

CHAPTER 7

(1989 – 1995)

My Fight Back

Memories and precise dates for this period of my life have long since faded. Only the positive aspects of day-to-day living, in a life that at one time seemed doomed, now dominated my thoughts. The exact sequence of events for my fight back holds little significance; it happened and that is all that matters.

The end of the eighties was a tough period for me and I was determined to rebuild my life. I recall little happiness, although I am sure there would have been some good times. There were days when death looked like a good alternative. I just wanted to ease the pain from the daily bombardment of legal documents that were served on behalf of my former wife.

Then like a crashing blow, and totally unexpected my former business partner had me arrested and charged with assault; another distraction placed before me, possibly my character needed to be tested again. Well, I didn't take the action lightly. The embarrassment of being placed in the back of a detective's car and later fingerprinted like a common criminal was a new experience and one I have no desire to repeat. I allegedly hit him in the head during a short encounter the day after he locked me out of the office. I do recall him blocking my path to my work desk that morning and pushing me away from him. It is more than possible in the scuffle something like he claimed could have happened. Regardless, this type of action was petty and unnecessary. In court, the judge told him as much. I was found guilty and given a suspended fine, provided I was a good boy for six months. I chalked the incident up to one of life's experiences. Still, it did drain my energy at the time.

During these turbulent times I was immensely grateful for the support I received from Garry, who was always there to help me, which was typical of his good nature and outlook on life. He never passed judgment, never questioned my actions and he was only too willing to do whatever it took to make sure I was okay. He would have gladly taken the shirt off his back to make my life more comfortable.

Maria was a stabilizing influence in my life. She had compassion and understanding for my difficulties and always wanted to learn more about my eyes in the hope she could find a way to make my life easier. In her pursuit of resources to help me to maintain my freedom, she approached the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, which had an office not far from my own.

Maria was quick to arrange a meeting and deliver me to the door. It was a most valuable morning and a reality check

for me. There was no mucking around; I was delivered the sledgehammer blow right up front.

After the formalities, the consultant told me, “According to our extensive experience and all the research available, you will be totally blind by age fifty.” He then set about trying to soften the blow with a heap of positive comments - unsuccessfully, I might add.

“... Although we are not the experts and can only go by the accounts of others we help.”

‘A bit late to tell me that,’ I thought. My analytical mind started to compute; I could not stop it, it was like a computer chip processing the next ten years of my life - not long at all!

No one needed to tell me my life had to change if I were to earn a living and enjoy a good quality of life after the lights went out. There was no escaping the reality; all my ducking and weaving had just come to an end. The raw fact was I had just ten years Shit!

The consultant set me a practical exercise and I was determined to demonstrate that I could cope and that I was not like other vision-impaired people. I never realised it was me who was about to be enlightened. The reality of my situation was brought to the forefront of my mind. The problem was, I still didn’t want to deal with it. My lack of sight was a disruption, not something I wanted to admit made me different from fully sighted people. As far as I was concerned, the consultant was setting me up for a white cane. He handed me a list of instructions and told me to set off on a two hour walk around the city, following each instruction carefully. He would follow me and make sure I was okay. Later he was to provide an assessment and some tips on how to cope better.

Despite the long winding ramp, exiting the building turned out to be the easy part. My first mistake came quickly when I crossed the busy road without waiting for the walk sign to appear on the traffic signal. The second mistake came about twenty minutes later. In Brisbane there is a big set of stairs leading from Edward Street to Wickham Terrace, called ‘Jacob’s Stairs’, and they are long and steep. Needless to say, I failed by taking two steps at a time, which increased the likelihood of having an accident.

The next task took me through the Queen Street Mall, a place I try to avoid, there were hundreds of people walking in all directions. I entered the large Myer shopping complex. The instructions directed me to purchase food from a small takeaway shop. Sounds simple? Well it’s not. It must be difficult for fully sighted people to appreciate what people like me have to go through. The food hall was crowded, the light was reasonable, but not good for my requirements, and people moved around quickly, cutting the path of each other with perfect precision, just missing and never bumping one other. They all had a purpose; get a feed and back to work, whereas mine was to survive the frightening ordeal.

Everything was confusing. I couldn’t find the end of the queue, so I stood watching what others did, and after working it out I gamely moved and waited for my turn to be served. I tried keeping my eyes on the staff, trying to work out which one would serve me. Questions and answers were flew between the staff and customers.

“Salt and pepper?”

“White bread or brown?”

It was impossible to know if someone was addressing me, or someone near me. My head swayed from side to side like an electric fan on a hot summer day, trying to pick up the sequence of events. It would have been easier to go without

than be subjected to this turmoil. Eventually I did get my food, then walked away, sat on a nearby seat and tried to stay calm. All I wanted to do was scream out, “Stuff you all!”

The entire experience of entering a shop and being served is so distressing, I avoid it whenever I can. On business trips I have even gone without food for up to two days, rather than experience such difficulties.

The instructions wound me through the city, testing my ability to cope with different situations. I was relieved to arrive back to the safety of the Guide Dogs office. Generally, I failed the exercise; not that it was put that way to me. I was given many helpful hints on how to cope better, then told that I would soon need a white cane to help me get around. This was devastating; a white cane didn't fit the businessman profile I had carved out for myself over the years.

The most helpful hint I received, and have since perfected, is to scan everything; each step I take I scan the surroundings. Fully sighted people, as I understand, are able to look straight ahead and still see each side of them. I quickly learnt the art of scanning from side to side and up and down; often it may not be noticeable to those around me. I can enjoy viewing art, photos and displays to a small extent by applying this tactic. Of course it is much easier with a guide to explain and describe what I am looking at. During later conversations I realise I miss a hell of a lot when asked what I thought of a particular aspect of the subject. My recollection is often very different from that of others. A night at the theatre or live show is even more interesting. I think I must miss much more than I see. Who cares? This is possibly why I prefer musicals anyway.

