

CHAPTER 8

(1996 – 2005)

Some Call It Gold

“Which part of, ‘You are not driving the car again!’ don’t you understand?” Lise asked.

Someone had finally said it. No, it was actually an order from my general. She stamped her foot, demanding my attention; there was no room for negotiation and I knew my days of driving a motor vehicle were over. Around the same time my eye specialist had also made his position clear. He informed me that if I had an accident he would not support me in a court case. I knew I had had a good run, and the odds were now stacked heavily against me. The thought of running over a child, or for that matter any person, was not something I wanted as a lasting memory.

Kindness arrived at my door, delivered by the most unexpected people. I was learning how to cope with public

transport. Clearly, trains were easier for me to travel on than buses. Trains are predictable in stopping close to the same spot every time, they mostly run on schedule and there are no obstacles in my way. Bus drivers have a habit of stopping with the door in line with the bus stop sign or the bus shelter. I often find myself walking into the signs as I hop off the bus. However, it was the Brisbane City Council bus drivers who demonstrated kindness far beyond their duty.

I recall one particular evening, the sun had set so it was dark by the time the bus had reached my stop and I had to cross a busy road after alighting. Cars sped around the corner and down the hill and their bright lights dazzled me. Lise usually met me, but this particular evening she was running late. I stood with my cane outstretched, waiting for a break; I could never be certain if there were no cars or trucks coming. It was a case of doing my best and hoping like hell I would be okay. I heard the bus driver calling for me to wait; he then locked the bus and walked me across the road and along the path until we met Lise.

On another occasion - it was a Saturday afternoon - I was waiting at the Taringa bus stop, close to where my office was at the time, when Kevin, a driver I had befriended over the past year, pulled up at the stop. He was on a different route from my Forest Lake destination. His bus was chock-a-block; Saturday is always busy, with teenagers travelling between the City and Indooroopilly Shopping Town. People were hopping on and others off the bus; it was a busy few minutes. Kevin turned off the bus motor, pushed past the passengers and greeted me on the footpath. I was extremely appreciative.

“Paul, Paul, it’s Kevin. I think your bus to Forest Lake has passed.”

“No, it’s okay, I’ve watched the numbers and it’s running late... At least I hope it is.”

Kevin insisted I hop on his bus so he could deliver me home after he completed his run.

“Wait a minute. Where are you going?” I asked.

“To River Hills.”

The people on the bus waited while we talked. For Kevin, my wellbeing was of the utmost importance.

“That’s too far out of your way.”

“It’s okay. I’ll take you home when I’m finished.”

After a short discussion, I jumped on the bus. I am sure people were wondering who I was to gain this special attention.

At the end of his run, Kevin changed the bus identification to ‘000 Out of Service’ and he drove for twenty minutes with me as his only passenger, delivering me to a bus stop within one hundred metres of my home. All because he did not want harm to come to me.

I quickly found out the difference between an Express Bus and a Rocket Bus. Thinking express meant, ‘We will get you there fast’ and rocket meant, ‘even faster’, bitter experience taught me my assessment was wrong. I was in a hurry to return from the city to my Taringa office for a meeting one day, therefore the Rocket Bus seemed like the best choice. That was until I watched the bus fly past my stop and Lise had to jump in the car and look for me at the University of Queensland campus where I ended up.

I was somewhat accustomed to taking wrong buses and trains. The trick when this happened on the bus, was for me to sit and wait, because they always returned to their starting point. Trains are a little different; they take much longer before they return. One particular afternoon, Lise had arranged to meet me at the Dutton Park Railway

Station on the south side of Brisbane. I quickly phoned her as we flew past the station. “Meet me at Fairfield,” I suggested. “No, make it Yeronga,” I amended as we passed Fairfield Station. The train never stopped at Yeronga, and by this time, I’d worked out what was happening, and I realised I was on the Gold Coast Express. Fortunately, it did stop after a few more stations and Lise found me.

Good deeds continued to come my way. I remember the time the bus was travelling along the Centenary Highway en route to Forest Lake. The 460 only went as far as the Forest Lake shopping centre and my stop was a kilometre further down the hill. I was sitting in the first seat behind the driver; he half turned and asked if I wanted to be dropped at the Creekwood stop.

