brisbane had many scenic bikeways along the riverbanks that were not connected to the outer suburbs. However, they were almost impossible for residents to access unless they were inner city dwellers. Also, if a person could take their bike by train to the bay side suburb of Cleveland, which is situated on the southern end of Moreton Bay, and then catch the ferry for the short trip to North Stradbroke Island, this would open up a whole new world for the cyclist. There are many places to visit once on the island. Point Lookout is a great ride, and there are countless lagoons and scenic tracks for mountain bike riders.

I proposed that the public be allowed to take their bikes on trains from 6.00pm Friday evenings to midnight, Sunday. The government liked the idea and passed the relevant legislation. They even went one step further, allowing bikes to be taken on trains weekdays as well, with only limited restrictions during peak hours.

A turning point in my engineering profession came at a Brisbane Development Association lunch. Peter Harvey, from the leading architectural firm, Peddle Thorpe Group asked me if I had designed the building services for a four

hundred room hotel. I told him I was not aware of any hotels of that size in Queensland. He was referring to the new Jupiter's Casino project, which was planned for the Gold Coast. I took a hint from his comments and became involved with tourism-style projects, holiday resorts and hotel developments. Queensland was at the start of a major tourism boom. The foresight paid off for our company.

For the next twenty years I predominantly specialised in the design of high-rise tourist hotels in Cairns, and low-rise island resorts. The jewel in the crown came for me in December, 1982. I had worked very long hours that week to complete the design on stage one of John Paul College, which is a private school in Logan City. Also, I was required to complete the design of a high-rise home unit development for the Pradella Group. Ironically, it was to be constructed on the same block of land in Spring Hill where I stood contemplating my future ten years earlier.

When lodging building plans for approval, it was critical to submit them before the Christmas break, rather than waiting until January, in which case they could take until late February to be approved. The project would then be placed at risk with the loss of valuable construction time due to the wet season. Builders like to have the concrete foundations completed before the big wet sets in. To achieve this, I had worked fifty hours between Monday and Wednesday, then a further thirty-six hours straight without a break, starting on the Thursday morning.

By 3.00pm Friday, I was totally exhausted. Chris approached me and asked if I would visit an engineer in Toowong, where there was a project to discuss and a set of plans to be collected. I strongly objected and told him to do it himself, but I lost the argument. I used it as a good excuse to head home early.

My adrenaline kicked in and helped me through the meeting. It turned out the project was the redevelopment of Hayman Island, a prestigious resort in the Whitsunday group of islands. The island was originally owned by the late Sir Reginald Ansett, founder of Ansett Airlines. Rupert Murdoch had assumed ownership at the time of our involvement and was investing tens of millions of dollars. Many design engineers work their entire life and never experience projects of this magnitude. A family friend, who was also a competitor of mine, commented, "We never get asked to do jobs like that!" He was right, and I wasn't telling him my secret. I must admit, I did feel privileged.

Richard Stone, the manager of the engineering company, explained the project and the services we were to design. He told me his company had been allocated six thousand dollars for the professional fees to design all the services. He then asked if I would be happy to split the fee fifty-fifty. I think I would have paid him for the privilege to work on such a project!

Our three thousand dollar share escalated to a five year commission, grossing my company over six hundred and fifty thousand dollars in fees. During construction I made around ninety trips to the island. Each trip resulted in the most unbelievable day anyone could imagine. A typical site inspection consisted of my arrival at Brisbane Airport in the private jet departure lounge by 7.00am on a Thursday. The plane was a slick Cessna Citation Jet, which did a round trip from Sydney every week. We enjoyed hot coffee and eats on board. The jet landed on Hamilton Island at 8.30am and we then made our way to the boat harbour jetty two hundred metres away. The Sun Goddess, a thirty-five metre luxury cruiser, whisked us across the sparkling smooth Whitsunday Passage for the forty-five minute journey to Hayman Island.

The resort drips in luxury; an exclusive hideaway in a tropical paradise for the rich and famous. It is heavily landscaped and resembles a tropical rainforest. The resort has a huge swimming pool for guests to lounge around and enjoy their fancy drinks. There is one attendant to every two guests. The five star restaurants and two hundred plus rooms are serviced by a commercial kitchen, which was a major part of our design commission and is by far the biggest I have been involved with. It had a floor area of around fifteen hundred square metres, and in 1986 the cooking equipment was valued at two million dollars. Service tunnels run underground from the kitchen to the apartment buildings. It was indeed a fascinating and exciting project.