My life was becoming more positive; even with the daily

struggles, I was not perturbed. I always knew there would be difficulties, and that I would need to overcome the negative forces which tried to pull me down. Adam wanted to visit me every second weekend, and the excuses his mother found to stop these visits forged a wedge between them. I guess she thought she was punishing me. Although I wanted to spend more time with Adam, Keryn was providing me with the free time I needed to earn additional income.

Even Adam had his limits and finally cracked. He arrived at my office one morning, holding back tears. Reluctantly he confessed he couldn't take any more of his mother's vindictiveness and wanted to live with me. I knew it was time to act, and act swiftly we did. That afternoon we found a townhouse which was close to his school, and the following day I gave notice to terminate my lease on the one bedroom dump I lived in at Yeronga. The following week we both moved into the townhouse, and rekindled our relationship, which more closely resembled a friendship between good mates, than between a father and son. Together we discussed his school subjects and each evening spent time studying together. It worked really well and I was glad to be making a contribution to his future. My life had a renewed purpose.

The time of me acting like a loser, waking each morning praying for a heart attack, and the constant struggles, were gradually being left behind. Adam was a positive influence in my life and I knew my contribution to his future was what he needed. I always wished my father had been better equipped to guide me when I was fourteen. I was no longer alone and I seemed to be able to handle my problems much better. Adam successfully completed high school in 1989 and we relocated to Spring Hill to be nearer to my office. The reality was I still had financial problems that had to be

resolved. They were so bad, that one afternoon when Adam took a fifty dollar cheque to the bank manager, he refused to cash it, saying there were insufficient cleared funds. Adam held his ground and stood debating the situation, explaining his dad needed the fifty dollars to buy food, but it made little difference. Adam had just learnt a tough lesson.

I was determined to shake the monkey off my back. Friday December 1, 1989, was one date I'll never forget - it was as hot as hell; we had completed a very busy week and were clearing the benches, ready to enjoy our weekend. The Gold Coast beaches were calling, but were not within my budget at that time. Instead, a quiet weekend lay ahead for me. Michelle, who was my only employee, sensed my troubled thoughts. My body language must have been easy to read. She approached me in a hesitant and apologetic manner. "Paul, you can't pay me, can you?"

Her question stopped me in my tracks, and I froze for a moment, gathering my thoughts.

"No ... no I can't."

Maturity beyond her nineteen years emerged.

"That's okay. You pay me when you can. I've been posting out the accounts and I know you will have the money soon."

What happened next will remain with me for all time; it turned my life around. She reached into her pocket, pulled out one hundred dollars and said, "Take this and make sure you don't go without."

I was overwhelmed and choked with emotion.

"Thank you, Michelle, thank you."

That gesture made me question my existence. How low did I need to go before I was fair dinkum about implementing serious reforms? Michelle closed the office and we headed home. She had to battle the public transport system while I enjoyed my short walk.

I tossed and turned through another troublesome night, which had become the norm for me. That night I knew I had to do something to get my life in order. I wanted to be financially secure; instead I had let my life deteriorate to the point where a staff member had to bail me out. Shame on me! But what was I going to do?

The next morning I jumped out of bed, looked in the mirror and saw a winner. It was the new me. Winner! Winner! Winner! It was written all over my face. I showered, shaved and scoffed my breakfast down. I knew this was going to be a significant day, but I had no idea that the biggest transformation in my entire life had already started to take place.

On this beautiful sunny morning at 6.00am, I was locking the front door when I recalled an interview I recently watched on television that made me pause and think. I stood reflecting on the great American golfer, Lee Trevino, explaining his winning attitude. His experience happened during a PGA Championship a few years earlier. He led the field by four strokes going into the final round. At the thirteenth hole, with only five holes to play, he had dropped to two shots behind the new leader. He went on to explain how he took control of the situation. Knowing he could do nothing about the first thirteen holes which were now behind him, he could however, make a difference to the outcome for the last five holes. History recorded that in August, 1984, the 66th PGA Championship was won by Lee Trevino.

I decided to adopt a similar approach. There was nothing I could do about the past, but I could influence the outcome of my future. I always remained consistent in my belief that my Maker was guiding my every step, and the past few years were part of His master plan for me. They were

essentially a stepping stone to what lay ahead. I decided to make it a lockup day and not leave my office without a resolution for my future direction. Tough talk! ... Yes, it was not going to be easy, but it had to happen. I couldn't continue this way if I wanted to accomplish whatever it was I was supposed to accomplish, although this had still not been revealed.

Sitting at my design bench sipping coffee, the first of my great ideas didn't take long to surface. I would give up working for a living, collect social security and enjoy a quiet life. After all, it would make life easier considering my disability. I wrote the idea on paper and thought about it ... 'What the hell sort of idea is this?' I was only forty years of age. Giving up was not what I wanted. I took the paper, screwed it up, and tossed it halfway across the room. It found the waste paper bin, which was where that idea belonged.

Such a plan wouldn't provide me with the luxuries of life I once had and hoped to attain again. This type of future would thwart my dreams to achieve success and my desire to make a contribution to the building and construction industry, which I believed was my duty. It wasn't my sharp eyesight that helped find the waste paper bin that morning; it had to be a sign. The idea was never retrieved; it was not a real option for me.

The second idea came within the hour; it was more out of frustration than from good management. I could give up my business and work for an established engineering company. I had recently received two attractive offers. Again I wrote the idea neatly on paper - that's what should happen with good ideas, except this was a stupid idea.

This is the time smokers usually leave the room and fag

their heads off while thinking over their problems, except being a non-smoker, I didn't have this luxury. This idea found the waste-paper bin along with the last. My inner voice screamed at me, 'Fool! Fool! Fool! Why are you cheating yourself?' I had decided on the person I wanted to be, and now wasn't the time to settle for less.