“You only go as far as the shops. I’ll be fine,” I explained.

“No, I’ll take you down there.”

“You can’t do that, you have a bus load of people.”

“Leave it to me,” he replied.

The bus driver drove past the usual turn off, and delivered me to my stop. The smile on his face told me how pleased he was to help. I started to realise people really did want to assist me and were only waiting to be asked. Still, it wasn’t easy for me to ask for help.

Then there was the day I attended a meeting at the Queensland Government Industry Information Bureau. Lise accompanied me on the short journey. Always looking for a game to unload the tension from work, I played the role of a five year old child and asked, “Mummy, can I push the bell for our stop?” The problem was I left it too late. We flew past our stop and ended up in the city.

“That’ll teach me to push the button earlier,” I told the driver as we disembarked.

“Was that you?” the driver asked.

“Yes. I’ll catch a taxi back.”

“No, stay there and I’ll run you out,” he insisted.

The driver was heading in that general direction, but he still went out of his way for us, again with the ‘ooo Out of Service’ identification.

Amidst the kindness, I recall one driver wanting to teach me a lesson. I am not sure what the lesson was, but he obviously felt good. The incident occurred at the bus stop outside the Royal Exchange Hotel in Toowong. I was less than fifteen paces from the bus and the driver must have been able to see me struggling, with my white cane fully extended. He closed the door of the bus, drove four metres and stopped at a set of lights for three minutes, while I had a thirty minute wait for the next bus. I know this can happen to anyone, but it seems a bigger deal to people with disabilities.

It was important for me to carefully structure my environment to suit my needs in every aspect of my daily life. My movements, the way I set up my office and manipulated the seating arrangements at functions, all helped my life to be what I considered normal.

Every day I am constantly reminded that no matter how much I want to think that in life there are only the limitations I place upon myself, the reality is, my eyes do limit me. I try so hard to do my best, but constantly people interpret my shortcomings as rudeness and arrogance. It is like living the childhood bully days over and over. It becomes difficult, and actually hurts to be made feel a fool. One of the hardest situations for people to understand is when they are speaking to me and I have to ask who I am talking to. I can hear them, but not see them. Instead of telling me who they are and accepting my situation, they often challenge me and strongly suggest I should be able to see them. Hell, I know that, but I can’t! Having to explain I

am unable to see them for a second and third time can lead to a debate. Often as I walk away, I hear people degrading me. They must think I am stupid as well.

July, 1998 was a significant month in my life. I had received word that Mum's health was deteriorating and that she may only have a short time to live. Lise and I decided to drive to Camden, and we arrived on a Friday evening. Beth told us that Mum had asked for us a number of times during that week. For some reason, she thought we were to arrive on the Tuesday. I concluded she was ready to leave this world and meet her Master, and we were the only ones holding her up. Saying goodbye was obviously important to Mum.

We spent an enjoyable evening with her. There was very little communication, but I am sure she knew we were there. We returned on the Sunday and spent the entire afternoon at her bedside. It came time to leave for the long trip home to Brisbane. Lise made Mum comfortable and we said our goodbyes. I stood at the door, looking back at the person who had given me life. Now it was time for her journey to end and a new, eternal one to start. Even as I looked at her lying there it was difficult to believe the finality of the outcome. It's amazing how many wonderful thoughts raced through my mind in those few seconds. I was looking at my mother who had planted the seed of self-belief in me. She had fed me with positive thoughts based around my life having a special purpose. I wonder if she knew more about my eyes and the difficulties I encountered than I realised. Then, maybe she believed it was this defect that would be the driving force in my life. I turned to Lise and asked, "Is this the last time I am going to see my mother?" "Yes, it is darling."

Lise held my hand and led me away. I took with me only happy memories of a mother who had done her best.

The following Sunday, on July 5, 1998, while planting a new rose garden at our Forest Lake home, we received the call from my brother Peter, telling us that Myra Elizabeth Funnell (nee Donovan) had passed away, aged seventy-eight. We decided our garden would forever be known as 'Myra's Rose Garden'. Every time Lise picks the roses they serve as a constant reminder of the beautiful mother whose presence and influence I enjoyed for forty-nine years.