After a day of inspecting pipe installations and attending planning meetings, the return trip across the passage was even better than the morning adventure. The luxury cruiser headed south to Hamilton Island. To the west we watched a beautiful sunset; the various shades of pink, orange and blue in the sky was fortunately something my eyes were able to detect. Of course I don't have a clue what others saw, but to me it was a beautiful sight. To the east were large expansive waterways between the islands, creating a passage to the outer Barrier Reef. The charter boats were making their way back from the forty kilometre trip, where divers enjoyed crystal clear waters and viewed beautiful coral and other colourful marine life.

I loved being out on the water; it was where I felt most at peace, watching the bright light created by the rays of sunlight flickering across the wavelets. I never tired of watching the wake from the large powerful twin diesel motors as it stretched as far as my eyes could see. I often wondered, 'Could this be what heaven is like?' I would sit on the back deck reflecting on my life; it was difficult not to feel

a sense of achievement and that I had actually made it.

As always, I snapped out of my private world of reverie and before long we had made our way to the jet and were thundering into the dark sky, returning to reality and leaving behind the holiday-makers who had paid for the privilege to enjoy their time in paradise.

Moving around construction sites, and even the walk from my office to a building site through the city, was difficult. I adopted my own methods of coping in the many awkward situations in which I found myself. I avoided going too far onto a construction site, preferring to work out solutions for on-site installation problems in the site shed, using the building plans.

Walking through city streets, busy airports and shopping centres provided its challenges. I learnt to walk behind people with light coloured clothing, particularly someone moving at a pace similar to my own. If they slowed or I needed to speed up I found another person and at an opportune time I moved on, settling in behind the next lead. I came to realise that walking too slowly was difficult; people walked at angles, cutting me off and often tripped me. By walking faster I was doing the passing and could control the situation. This practice also had to be revised as my eyesight continued to fade. Walking slower became necessary to avoid obstacles that I obviously didn't see. It was easy to become disoriented and sometimes I was not able to work out where I was. This was not easy for a thirty-three year old businessman who wanted to soar with the eagles.

On many occasions there are awkward incidents and people become upset with me. It is very difficult to communicate to them what is actually happening. Sometimes their

attitude is downright hurtful. When I walk into shops, the attendants often assume I am drunk or I am there to steal their merchandise. There is no escaping the fact, it does hurt my feelings. These days on entering a shop, I walk directly to the attendant and openly explain, "I want to have a look around. I have lousy eyes and move slowly. I am not drunk and I don't want to steal anything." It never fails; I even get special attention.

It's worse when a friend or relative treats me like a fool. Why do people think a person's eyes affect their brain? I felt so ashamed when Keryn constantly labelled me a pervert in shopping centres. I would walk slowly through a busy area of the complex, and of course there were always plenty of young ladies with children in prams and by their sides. I found I had to focus to see them. The last thing I wanted was to trip over or bump into a small child with my 110kg body. I had to anticipate their every move and be prepared for the unexpected. I was ready for a child or a mother to change direction, thus cutting off my path. Keryn was convinced I was staring at the ladies. I still get a sick feeling in my belly as I reflect on those times. To be labelled a dirty old man is one of the biggest insults I could receive. Damn it, I get so angry as I think about it!

What is it about vision-impaired people that some fully sighted people don't understand? Can it be that they are unable to imagine what is happening? Possibly that is it. The time it takes for me to focus and work out what I am looking at, and what my response is, appears to most people as if I am staring. It would be nice if people could realise that some of us just don't see our surroundings in the same way as they see them.

Over the years I have had my share of accidents. I once fell from a stool and crashed head first through a plate glass

door. I must have been six at the time. I am now in my fifties and little has changed. On two separate occasions I injured myself when the phone rang at work; the first time I ran directly into the corner of a wall, splitting my head a beauty, and the second time I bashed the entire right side of my body against a wall and seriously hurt myself.

Another time I was riding my bike along the Brisbane River bikeway; despite my limited eyesight I pedalled the bike as fast as I could. My sixth sense told me to stop. Why? I don't know, but I jammed on the brakes. I sat for a minute orientating myself and my eyes started to focus. Less than three metres in front was a solid brick wall, and the river was just two metres to my right. I had missed a bend in the path and came very close to a wipe-out that morning. During my next outing, I cut my leg open on a guide post. That was the end for me; needless to say, I never rode a pushbike again.