I was obsessed with being the leader I had become and the decision maker I had dreamed of. I wanted to be responsible for my own destiny regardless of any limitations my eyes may place on me. I wanted to be ready when my special calling arrived. Working for another company couldn't provide the same opportunities and would restrict my flexibility. To me, independence in business was a tonic; I needed to achieve my goals for my own self-satisfaction. Possibly it was also to prove that I was able to live a normal life. Now, I did need a break! A long slow walk through the city streets was in order.

The next few hours passed with little consciousness of time or place. I am vague regarding exactly where I walked and what I did. I do remember wandering through the inner city, passing high-rise buildings and new construction sites with tall cranes towering overhead. I recalled my desire of nearly two decades earlier; that Brisbane was the city I wanted to grow with, to be part of. Over those years I had been the plumbing design engineer for many of the large buildings, restaurants, shopping arcades and well known businesses belonging to the cream of the business world.

Many large buildings had my stamp on them; from the concept design to the reality of the completed structure, I had influenced some aspect of the construction that many thousands of people were now enjoying. Over the years I had never taken the time to stop and appreciate that I had in fact achieved my most desired dream.

As I continued to wander aimlessly, my love of boats and the water beckoned me to the Brisbane City Botanical Gardens on the banks of the river. The sailboats travelling around Australia, moor near the gardens due to their close proximity to the city. The turmoil I had been experiencing started to recede and I began to feel at peace with the world as I sat under one of the towering Moreton Bay Fig trees near the river bank, sorting out my thoughts.

The Heritage Hotel construction site bordered the river and the Botanical Gardens; on this day it was nothing more than a large hole in the ground. I was the original design engineer for the plumbing services, until I resigned in mid 1988. I had little option due to the corruption I believed was taking place, although it would have been difficult to find others to corroborate my beliefs. The project was a two hundred and fifty room international hotel, now called The Stamford Plaza Hotel. I couldn't help thinking how much I wanted to be part of that project again.

I recalled the day I resigned. My friend, Laurie Watts, suggested that I should file the job where I could easily find it. He held the opinion that I would one day be recalled and offered another opportunity. I thought he was dreaming. 'But, you never know, the tide could turn and the project may become the pride of my company again.' Well, pigs might fly. I never held out any hope. In fact, on terminating my commission, I threatened to sue the developer for my outstanding fee. I realised they couldn't afford a black mark against such a prominent project. With this hanging over my head, it was unlikely they would ever invite me back. It was now mid afternoon; I must have dozed off for a while, and it was time to make my way back to the think tank in my office.

Reflecting on the landmark projects I had worked on, I

realised that, although to other consultants they were only jobs, to me they were much more, they were my life. I had played a significant role in the success of the buildings. I was able to see that not all in my life was lost and that I had a solid foundation to build on; a foundation that many companies would love to have as their starting platform. My inner voice kept telling me, 'Go for it!' and that is exactly what I intended to do.

The only problem was my attitude, and that could be fixed. A swift kick up the bum was what I needed. That afternoon I continued my quest, searching for alternative ideas on the direction of my life. There was but one option, and that was to be successful. I wouldn't be satisfied with anything less. I wanted to be a winner, and be the person I believe I was meant to be.

The night that I met Mick Doohan, had a lasting effect on me. He was a five times 500cc MotoGP World Champion. When asked, "Why do you want to win?" He replied, "Growing up, my father taught me that second place sucked, and it does." Like Mick, I didn't want to settle for second place.

I decided that now I had put my hand to the plough, I would never turn back. I was so convinced that my new direction was the only way forward for me and even though I had not come up with a detailed plan, I burnt my bridges and there could be no retreat.

The day was nearing an end, it was time for me to make my way to the sanctuary of my home. It would soon be dark and my curfew was approaching. Adam had arrived home from the local swimming pool and had prepared the evening meal. I was keen to spend time with him before we retired to watch television. We were engaged in a good

conversation, but my mind wandered to the plan I needed to formulate.

“It’s okay, Dad. Go for it. I’ll clean up and do the dishes.”

“Does it really show, son?”

“Yes Dad, it does,” he laughed.

Midnight came and went before the outline of my Five-Year Business Plan was in place. The plan was designed to provide me with an improved quality of life, and hopefully would also help those around me. Most of all, it was designed to start me heading in a different direction. I decided to place more importance on achievements and less on money. Outside meeting my obligations, which I obviously had to finance, great wealth and material items had lost their appeal. I had proved that a person can have almost anything they want, providing they work hard. Now it was time to strive for achievements that stimulated my mind.

The Five-Year Plan consisted of debt reduction in the first year. The second year was consolidation and setting the foundation for my future. Growth would follow in the third and fourth years. Then it would be time to introduce new ideas and direction. I saw myself heading into other fields; exactly what they might be, I didn’t know and it didn’t really matter at that time.

My personal life also needed to be considered. Maria and I had been together for about two and a half years. Our relationship was more about having a partner for the social events we attended, dining out and spending weekends away on the Gold Coast. There was little depth to the relationship and it was not looking like a lifetime commitment. Even though we were both off-loading baggage from our marriages, we still had some great times. I recall one evening in 1992, when I asked Maria to attend

an Olympic cocktail party hosted by Lord Mayor Sallyanne Atkinson at the Brisbane Sheraton Hotel. The occasion was a send-off for the athletes. Even on such an important occasion Maria insisted I introduce her to the Lord Mayor as my playmate. There was very little we took seriously, unless it was business related.

With no real prospects of us staying together, I decided I should build into my plan that I would meet the lady of my dreams in the third year, and marry her in the fifth year. At that time I had very little to offer a lady; with my new plan in place that was going to change. It is significant that the plan was to start in January 1990, the month of my forty-first birthday, and that my predictions would eventuate very close to the specified years.

My morning prayer changed to one of gratitude, asking for very little. My typical prayer was: "I asked You for a heart attack and You have given me good health. You know I can work hard; please provide me with the work and I will employ lots of people, giving them jobs and a better life."