Life was changing for me; although I never seemed to have much money, which didn't matter as it was no longer my driving force. Personal achievements became most important to me, particularly achievements that would leave a lasting legacy. Over the years I had experienced how quickly material items could be taken from me, and how suddenly life could be snuffed out. In August, 1997 Princess Diana was killed. The message for me was that our Maker didn't discriminate. When it was our time, we had to be ready. My good friend, Peter O'Brien, who frequented my office on a regular basis, died not long after. He was only fifty-seven. Peter was a property developer, who from a financial point of view, lived a stressful life. He took risks that would prevent any person from sleeping at night. He turned up at my office one day with a little bag of cakes for morning tea, and revealed to me the level of financial debt he was trying to manage. Even with my poor eyesight I could see it was worrying him. He claimed it was one and a half million dollars, which in the world of business, is not necessarily a lot of money. The problem was, Peter didn't have the cash flow to support the debt. I later learnt he had miscalculated and the amount was actually two and a half million dollars.

I tried to encourage him to slow down and change his lifestyle, but it was too late. He died two weeks later. This served as a timely warning for me, that we don't know the

day or the hour when our lives will end. In my case, there was a lot I wanted to accomplish, and every minute of every day became important to me. I was in a race against time and wanted to achieve as much as I could before I became totally blind. I also wanted to find out just how much could I accomplish in my lifetime?

The success of my Estimating for Plumbers textbook and the estimating seminars led me to design and develop a software program which I named the 'Sharp Estimator'. It was not really a conscious decision on my part to enter the software industry; it was only by chance that my life took this direction for the next one and a half decades. At the time I accepted it as another part of my destiny. I figured the opportunity would not have been placed before me if it was not meant to be.

In the nineties, Information Technology was a glamorous industry. Bill Gates and his Microsoft company led the way with business and office software. New technology was moving at a cracking pace; the developed world had moved from barely understanding what a desktop computer was in the early eighties, to the presumption that a computer should be on every office desk. Even home computers were becoming a necessity by the second half of the nineties. Computers were millions of times faster at processing information than the human brain. The speed and capacity of software programs was difficult to comprehend. To be riding on this exciting 'Information Technology Highway' was exhilarating.

For three years I had been recommending software programs to trade contractors which had been designed and developed by other companies. I did my best to consult with those companies and explain how their software needed to change, but they thought they knew better

and refused to listen to me or their potential customers. The fact that they were out of business within four years suggested they should have considered my suggestions more seriously.

Ken, who was a salesperson for a number of software programs and one of the people whose estimating software I recommended, arrived in my office late one afternoon. He tossed a document along the length of my boardroom table and asked, "What does this mean?"

I organised a coffee for him while I examined the content of the document. He had been declared bankrupt in the Supreme Court the previous week. I explained the consequences of being bankrupt and the limitations it placed on his business activities. He was visibly shaken. His wife lived and worked in Rockhampton, an eight hour drive north of Brisbane. He had moved to Brisbane to earn the additional money they needed to make ends meet. Now his dream was shattered.

I sat quietly, watching him flounder. He searched for words that wouldn't come, his head stooped in embarrassment, and it was obvious he didn't have a clue what to do next. I could have been looking in a mirror; his situation resembled my own at the peak of my troubled times. I was only too aware of the difficulty that lay ahead for him. Even with my own debt reduction program still in progress, my heart went out to him and stupidly my wallet followed. I really didn't want to become involved, still I felt the need to help a friend as others had helped me. I did have a small reserve account with a little cash in it, which I reluctantly considered. Lending Ken money was not a consideration. It had to be a situation where I had total control.

We spoke for some time and I quizzed him on his sales

income, which later proved to be exaggerated, while his business expenses were understated. Based on his information at the time, it seemed to me that nothing more than poor business management had caused his plight. We agreed to sleep on it and meet the following morning to sort out a solution. I already had a basic idea and needed time to work through the details. The following morning at the meeting it was agreed that I would form a company, with his wife as the partner and he would work for the company. The plan was conditional on me having full control over the administration and finances. His role was sales and marketing.