Crossing roads has always been the most difficult task of all. I am never sure if the road is clear or if a vehicle is coming towards me and I have missed seeing it. One night I ran across a road in a shopping centre car park with Adam holding my hand. In the dark I tripped on the centre island and found myself lying on my side staring up at a set of bright headlights. When most people cross the road, they look to the right, then the left, to the right again and cross the road, knowing the way is clear. I also go through the process, but I cross the road hoping there is nothing coming, and waiting for the thud.

Mum and Dad were always finding an excuse to justify a journey north to spend time with their grandchildren. They particularly liked to escape the cold winter months in Camden in order to enjoy the tropical sunshine. I could not forgive my father for his treatment of me, but I still

welcomed him into our home whenever he arrived. I came to realise he didn't know he had done anything wrong; it was how children were raised during the war years and no doubt he was treating me the same way he was treated by his own father. I looked forward to their arrival with an air of anticipation. Even today, I feel the pain of longing for the deep love and affection I so badly wanted from my father and didn't receive.

During one of his trips he did visit my office and was impressed with what he saw. The drafting machines lined the room, forming a small corridor that he walked along while taking it all in. Computerised drafting was very new and it would be another decade before our company considered the technology. The large 'A1' plan printer fascinated him. He stood for about thirty minutes watching the plans rolling out. He sat at my executive desk, in my executive chair, and no doubt had an executive fantasy. I reminded him of his warning that if I didn't study, I would be digging ditches. "No ditches around here," I told him. That day, my father told me how proud he was of me. I knew he didn't understand it all, but he did express his admiration and that was good enough for me.

The winter of 1983 was not to be any different. Only two years into Dad's retirement, he and Mum were to make their trip north. The plan was for them to leave Camden for the drive up the Pacific Highway to Brisbane following the wedding of my sister, Bronwyn and Peter Crook. For reasons best known to Dad and Dad alone, he entered Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney for a routine hernia operation. This was against the specialist's advice, due to the fact he was overweight. I wonder what he knew that he hadn't told us. Dad visited his older brother Victor and asked him to stand in for him at the wedding, should he not come out of hospital.

The phone call no one wants to receive came in my office on Saturday afternoon, May 28, 1983. It was my younger brother Peter, who suggested I should fly to Sydney as soon as possible, Dad was not expected to make it through the night. The hospital staff were wonderful; the nurses took it in turns to give him all the care possible, and there was always one by his side day and night. Word came through to Mum that he was improving; then she heard he was not. Members of his church visited and assured us of their prayers for him. By Sunday evening I was convinced he was over the worst and was improving, so I flew home to Brisbane, looking forward to their trip north sometime soon. He was still with us, and that was comforting. How wrong I was! At 3.00am Monday May 30, 1983, my father, Kenneth Selwyn Funnell, aged sixty two, lost his battle for life and died of septicemia.

Three weeks later, Dad's passing hit me, and when it did it was like walking into a brick wall. The father I really did love and care about was gone, and now I have only memories. Sadly, that is life, and we have to move on, no matter how difficult it is. It goes to show we must make the most of every day with the people and life we have.

Dad's passing must have been particularly difficult for Bronwyn, not to have her father give her away at her wedding. I know it was one thing I looked forward to with my own daughter, Rebecca; the walk down the aisle is something every father dreams of. I am sure Dad left many unanswered questions for each member of our family. Did he ever tell Ruth she had been adopted, and relate the wonderful circumstances surrounding that event? We had been sworn to secrecy and were never to talk about her adoption, which was easy, because Ruth was always one of us and we never saw her any other way. Did Dad ever sincerely apologise to our mother and ask forgiveness

for the miserable way he treated her? I doubt it, but I still wonder.

I am unable to recall a time when I was in Ruth's presence without wondering what she knew about her circumstances. In June, 1984, I was visiting Mum at her home in South Camden. She had sold the large family home in Broughton Street, beside St John's Church, and moved closer to my sister, Beth, where the grandchildren could visit on a daily basis.

This particular afternoon, Ruth approached me and asked, "Did you hear what happened to me?"

"Please tell me."

Ruth would have been thirty-five, and was a nutritionist at the Camden District Hospital.

The previous Tuesday, she had been checking on Mum, as she did most afternoons. During her conversation, she said, "Mum, guess what that silly old Mrs Rofe said to me today? She's going off her head."

"Don't take any notice of her, she's a busybody," Mum told her.