The work rolled in and the business grew. One employee soon became three, then five; within eighteen months it was a team of ten, and within three years I had fifteen employees and two companies. I was trying to reduce the debt, but it became a hard ten year slog. A lot of the cash was gobbled up in the running of the business. Wages accounted for forty-four percent of the company's turnover, and when we moved to our new office, the cash drained even faster.

We were in the final weeks before closing for the 1990 Christmas holiday and I was planning the next year in more detail. I like to hit the ground running when we returned; January has always been a very important

month to me. The phone rang early one morning. It was Laurie Watts, the project manager for the Heritage Hotel construction site. After some idle chatter, which I have never been good at, Laurie asked, “Do you still have the project files for the Heritage Hotel?”

“Of course I do. You told me not to lose them.”

Laurie was one of the good guys on the project. He had been to hell and back with the owners and uncooperative consultants.

“What day are you available for lunch?” he asked. “We’ll see if we can do a deal.”

I wanted to say, ‘Today! Now! What time? I’m ready.’ But I kept my composure.

“You are aware the Heritage is a special project to me? And although I’m busy, I am in a position to give it priority.”

In short, it meant I had little work to start in the new year and was eager to work on the project again.

We met for lunch two days later. Laurie explained that the predictions I had voiced to the Singapore owner on the morning of my resignation had come to be. Some of the consultants were sacked, and the original project manager was no longer on the job. Laurie now had full control. He wanted a good deal for his client - a little too good from where I sat; still the handshake took place and a deal was done. One of his staff visited my office and confirmed my company’s ability to deliver on time. We passed the test. My office was set up so well it was impossible to detect I had a problem with my sight. It was my skills they were paying for and I intended for them to get a first class job. This was an important break in my recovery, as it provided eighteen months of good cash flow. Laurie made sure the monthly cheque always turned up on time.

With my assertive approach, I took my promotional campaign on the road. In particular, I visited Mr Iezzi, a

building contractor who was constructing more than half the Queensland public housing at the time. The deal we made provided him with a discount in return for prompt payment on our completed designs. The fourteen day payment schedule also helped my cash flow. These two deals provided an answer to my prayer. One morning I prayed to be relieved of the pressure of wondering where the money would come from to pay the staff. I can, without fear of exaggeration, state that since that day I have never worried about having money to pay staff. Sometimes I arrived at work without enough in the bank, but I knew money would come from somewhere, and it always did.

Twelve months into my plan, I looked for guidance: “I am accomplishing my current purpose. What is the special purpose I am here for? Please show me.” Some may think I am strange, but the fact remains I cannot deny what actually happened. I needed to know the direction I was to go. I needed a sign.

The answer came one evening while I was watching television. No matter how late I finish work, one or two hours television is a must. I find it difficult to read the small print of a newspaper and I rely on the television for news and current affairs. This particular night I reflected on a lunch I had in 1983 with a representative of McGraw Hill, one of the larger technical book publishing companies. The McGraw Hill representative, whose name escapes me, asked if I would review a series of three plumbing technical books by R. J. Puffett and L. J. Hossack. During the meeting he also asked if I had thought of writing a technical book, and that if I were to write one, McGraw Hill might possibly be interested in publishing it. This was absurd, totally ridiculous; it didn't even deserve discussion. Why would any person place themselves in a position to be criticised by their peers?

Glued to the television, I had a second flashback to 1982, when a family friend suggested I should have my palms read. Normally I would have laughed it off, but in this case the suggestion was coming from a person I respected, who worked for an engineering company and understood my desire to be a leader in my field. Without my knowledge, she made the appointment and phoned me with the details. She then told me to take thirty-five dollars to pay the palm-reader, and a tape to record the session. The reading was extremely interesting, and amongst many predictions, he revealed that one day I would write a book.

I sat deep in thought, piecing the information together to decide what it meant. This was two reflections in one evening and both connected with writing a book: could it be the sign? It was like the movie 'Field of Dreams', when the mysterious voice said, "Build it and he will come." Maybe for me it was, "Write it and they will read it!"

I didn't have a clue, but I didn't dare ignore the thoughts. The process had started. If I were to write a book, it would have to be a technical book; the plumbing industry desperately needed reference books. As an author I would need to be prepared to tell all and put my reputation on the line. For me, there was only one choice; the book was going to be 'Estimating for Plumbers'. This was the weakest subject taught in the plumbing trade courses and it was my strongest subject.

I started to warm to the idea. Yes ... it did grow on me. I got to thinking; writing doesn't rely on perfect eyesight, and a book on that subject would be a major contribution for younger tradespeople. Even more interesting, was the fact that no estimating books had ever been written for plumbers. There was definitely a need. The only negative aspect was most employers didn't want their workers

to know the secrets of estimating, because one day the employee may be their competitor. I was confident I was well qualified from my days as an estimator in the seventies. I was also confident there was a market for me to conduct 'Estimating for Plumbers' courses, where I could teach trade contractors the required skills and reveal the secrets of estimating to them.

The idea, that if my sight went completely, I could stand on a stage with markers on the floor providing me with boundaries, was very appealing. I would be able to move around freely and was unlikely to fall over any obstacles. This could be the way to continue enjoying my life when the lights went out completely.

I was entering the second year of my business plan. Unfortunately, reducing debt had left me with little cash to invest. I scraped together a thousand dollars and mapped out an eight lecture course, to be entitled 'Estimating for Plumbers'. My slogan was *'Know when to say "No!" because the price is too low'*. Each lecture I prepared would later become the basis for the corresponding chapter of the book. I intended to fill in the gaps along the way using feedback from the attendees.