Unfortunately, it only took six months for it to become obvious that Ken was a terrible salesperson, and had no idea of focusing on goals or sales targets to achieve results. I already knew he was a poor administrator, which didn't leave much for me to work with. Even with the introduction of the 'Sharp Estimator', which he admitted was the easiest software to sell, he didn't make enough sales to survive. I persevered for eighteen months and concluded it was time for us to part company. The business venture had burnt through thirty-two thousand dollars in cash, which depleted my financial reserves, and the Profit and Loss Statement showed a massive fifty-eight thousand dollars loss. Ken's gravy train was about to leave the station without him.

With a little encouragement, he agreed to resign, and his wife's shares were transferred to Lise. I assumed total control of the sales department and took responsibility for the company debts. I immediately restructured to an Information Technology company specialising in design and development. Our flagship product was the 'Sharp Estimator', which became the most popular estimating software in the plumbing industry. We also developed

‘PriceMate’ software to compete at the lower end of the market. At the time the company was called ‘Cavalier Software’, which was later shortened to CavSoft, in keeping with trendy software company names. The team at Cavalier Software went on to design and develop the ‘Contractor’s Pack’ software program for the building and construction industry. The ‘Cavalier Costing System’ followed. Our portfolio of products slowly grew.

Juggling the responsibilities of the design engineering company and the software development company didn’t fit my plan of running a business in a more relaxed and stress-free environment. I was forty-eight and viewing the world differently. This was a strain I didn’t need. The monthly financial reports indicated that the company I focused on for that month made the profit and the other company generally had a loss. By 1998, computer aided drafting had been in the engineering industry for around ten years and it was time for me to enhance the technology, or get out. My engineering company had been reduced to five staff because I was finally getting smart and realised I could make more money for myself by not replacing staff as they left the company.

Around the same time I had made a business decision that I was not prepared to invest in new computers and design software. I was more interested in exiting the engineering industry. My eyes were very slow at seeing the design details on the building plans. A task which once took thirty minutes, was now taking three times longer. I was actually looking for an opportunity to get out completely. There was also the narrow-minded attitude of council inspectors that was costing me a small fortune.

A number of council inspectors gave me the impression that they would like to be running their own consulting

businesses, but were stuck in the public service system. They often took the opportunity to remind consultants that they were the authority and we were answerable to them. They even gave subtle hints implying we should bribe them to fast-track our project approvals. There were also constant and time consuming debates on interpretation of by-laws, rules and regulations. In cases where a creative engineering solution was required, most inspectors were inflexible. It was ridiculous that in the state's capital city, only the head inspector could approve a special design, even in cases where there was only a slight variation from the codes. The delays in achieving the approvals were a waste of human resources. Every year there were new inspectors appointed to review plumbing plans for approval, which meant consultants had to waste more time educating them by debating the by-law interpretations, as we had already done with previous inspectors. It was all too difficult.

The best my company was prepared to do, was to take inspectors to lunch to show our gratitude for responsibly assisting us. My company policy was not to play the game of bribes, and this resulted in long delays for approval. I vividly recall one project being held up, and when I enquired about the delay, the Brisbane City Council Inspector informed me that my work was on the twenty-eight day waiting list. This was the final straw for me. I had had a gutful and reported the situation to Lord Mayor Jim Soorley, who I knew disapproved and wanted to weed out the corruption.

On December 24, 1997, my head engineer buzzed me and said, "Lord Mayor Soorley is on the phone."

I didn't believe him, but thought I should take the call.

"Paul, it's Jim Soorley here."

"Good morning, my Lord Mayor."

“Officially I’m on holiday, but I came in to clear my desk and spotted your letter.”

“Well, I hope you don’t think I’m too forward, but when inspectors cause me to consider closing my business, it is obviously time for something to happen.”

“Paul, please accept my apology. I am sorry this has happened to you. Are you willing to name him?”

“Yes. It’s John _____. But please take it easy. I don’t want anyone to lose their job, I just want a fair deal.”