Not placing any importance on the conversation, Ruth continued to dust the lounge room where Mum was sitting. "She said to me, you are the adopted one, aren't you? I told her not to be silly and mind her own business, but the old girl wouldn't let up. She repeated it three times and got me upset."

Mum's deathly silence caught Ruth's attention. She tossed the cleaning cloth on a chair, she spun around and saw tears streaming down Mum's face.

Close to hysterical, Ruth screamed, "Mum! Mum! ... Mum, is there something you need to tell me?"

By the end of Mum's sad recounting of her version of events, Ruth saw only the love that she had experienced and made it clear that Mum was the only mother she wanted.

I wondered what the hell went through our father's mind and how he justified withholding things that clearly affected other people's lives. Why would he not be proud of taking a young baby and giving the child a life she would not otherwise have had? I know I was proud that she was my sister.

Rebecca and Adam were important to me and I spent as much time as I could with them, although I suspect they may tell a very different story. From their point of view the time was possibly nowhere near enough. I was busy in my role as a mover and shaker and I had a high energy level that was difficult for others to match. My thirties and early forties were my most enthusiastic and productive years. During my teens I learnt that it is not just what you know, but who you know, that counts. I made sure I was well connected in the building and construction industry, and as it turned out, I became more informed than most. In fact, I often became the source of reliable information for construction project managers and consultants.

Yes, I wanted to soar with the eagles, but so often I found myself scratching around with the turkeys. Staff continually let me down when I had committed to delivery schedules. Project managers and architects gave us work based on past performance, but so often I found staff not arriving for work on time and giving excuses that I had never heard of.

My desire to be an active sportsperson seemed to have disappeared. My dream to one day win a sporting trophy would remain just a dream, without any possibility of eventuating. I spent a large proportion of my life in the office. It was the one place I felt safe and was less likely to hurt myself, although that was not guaranteed. My bad eating habits and lack of exercise meant I stacked on weight. Driving a powerboat was hardly exercise. I blew

out to 120kg, and justified to myself why it was okay. I blew out even further to 130kg, and justified that it was also okay. I was desperate to find an interest outside work and tried photography, which I did enjoy. It started me walking and gave me some exercise. On occasions, I had to get into difficult positions to capture the required image. It was difficult looking through the viewfinder on a 35mm camera; lining up the subject was a challenge, and focusing the lens was an even greater challenge. I imagine my ability to find strategies to help me overcome difficult situations led people to believe I didn't have a sight problem.

I enjoyed my time as a photographer, but eventually my eyesight faded to the point that it became impossible; however, not before I captured some very good photos. Sunsets and sunrises were my favourites. In 2001, I received six out of ten in an international photo competition, which was held at the Sydney Royal Easter Show.

Black and white developing was impossible for me, even though I invested a small fortune trying. The darkroom was a waste of time with eyes like mine. I did wonder what I had to do to find a hobby or sport in which I could excel, and take more than just an interest and maybe even win that trophy to place on my shelf. The more I tried, the more I experienced setbacks and disappointment.

Work was the only thing I could do without much difficulty. I poured my energy into working long hours, attending meetings, more work and more meetings. There had to be more to life than this. My marriage was in a steep decline. Keryn and I were talking about separation and the consequences if such action eventuated. Keryn was clear; she would clean me out and make sure I had nothing. It sounded like it would be one big mess to me, so I hung in.

I didn't even take the time to do anything about fixing our marriage. I am sure there is plenty I could have done, but for reasons I am no longer sure of, I did nothing.

Communication is everything to me; if there is a problem it has to be talked about and a solution found. There were never any discussions in our family, so I gave up easily. It is my opinion that in marriage break-ups, we are more concerned about the concessions the other person is unwilling to give, where in fact we should be focusing on our own contribution to fix the problems. At the same time I must have been losing the respect of my children and didn't realise it; had I known, I would have done things differently.

I was guilty of falling into the trap, which many young, aspiring business people wanting to reach great heights fall into, I was focused on my achievements to the exclusion of everything else. I was blind to the needs of those around me and I did not pay sufficient attention to the decline of the things in my life that really mattered.

It was obvious my eyesight was gradually fading, yet I held the opinion that I would never totally lose it and that I would always enjoy some level of sight, albeit slight. I loved my car and I enjoyed driving it. The last thing I wanted was anyone telling me it was over. The fact was, I should have been turning in my driver's licence, but I ignored the signs and kept driving, hoping for the best. My best was almost not good enough.