My staff and I prepared a double-sided A4 flyer, photocopied it on blue bond paper and mailed it to nine hundred plumbing contractors. I used up my last dollar and hoped for one class of twelve contractors. The investment quickly paid off. I had enough enrolments to fill four classes, and I spent the next eight weeks delivering lectures four nights a week, each lecture being of three hours duration. It was actually five nights a week, when the university lecture was taken into account.

Maria warned me to be careful of burnout. This made me

mindful of my performance, which I am pleased to say, didn't falter. I was as excited about my last delivery as I was the first. I felt privileged that trade contractors wanted the knowledge I was able to impart. Some nights I was tired and I ran on adrenaline, but despite this I simply loved every minute of the lectures. At this time I was still driving a car; I had not become aware of the real danger I posed to others. It was very difficult driving the long distances at night, setting up a temporary classroom at each venue, and later packing up for the long trip home. One night a week was on the Gold Coast and another was on the Sunshine Coast, with two nights in Brisbane.

My life was gaining real purpose and direction. I knew I was helping others and it gave me a great deal of satisfaction. The actual writing provided me with a stimulating project that didn't require me to leave the office. It was a perfect situation for my limited sight.

The 'Estimating for Plumbers' book continued to take shape. For ten long months I commenced my design work at 5.00am, then worked till 3.00pm until it was book writing time. I then continued through to 11.00pm, except for the nights I lectured. I enjoyed Saturdays and Sundays the most. I was able to work exclusively on the book all day and into the night. I must admit I was surprised. At school I was a non-achiever and could not write even one page of meaningful work. It was beyond comprehension to think my destiny was to be an author. I am a poor speller and reading is difficult due to the trouble I have finding my place on the page.

Mum loved my achievement. I'd phone and keep her informed of the progress, explaining to her that I had no idea where I obtained this ability. I once told her that I thought my hand was being guided. She loved that

statement and was quick to remind me of what she had always said, and that the book was what it was all about.

I was eating, breathing and sleeping every page of the book. Except for the need to earn money, it was all about the book. On a number of occasions I was reminded by a friend that not everyone wanted to talk about my damned book. He wanted to know if I appreciated there were other topics. Well ... No! ... I didn't realise there was anything else, and no, for anyone in my presence, the book was going to be the topic. Looking back I realised this is the single-mindedness and obsession inherent in any person wanting to achieve success. It may be a sportsperson wanting to achieve a gold medal, or a singer, actor, or for that matter, any person with a goal or dream in their life. To be successful, it is important to be obsessed and passionate. I never saw any need to apologise for my dedication.

Late one Saturday night, Maria called at my home; it must have been after 10.00pm. She had purchased a house just a few streets away in Spring Hill. Maria wanted to go dancing and get me out of my office. I hate nightclubs. I can't cope with the loud music and darkness. Still, I agreed and we ended up at an inner city disco. Maria chipped me that we had been there for thirty minutes and I hadn't talked about my book once. That's right, it was killing me to stay off the topic.

The time arrived to send a draft to McGraw Hill Publishing, who in turn forwarded it to a number of TAFE trade teachers for assessment. I was disappointed when there was no response and McGraw Hill reached the conclusion that there was no market for the book. 'That is bullshit!' I thought. 'There is a desperate need for the book.' I was convinced they got it wrong and I was prepared to prove it. I drew my inspiration from Jonathan Livingston Seagull,

who never gave up. Sometimes you have to go with your gut feeling. Within three weeks I formed my own publishing company, 'Antelope Publishing.' It was intended to cater for authors who wanted to publish technical books (although the focus has become wider over the years). In June 1992, I faced my next hurdle in the challenge of publishing. I needed twelve thousand dollars toward the printing costs. Where the hell was that going to come from? Money kept turning up just in time for all my genuine needs. I was certain this would be no different.

Now I was really testing my faith.

Over the years I had learnt that the lack of finances should never stop a person from following through on a good idea. Money has a tendency to sort itself out. I phoned my trusted friend Gordon Spreadborough. The following week we met for lunch at the Ridge Hotel Restaurant. I explained my dilemma and that I needed to find the money. The prospect of the book excited him and he immediately saw its potential.

"Do you know how sponsorships work?" he asked.

"No. Not a clue."

"We will identify a number of companies who could benefit from investing in the book and provide them with advertising rights."

"I like it!"

Within weeks, James Hardie Building Products had committed ten thousand dollars, with the proviso that I would fund the balance.

During the ten months it took to complete the book, I was most indebted to Adam; he was one person who knew my difficulties and was concerned about me. At that time in our lives he was my friend as well as my son. I was proud of his achievement in becoming an apprentice carpenter and the hard work he put into his study. He

was very considerate, and when he arrived home each afternoon, immediately checked to see if I had any deliveries for my engineering projects or manuscripts which needed to go to the technical adviser. He prepared our dinner, which allowed me to keep working. I always maintained, “I don’t know what more you could want in a son.”

By August, 1992, we were ready for the printer. The ‘Estimating for Plumbers’ courses were also completed and I had restructured the course into a two day seminar format, which allowed me to go on a national tour, and eventually to New Zealand and the United States. In September, 1992, one of my biggest accomplishments took place. I had my own book launch at the Queensland Institute of Management, of which I was a member.

My lounge room doubled as a storeroom, with two thousand books stacked against the wall. They represented a fully paid asset with a retail value of around one hundred thousand dollars.

I retain vivid memories of the first seminar I ran in Melbourne. It will always serve as a reminder that one has no limitations, and disabilities don’t have to be a restriction. I chose Melbourne for my first big seminar, as it represented a city of plumbing contractors who had high expectations of getting value for money. If I got it wrong in Melbourne, I was finished. However, if I succeeded there would be no turning back. It was like rolling the dice, and I was gambling on my own abilities.

I had hoped for fifty plumbing contractors to attend, appreciating twenty-five to thirty was a more realistic expectation. The success of the seminar was difficult to take in. If ever something went right, it was these two days. One

hundred and seven attended, ten of whom were technical trade teachers, which guaranteed the book would be used as a technical reference in their courses. What a boost to my fight back, and my self esteem!