“I have a team who looks after these situations and I want this type of person out of my administration as soon as possible. I do know your reputation, Paul. I am aware you are tough on our administration, but from what I’m told, you want to help improve it. Why don’t you have a nice Christmas and I’ll see the problem is resolved,” he informed me.

He was a man of action, and the inspector took an early retirement twelve weeks later, much to the satisfaction of many engineering companies.

There were dozens of similar annoying incidents and they gradually ground me down. I remember a consultant telling me, ‘You may be right, but you should know to shut up and pamper the inspectors.’ Except, it was not my style.

A friend had offered to buy my business but I had good reasons for not wanting to sell to him. I had deliberately reduced the business to only a couple of clients so it would be easy for me to exit. I did offer to give my friend what remained of the business for free. I was also aware that at the time he didn’t understand how to run such a business and that he didn’t appreciate the design and documentation process. My fee to teach him was to be twenty thousand dollars. Although it was a bargain at that price, he obviously didn’t think so. A few months later he paid in the vicinity of

seven times that amount for a business where he received very little more than what mine had and he still didn't have the training.

Monday April 20, 1998 started as a typical day, for which I had no special plans. It was my first day back from a two week business trip to Melbourne. My first meeting was with the head engineer, who had been given ten tasks to complete while I was away. It didn't take long for me to become annoyed, we spoke about the first item, which he had not completed. The second item, the third and the fourth had not been completed either. The meeting came to a sudden end with me strongly expressing my disappointment and trying to get answers which were not forthcoming. My colleague furiously left the office.

I immediately called Lise in for a meeting, her office was next to mine. I explained that I intended to retire as a design engineer and focus on the software company. It was a decision not to be taken lightly; five staff were about to lose their jobs.

"When?" she asked.

"Today. Now."

"Don't talk about it, do it!" Lise instructed. She also had had enough of staff and the problems we encountered.

We were interrupted by the arrival of my friend Gordon Spreadborough. He sat and talked to me for over two hours. I trusted his advice more than any other person in our industry. He gave his detailed version of how the industry was changing and where it was heading. I explained I wanted to move on with my life, and my ability to do my best work as a design engineer had run its course. I hadn't personally designed a project for two or three years. My eyes could only scan and focus slowly, so the building plans had become too difficult for me to read. The passion

remained, but the capability was disappearing. Looking at my watch, I said, “Gordon, you have never spent two and a half hours in my office. This is a first. Not once today have you told me my decision is wrong.”

“It is right, and the time for you to go has arrived. You should now enjoy your next venture.”

Gordon left, and I called the head engineer into my office. Quietly and calmly I laid down the facts and gave him an ultimatum, that if he was going to resign to do it that day, because I would close the engineering company at 4.30pm. He returned to his workbench, packed his bag and announced he was leaving, effective immediately.

Lise and I faxed about three hundred companies with whom we had worked over the past twenty years. The announcement of my retirement became public knowledge and I provided the reason that my fading eyesight no longer allowed me to perform to my high standard. I knew the building and construction industry well, and it was important for me that there was only one story, without rumours. Another chapter of my life closed and I was free to pursue my interests in Information Technology.

The decision may have been easy, but the consequences of that decision were much harder to live with than I had anticipated. A part of me went missing that day. I had accomplished my most desired dream of being a design engineer, and owning my own company. I had spent twenty years loving every day of it. In all that time I hadn't let my eyes affect my dream, but now there was no escaping the fact it was all over. I felt compelled to sit down and record my thoughts.

The following is an extract from one of my diary entries at that time:

‘The passion never dies, but I knew it was time to let the young ones carry on. To me it was the ultimate career in the plumbing industry. I chose to walk the consulting path and loved every minute. The thrill of being the decision maker, the challenge of designs and the complex calculations, using my experience to achieve the desired result and the pride of my accomplishments, for me it was never just a job, it was a passion!’

For twenty years I was privileged to be involved in the growth and development of Queensland’s capital and regional cities, its country towns and beautiful islands. Design engineering provided me with the opportunity to meet and mix with people I would not have otherwise met and with whom I now enjoy lifelong friendships, as well as the opportunity to sit in boardrooms and express my ideas, influence outcomes and be part of some of the most prestigious projects ever to be built in Australia.