This particular morning it was 4.00am and pitch dark - for me all dark is black, and therefore the degree of darkness is irrelevant. I was driving to my Spring Hill office, heading north on the South-East Freeway. I was off on another planet, listening to the music playing through the eight

speaker stereo sound system, and travelling at one hundred and twenty kilometres per hour without realising it. A sense of reality was not present that morning as I entered the eighty zone, still proceeding at my relaxed speed, when suddenly a policeman who had been standing on the road, jumped out of the path of my car, tossing his stop sign to one side. I went so close to cleaning him up, it scared the hell out of me. He had obviously stepped onto the road to signal me to stop and pull over for speeding. He was a lucky man, having come very close to losing his life.

It may seem hard to believe, but after almost killing this poor policeman, who was only doing his job, I actually talked him out of taking any action. I achieved this by admitting I was in the wrong and that I was grateful to him for pointing out my mistake. He didn't know the real reason why I couldn't see him. I was only too aware, and was forced to reflect on my life with the possibility of the added burden of hurting, or even killing, another person. It should have been an easy decision to stop driving, yet it was not. I wanted a normal life, and I thought it would mean admitting I was not a complete person, or that I was weak. Stupid as it sounds, it is part of the process for people who have to come to grips with situations similar to my own.

Reading was not my forte. I have read only four books cover to cover in my entire life. Needless to say, 'Think and Grow Rich' by Napoleon Hill was one. Another that had a lasting impact on my life and achievements was 'Jonathan Livingston Seagull' by Richard Bach. It inspired me to realise that life only has the limitations that we place on ourselves. Even now, I find it difficult to allow my eyes to limit me from what I want to achieve in life. Rather, I see that my Creator has made me the way I am to guide me down a particular path. What would be the outcome if I took a wrong turn, or through laziness I didn't achieve as

much in life as I was meant to?

No matter how much I want to believe there are no limitations in my life, the fact remains there are daily reminders that I have restrictions over which I have no control. Still I dare to dream my dreams and forge ahead to make them come true.

Perhaps my disability was there to keep me humble or to compel me to over-perform. My mother's theory that I was on earth to do something special never left me, even though at that time my special destiny had not been revealed and I doubted that it would ever happen.

In late 1984, I thought my partnership with Chris was going well. We were highly respected and the most envied hydraulic services consulting business in Queensland. Our main competitor referred to as 'King of the North'. This was because of the major projects we were commissioned for in North Queensland. The only thing I had difficulty accepting was that Chris's wife, Margaret, continued to work in the business. I hoped she may have retired and left Chris and me to run it. I liked Margaret; she is a lovely lady with a kind and caring nature. I did, prefer it when Chris and I made the business decisions. Margaret controlled the administration and finances. I had a certificate in Business Management and had completed courses in accounting, as well as financial management. I was of the opinion that I had a major contribution to make towards the growth and profitability of the company. Instead, I was often left out of the process. Chris and I had meetings, but most decisions were left until after he had discussed the issues with Margaret. Eventually I let it get to me. I shouldn't have, but I did.

One afternoon I walked into Chris's office and laid down the

law, explaining how things needed to change and that if we didn't address the matter it could force us to part company. We agreed to leave the topic on the agenda for our next meeting the following week. Exactly one week later, Chris arrived in my office and picked up the conversation as if it were the same day. I was dumbfounded by his opening statement. "I have decided to take you up on your offer for us to part company and go our separate ways." Speechless! I was absolutely speechless! I didn't remember making an offer anything like that; only that it might be an outcome if we didn't talk things over. I felt there was plenty of room for discussion. Realising I had cornered myself, I had no choice but to agree; I didn't want him to see my devastation. I took his decision to be final. It was all over, and a voice in my head was singing, 'Fool! Fool! Fool!'

The split was the most professional and amicable parting anyone could have wished for. We had sufficient equipment for each of us to set up a business. We parted with sixty thousand dollars each in cash. Not bad for four years, considering we paid off all the company debt, including our taxes, and we both owned our prestige cars.

Twenty years later, Chris admitted to me we were foolish to have parted and should have worked it out. In business, partners often don't pay enough attention to the compatibility in their private lives and place too much emphasis on their careers. We tend to focus on the expertise each brings to the company. Chris and I had a major difference: I wanted to grow the company into a large corporation, and he wanted it to remain a small business.

Things were now very different for this entrepreneur.

Could this be the end of my reign? Or was it just the next step on the ladder?