‘Estimating for Plumbers’ reference textbook went on to sell more copies in its first two years than any other technical book in the building industry. By 2002 it had sold over four thousand copies and more than three thousand eight hundred contractors attended my lectures in Australia, New Zealand and the USA. Following the Melbourne seminar I felt like a winner. The comments and feedback from the attendees over the years have been a joy to read.

On the night of the book launch I was most proud to hear industry leaders say what a benefit it would be to the young contractors. Vic Eddison’s face showed deep emotion as he spoke. He said he was proud that I had been his first plumbing apprentice and that he had played a role in my success. Being the author of a technical book provided me with the opportunity to travel and attend speaking engagements and conferences.

It was time for some affirmations; I again had things happening in my life that I could build on. The affirmations I used were:

‘I can do what I put my mind to.’ True.

‘I am capable of finishing a well-planned task no matter how big it is.’ True.

‘I have no limitations in spite of my eyes.’ Almost true.

The end of the third year of my Five-Year Plan was close and now I woke each morning with an air of excitement, knowing the day would bring something special; looking for the one thing that would inspire me and provide a sense

of 'I am glad to be alive'. The reality was, things were still tough and I needed to keep making adjustments to allow for my sight.

Visiting clients was a major task. I limited driving my car to only important occasions. Reading buttons in lifts of high-rise buildings proved to be extremely difficult, and walking into parking meters hurt: I can state from firsthand experience, they are not a good height for males! Company policies made allowances for my fading eyesight. I had to buy time and the only way to do this was to make my environment conducive to my needs. If the clients were not within walking distance of my office, they had to go. The idea worked perfectly; I operated my business for six years and never had to start a motor car for business reasons, and I only used taxis on odd occasions. The costs of running the business dropped, while turnover increased.

For some reason, everything was treated like a business for me. Leaving a project half finished was not my style. It was 'decision time' for Maria and me. Was there a future for us? I wanted to settle down with a life partner and could now make a significant contribution to a relationship with a nice lady, even though I was offering potential rather than hard assets. Maria had made it clear to me that I had the best deal she was offering and that most men would envy me. I saw it differently; calling on her late at night, then walking home in the early hours of the morning along dimly lit streets, was not the future I dreamed of. I had prepared myself for the split mentally, but emotionally it was not so easy. We may not have used the 'love' word very often, still it was part of our relationship. It was time for me to move on and I knew what had to be done.

It was like the ending of a movie. We went to a nice restaurant for dinner, and then arrived home at her front

door. We hugged and said good-bye. I walked home along the dark street for the last time and we both closed another chapter of our lives. We remained good friends until her tragic death in a bike accident in 2006, in Milan, Italy.

During early 1993, in my quest for happiness, I came to realise that I may spend the rest of my days alone. Asking a lady to take on the day-to-day difficulties caused by my eyes would not be not fair. She would have to be a very special person, and I may in fact be too much of a problem. I had built a profile in my mind of the type of lady who may like to be with me, and I wanted to know that I would be able to make a contribution to her life as well. She would need to be someone who had known me for some years. To me this would take care of the trust factor. I wanted to avoid another relationship break-up if at all possible.

My new lady would need to be understanding and compassionate, as well as being prepared to accept me as I was with my lousy sight. Of course this ruled out most ladies I came in contact with. There were absolutely no available ladies I could think of whom I had known for any length of time. Some days I felt like I was planning a new business venture, which I guess I was, except I was constructing a missing link in my life.

It was around 10.00am Friday March 26, 1993, when the office phone rang and my secretary transferred the call to me. "Good morning, Paul. You won't remember me. I'm Lise Wiggins, Vivian's sister," the voice announced. 'She has to be kidding,' I thought. 'The most gorgeous lady I know; of course I know who she is!'

I had first met Lise twenty-one years earlier, when she was eighteen and had won the 'Miss All Nations' contest in Brisbane in 1972. Keryn and I were good friends with her

sister, Vivian, and her husband. I am not sure how to say this, but I was so full of my own importance that night, that I don't recall meeting Lise. How dumb! That night I was introduced to the most beautiful lady in the auditorium, and I didn't remember her.

We did meet again a few weeks later at a family barbecue, and this time there were no slip-ups. However, I am not sure she noticed me. I recall thinking, 'Wow, this is the style of lady a bloke would like to spend his life with.' Over the years our paths crossed many times. I recall three separate incidents in particular, that in hindsight, were significant in the events that were to follow.

The Australia II yacht which won the America's Cup in 1983 was on display on the south bank of the Brisbane River. A group of business friends had accompanied me to view the racing boat. Lise spotted me amongst the crowd and quickly introduced herself. I remember the looks on the faces of the other guys when they saw such a beautiful lady talking to me. I was proud and pleased she had recognised me.

In 1991, I attended the funeral of Lise's father, and I recall watching Lise and her husband exit the crematorium. I thought, 'You need a good man in your life; one who would look after you.' It was just a passing thought from a man in the market for a wife.

The third incident that sent me a message, which at the time I didn't fully understand, occurred in February, 1992, while I was visiting Vivian's home. Lise was there and we stood deep in conversation, and for reasons I am unable to explain, we held hands during the encounter. I interpreted it as a sign of friendship, but there was no mistaking the chemistry that flowed through my body. With her husband standing a short distance away and watching my every

move, I made sure to look interested in the topic.

“Yes, I remember you very well,” I told her.

“It’s Vivian’s fortieth birthday on April 15, and you are the first on my invitation list. Would you be able to attend?”

Momentarily ignoring Lise’s question, I asked, “What are you doing these days?”

“I am on my own, living on the Gold Coast

I didn’t let her finish. After all, I had the only information I needed in the first five words.

“I have always wanted to go out with you. Would you like to have lunch one day?”