The excitement of calculating accurate water flows and pressures for high-rise buildings, office towers, holiday resorts and hospitals, and contributing to the pleasure of the end-user, provided me with a level of satisfaction that will never leave me. The hospital patient may take it all for granted, but I know I made a difference to their life. It was difficult to let go and I knew I would miss my involvement.

Life continued to provide constant nagging reminders of my limited sight. I attended positive reinforcement workshops run by Bert Weir at the Relaxation Centre in Fortitude Valley, an inner Brisbane suburb. I wanted to find out if he could help me. It was a most interesting experience, particularly as it reinforced some of my own thinking. Bert maintained that by using positive thoughts even medical conditions could be cured. My own thoughts on affirmations are well documented; they are useless,

unless the person truly believes them. Regardless, I analysed his theories and applied them to my own situation.

One of the main thoughts I have always applied, is that I refuse to accept that total blindness is inevitable. I have always believed that I would maintain enough sight to fulfil my purpose in life. My spiritual faith will not allow me to accept anything less. Sometimes I wondered if my beliefs were based on wishful thinking, or could they possibly be the reason I still have some residual sight? I believe that my positive attitude and refusal to accept that my lights would go out by my fiftieth birthday is the reason that at fifty-eight I still enjoy around four to five percent sight on a good day, given the right conditions.

Lise sat me down and explained that I should be pleased with what people were saying. It was difficult for me to accept compliments, although I must admit it was nice during the months following my retirement. I took comfort in the phone calls and letters of congratulations from friends and colleagues. Each of my career choices was a small step along a journey that was part of my destiny. It is only when the steps were viewed together as a whole, that they could be seen to have a definite purpose. I was particularly moved by a couple of the tokens of appreciation I received, each of which made me realise that I had really achieved my dreams 'in spite of my eyes'.

The first came from Caroma Bathroom Products, which has for many years been the largest supplier of bathroom fixtures to the building industry in Australia. Anita, their representative, told me she was phoning on behalf of the general manager. He asked that she convey the company's congratulations and that they would like to present me with a special gift to say thank you for my support over the years.

On many occasions I specified their products for projects, and on two occasions their sales value was over one million dollars in each case, which was a big order.

“Do you like red or white wine?” Anita asked.

“White,” I replied.

‘How can I tell her I don’t really want wine?’ I thought. It will be drunk, the bottles will be thrown out and I’ll have no memories of their generosity.’

“It’s difficult to tell you and possibly even rude,” I said, “I don’t expect anything, but if you insist, can I suggest what I would really like?”

“Of course, we’ve been instructed to give you whatever you want.”

“I’d like memorabilia. It can be anything that carries the Caroma brand name. This way it will still be in my possession in twenty years time.”

“Consider it done. We’ll see you next Friday,” she replied.

Two weeks passed, and I had started to think it would never happen, when one morning Anita and her friend struggled up the stairs to my office, which at that time was situated on Coronation Drive, overlooking the Brisbane River. The main item she presented me with was a large, one metre diameter vitreous china pot plant holder. It was the last of its type manufactured in the Royal Doulton range when Caroma took over their operations. There were also many other small items, such as mugs, books etc. I was honoured to be recognised by such a high-profile, and well respected company.

The second accolade is extremely difficult to share as it is intensely personal. It does convey another person’s perspective on a part of my life where I wanted to help others. The appreciation was expressed through a letter from a colleague and friend sent to Lise and me:

This morning I have taken the opportunity to sit and reflect upon two most enjoyable and inspiring days with you both at your Melbourne Estimating Seminar. I ask myself, 'How can it be that I am so privileged as to be regarded a friend of Paul Funnell? How is it that Paul has been such an influence on my life, when I don't see him very often and we don't have regular contact?'

Paul, I want to take a few moments of your time to remind you how this has come about.

I too have a Lise in my life and have shared my life with her for forty years, and when we spoke at the seminar you were quite right to chastise me for not being with her at home in Tasmania. Instead I was pursuing my other love that we all know as the 'plumbing industry'. True, my interest in plumbing has been a very important part of my working life, but in 1981, I took the chance to have a trip to Europe with the Australian Motorcycle Enduro Team to the World Championships in Italy. As it turned out, the trip went far beyond what I could ever have imagined and was so fantastic and uplifting that it completely turned my outlook on life on its head.

So much so, that when I returned I found it very difficult to settle down to the day-to-day task of earning a living, being a good father and husband and a useful member of the community. In desperation, I sought new horizons by relocating to Queensland on my own. I was prepared to work in the trenches in Brisbane, provided I could work in the plumbing industry, but as it turned out, I found a job in estimating. One of the first sets of plans I was asked to price was a Funnell Hydraulic Consultants project, and I immediately thought, 'Hey! This is not too bad.' I was pleased that you knew how to communicate information effectively using building plans. I was hooked and there

was no turning back. You and I were destined to meet on one of the projects. I did not realise that your influence on, and inspiration to me had begun as we kept in contact.

Paul, it was you who encouraged me to join the Institute of Plumbing and become an active member. I gained the experience, knowledge and confidence in public speaking, and it was you who encouraged me to accept a term as president of the institute, a role I might otherwise never have contemplated.

It was you who invited me to join the Funnell Hydraulic Consultants team, and it was you who encouraged me to undertake design work on large scale projects. Anyone can design single house drainage, but to be introduced to and encouraged to extend my ability beyond my own expectations was a great experience. Thank you.

It was you who took me to the boardrooms of the large architectural firms and you who gave me the confidence to participate in the discussions for services on the most advanced building design in Australia at the time. It was you who threw me to the wolves in those discussions and left me to fight for our trade at the highest level in this country, and where I might rather have jumped out the window (we were on the twenty-fourth floor), you had the confidence in me to allow me to become involved. This was a most wonderful experience for me and I will forever be grateful to you for giving me the opportunity.

It was a privilege and honour to share with you those troubled times you experienced towards the end of your previous business partnership in 1987. Many an evening after work we sat and contemplated how things may be resolved, and your sharing with me the anguish you were going through in your personal life was very touching. I

wish I could have been of more help to you.

The fact that I chose to return to Tasmania to undertake my own building project was undoubtedly influenced by the confidence you gave me to believe in myself and that I could successfully complete the project. Your influence has stayed with me over the years as I settle into a life away from the activity and bustle of Brisbane.

Thank you for influencing my life.

*Kind regards,
Allan*

Achievers only remain on a high for a short period of time. The thrill of success soon passes and the need to look for a new challenge or something that will again give them that special adrenaline rush kicks in. It was no different for me. My achievements were past history and I had a desire to find a new project. I was constantly aware that my dream of winning a trophy had not been fulfilled. For me it was about having something on my shelf that made a statement. I wanted a trophy that told people I was the best at that particular skill on a particular day. At this stage of my life I hardly expected the trophy to be a sporting achievement. For me winning had become an expectation. My estimating textbook was proudly displayed on my shelf and took pride of place. The book was in its second edition and carried a photo of me on the front cover; still it didn't seem the same as being awarded a trophy. On reflection, possibly it was much better and I just didn't see it that way.

In the year 2000, the Queensland Government held the 'Asia Pacific Information Technology Awards for Excellence'. We knew our Contractor's Pack software was a good product and a team decision was made to enter the

awards. At the judging we believed we presented well and were in with a chance. Four weeks passed before the awards night; it seemed like forever. I vividly recall that night.

The chauffeur pulled our Rolls Royce up at the foot of the long, steep stairway leading to the Exhibition Centre Ballroom. The stairs were lined with red carpet from the bottom to the top. Lise and I slowly walked up the stairs as autograph hunters appeared, pushing pen and paper in our faces while cameras flashed. We felt like the Hollywood Academy Awards had come to Brisbane. I personally felt a million dollars until I heard, “Keep your feet on the ground Paul, they are only actors,” Lise teased.