“Name the time and the place,” her reply came down the line.

This was going well. She didn’t hesitate. Weeks later she told me her mother said I would ask her out. I hope she believed it was because I recognised class and not because I was a desperate man.

My professional experience cut in. I knew exactly where I should take a lady of this quality for our first date and she would be most impressed. Just as quickly I replied, “Michael’s Restaurant, Tuesday twelve thirty.”

I had shed a massive 30kg and planned to wear my business suit. I was sure this would make a good first impression and increase my chances of a second date.

I had intended to reject the invitation to Vivian’s birthday; I was due to lecture in Coffs Harbour, on the New South Wales north coast that weekend. Within a short space of a few minutes, I informed Lise I would be pleased to accept. I liked Lise very much and felt she was the type of lady I might enjoy a long term relationship with.

The lunch went well and we saw a lot of each other over the coming weeks. Wanting to protect myself from being hurt, I decided to try to find out quickly if there was a chance of us becoming partners. Vivian and her mum had been friends for a long time and I didn't want our friendship to be lost if Lise and I weren't going to work out.

Lise accompanied me on a get-away Easter weekend to Tweed Heads, which has always been one of my favourite locations and the place I would most like to live when I retire. The cool breezes from the ocean are refreshing, I love watching the strong currents of the Tweed River rush through its mouth to the open sea, and the many fishing boats returning with their catch. The poem 'Sea Fever' by the English poet John Masefield, best describes my feelings:

'I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky ...'

That is what it is like, a magnet for me.

I figured four days alone with Lise would reveal if we had common interests and whether a long term relationship was possible. We would either want to spend more time together or be ready to kill each other. I'm not sure why everything has to be so calculated for me. I find it difficult to simply just let things happen.

Feeling confident, I had a fair idea as to the outcome, so earlier in that week I phoned my trusted friend Deanne Groves and we arranged to meet for drinks at the Sheraton Hotel. I explained my situation to her and how I really liked Lise and that I might make a decision to pop the big question. The fear of rejection has always been difficult for me. I suggested to Deanne that I was confident in my ability of assessing the opposite sex. I was adequately experienced, and Lise was the lady I liked. This was not the first time I had thought about Lise in this way. One of my theories

in life is, ‘When opportunity knocks, don’t ask who’s there, just open the door and walk through’. In the short space of time that opportunity is being questioned, it can disappear; yes, even in the blink of an eye. Deanne looked puzzled.

I pointed out that asking Lise to commit to another relationship so soon after separating from her husband, may not be responsible. On the other hand, I was not going to let her go without finding out if we were meant to be together. Should we marry, I would be her number three husband, and I didn’t want to stuff up her life.

“Paul,” Deanne interrupted, “you like the lady, you have known her around twenty years, you think her mother is wonderful and it sounds like you could fall in love with her. Go for her, my friend. It is that simple. If you blow it, you will always know where I am in the world. Phone me, and tell me what happened; I will give you a big hug, spin you around and tell you to try again. That is what life is about Paul. Do you want a few years of happiness with Lise and gamble that it may be for life? Or would you prefer not to take that chance and miss out?”

It turned out Lise wanted a stable relationship as much as I did. She was a giver and enjoyed looking for ways of pleasing me. On that Good Friday she asked me what we were doing for dinner. I jokingly said, “We’re having seafood.” While I had my afternoon nap, she walked one and a half kilometres to the Tweed Seafood Markets and purchased enough seafood to feed about four people. She then walked all the way back to our hotel room, and that evening placed a banquet before me, more delectable than I would expect from a five star restaurant. It did cross my mind that we were off to a good start.

The next day was even better. Lise wanted to purchase a new dress for the show we were attending that evening at

Seagulls Leagues Club. I guessed I was scoring some points with her and she wanted to please me by looking nice. Lise only had to turn up to do that! She was quite tall, blonde, very attractive and of Danish descent.

Finding a shop that Lise liked wasn't difficult. While she did the female thing by exploring every clothes rack, I wandered towards racks of dresses that appealed to me. This was a hint Deanne had given me. She said it was a subtle way to influence what my lady might purchase. Lise was on the far side of the store and I didn't think she could see me. I didn't make allowances for her better eyesight and that she could in fact see my every move. I was a little disappointed that my first attempt at influencing my lady was not working. Not to worry! The dress I picked was stunning. I held it up, examined it in a way that gave the impression I might know what I was doing, and then placed it back on the rack. It was destined to please another, so I thought.

A few minutes later, Lise called out from near the change room, "What do you think of this one?"

Wow! It was the dress I had just admired. I had really won the prize this time. "It's great," I called back.

At that moment my mind was made up; I was not letting her go. Only how and when I would ask her to marry me remained to be decided.

The following weekend, I visited Lise at her Robina home on the Gold Coast. Knowing it was her thirty-ninth birthday in less than two weeks, I decided to test her out. Employing a tentative tone which almost dared her to say no, I inquired, "If I asked you to marry me, would you actually accept?"

"Yes, I think so," she replied.

"Well, best I watch out," I said, wanting to put her off.

Diamonds International was my next stop and a booking at Michael's Restaurant, for April 28, 1993, which had been the scene of our first date. I also placed an order for a big arrangement of flowers. They were so big, the restaurant manager had to organise an additional table just for the flowers. The scene was set. This was going to be romance at its best.

I picked up the ring on the Friday evening and headed to Lise's for the ANZAC day long weekend. The ring was in my briefcase, secured by a combination lock. I had not long arrived when Lise wanted to know what was so important in the briefcase that it needed to be secured with a combination lock. The more I evaded her inquisitiveness, the more intrigued she became. Lise is a bit of a tomboy 'dare-me-and-I-will-do-it' type.

"If I can crack the combination, can I see what's inside?" Stupidly I agreed to her proposition, and ten minutes later she had the ring on her finger, yelling, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

A few weeks later Lise moved into what became our Spring Hill home. Her caring nature came to the fore and it quickly became obvious my happiness was to be her mission in life. The first thing she wanted to help me with was reconciling with my daughter Rebecca. We tried several times without success. I could not help feeling that I had done something more to hurt Rebecca than just the break-up with her mother. Lise was not ready to give up and invited Rebecca for Christmas that year, but unfortunately it was a disaster. It was obvious things were unlikely to mend. I found it particularly difficult as I had no idea what the problem was.

For me the saddest moment came one evening when Adam answered the door of our home and stood talking with an attractive young lady for some time. I wondered why he

only invited her to come a little way through the door and then made no attempt to introduce me to her. After the young lady left, I asked who she was. Adam's face was blank with amazement that I would ask such a question.

"Rebecca. That was Rebecca, Dad!"

I just wanted to hide. My good old reliable eyes had done it again! If I can't work them out, how can I expect others to understand? It hurts today as I reflect on the fact that I did not even recognise my own daughter!

Lise kept trying; she knew it was important to me, although I made out it was no big deal. The final straw came for Lise one evening when Rebecca arrived to see Adam and she was less than polite to me. I took it in my stride. After all I had come to realise it was not going to get any better and the only real thing that hurt was the fact she could not call me Dad. Rebecca spent the evening in Adam's room and was equally rude to me on her departure. Lise then emerged from our bedroom in tears. It was one of the few times I have seen Lise cry. She was cut up by the way Rebecca had treated me. Lise tried to apologise to me for Rebecca, but that was not possible. No one can apologise for the actions or comments of another person. Lise went on to promise she would never ask me to try again. We did in fact give it one more go, a few years later; again without success.

I have had to move on in life. The last time Rebecca spoke to me in a civilised manner was 1985, when she was thirteen years old. On her wedding day she refused to allow me to give her away, or even to attend. This, by far, rates as one of my greatest disappointments in life. It hurts like hell every time I think about it. I am denied the opportunity to play the role of grandfather to her two children, Georgia and Hayden. I am sure I would be a good grandfather to them. Today I respect her wishes and hope she never has to endure the rejection of her own children.

Still, there were many ways I was blessed with happiness. On Sunday morning, January 1, 1995 in the Brisbane Botanical Gardens, Lise and I were married after we had enjoyed a New Year's Day wedding breakfast with fifty close friends at the Stamford Plaza Hotel. Lise later dubbed them the 'Rent a crowd'. By midnight we were honeymooning in Fiji, where we had two wonderful weeks relaxing.

We had an exciting life of travel. Between 1993 and late 1996 we travelled to every capital city in Australia at least three times to present my estimating seminars. On each occasion Lise hired a car on the Sunday and we escaped the city life for a wonderful day in the countryside. We visited New Zealand twice and also Hong Kong and Chicago, USA. We also visited Norfolk Island for Lise's fortieth birthday. I wanted a life of travel and it was now happening. Lise made it possible for me; she helped me through airports, and when visiting historical displays, such as Port Arthur in Tasmania and the Jenolan Caves in the Blue Mountains, Lise described the finer aspects of what we were viewing. Driving for me had become extremely difficult and Lise willingly assumed the role.

My life had changed for the better and Lise was an integral part of it. She knew she was needed and that gave her a sense of worth and self-satisfaction. In her quest to help me get around, she took me to the Royal Blind Association. I thought, 'Here we go again!' It was not a general enquiry visit. Unlike Maria a few years earlier, Lise came straight out with it: "I'm here to purchase a white cane for my husband." I immediately left the room. It was simply too much for me. Although she emerged with a white cane, I wouldn't look at it or take it out of its packet. It was about a year before I plucked up enough courage. There was no pressure from Lise, only encouragement.

Over time, she taught me there was no shame and that she was in no way embarrassed when I carried it. In fact the turning point came while shopping in the Myer Brisbane store one Sunday afternoon. Lise saw a man using his white cane and struck up a conversation with the gentleman's wife. I heard her telling the lady that she wished I would use the cane, so other people could get out of my way. This was a different slant, and the first time I accepted it could help others, not just me. I now viewed the white cane in a different light.

I was visiting Sydney for a series of lectures and my driver wanted to stay in Sydney for the Easter Racing Carnival. I decided to take the cane and give it a try where no one knew me. What a disaster! I am sure people thought I was a phoney. I walked from Broadway to Circular Quay, over to the Opera House and back. I pulled the cane out, tried to use it, put it away and then out again. This happened all the way there and back. I think my lack of confidence and lack of training must have shown. The cane went into the cupboard and stayed there for quite a while.

I use an 'identification cane' that folds up. I have it half extended when I have Lise with me, or I want people to know I have a sight problem. It is fully extended when I need to tap and feel my way in the dark.

One evening I wanted to attend a lecture at the Law Courts in Brisbane and Lise was unable to take me. It was find my own way, or miss out. I decided to take the train into Central Station. From there I had to walk four city blocks. It was 5.30pm and the peak hour rush was well under way. Being winter, it was dark and I had to pass two bus stops crowded with people, as well as cross three roads and one busy walkway. This was going to be hell on earth. The cane came out, fully extended, and I walked with confidence. It

was like the parting of the Red Sea; people walked around and past me, and not one bumped me. This was a new and incredible experience and I actually enjoyed it. That night my cane became part of me, my buddy if you like.

Lise has two children, Rachael and Bradley, both of whom had grown up and were going their own ways. Adam decided to move out and build a life for himself, which left Lise and me free to build our life around our own dreams: dreams, that if left alone, would never come true; they had to be coupled with reality and our desire to work hard to make them happen. This is exactly what we did. With a sense of achievement and satisfaction we let 1995 fade into the sunset.

I was not to know my best days were still to come, and in a very different way to anything I could have imagined.



Garry, Paul and Lise New Years day, 1995