There was first class hospitality with drinks and nibbles, and then we made our way into an extremely large and very dark room. I heard other people complaining about the lack of light and no one was able to understand why the room was so dark. We were given small hand-held torches to read the program and dinner menu. I became anxious as my body went into clumsy mode. Not being able to see to eat was an embarrassment and it was vitally important that I didn't do anything stupid. Sitting opposite us were our competitors, representing Timberline, a large and successful US software company. I was sure we had no hope against such a prestigious company. Still, I dared to dream my dream of winning.

The time had arrived. It was an exciting moment for Lise and me. Our company was a finalist in the Building Construction Division. The three finalists were announced by the Master of Ceremonies, then the long pause. The room was silent, while he opened the envelope.

Then I heard those magical words, “And the winner is Cavalier Software.”

Lise screamed with delight and kept hitting me on the head with her handbag. The camera responsible for beaming the images of the winners onto the big screen zoomed in on us. The entire audience saw me trying to get out of my seat and Lise hitting me and landing me back in the seat. She kept screaming, “We won! We won! We won!” I think she may have been excited. It did feel good standing on the stage and being awarded my first ever trophy. I remember comparing it to an athlete competing successfully in the Sydney Olympics. For me it was the equivalent to winning a Gold Medal.

Yes, some call it gold!

We didn’t have to wait long for a second attempt. I had designed a pipe sizing software program and called it ‘WaterFlow’. It was new state of the art technology and even today, I marvel at what it can do. The same design that takes an engineer around five hours to size the pipes using manual methods, is completed by ‘WaterFlow’ software in thirty-five seconds. The software accommodates buildings up to one hundred and twenty storeys high and eliminates thousands of calculations for the engineer. I am told that computers can process data at a rate one hundred million times faster than the human brain.

In 2001, my company again entered the Asia Pacific Awards for Excellence, and the competition was strong. One of the competing projects was entered by the Queensland Department of Transport. Their project included the fibre-optics and software system for the new South-East Bus Lanes, which extended from Brisbane City to Logan City. Any rational person would have agreed we had no chance, but it turned out they liked our pipe sizing software and we again made it to the finals. I recall one of the judges saying he was impressed because engineers didn’t need to consult

books and charts; it was all there for them. I thought back over the judging and felt I had reason to be quietly confident. I had presented the product well and had tried to convince the judges WaterFlow was incredibly good.

We had invited my cousin, Denzil Dunbar, and his wife Chris, to the awards presentation. Denzil enjoyed dusting off his old dinner suit and Chris had purchased a beautiful evening gown. The awards were held at the Tivoli Theatre and the room was much smaller than the previous year. I remember it was so packed with people that it was difficult to move. The tables and chairs were crammed in. As usual the lights were dim and it was hard for me to keep up with the events. Lise was my public relations lady and did a great job talking to the other contestants and VIPs. Similarly to the previous year, the prize included a trip to Malaysia to represent Australia in the World Championships, and of course, the trophy to sit beside our first one.

We were half way through our meal when I realised the magnitude of what was happening. The thoughts made me nervous. I wanted to be physically sick and I urgently needed to be in the fresh air, but it was too late. It never dawned on Denzil that we may lose; he spoke only of us collecting the trophy. He placed me under enormous pressure. I started preparing myself for the ultimate fall. If our name wasn't read out I'd be more disappointed for Denzil and Chris than for us. What was I thinking? A small company like mine winning against a Queensland Government project? This was David and Goliath stuff.

Lise did her best to calm me, and iced water along with deep breathing soothed my nerves. I had learnt this in my public speaking training. One of the judges arrived at our table to greet us. She squeezed my hand and told me to be confident, hinting that I had little to worry about. I refused

to allow her signal to mean anything other than good luck. At that moment, the fear of losing became greater than the anticipated joy of winning. Here we were twelve months further on and I had the audacity to think it could happen back to back for us. The difference this time was, I really wanted to win for Denzil and Chris. I also believed WaterFlow pipe sizing would be a worthy winner.

Just like the previous year, the finalists were announced and our name was there. Again the long wait.... “And the Winner is..... Cavalier Software.”

With pride, I knew I could take my place amongst the Information Technology Industry leaders and not feel the first award was a fluke. In my mind, I had won my second gold medal, as surely as if I had competed in the Olympics. I was a winner. And again, I did it ‘in spite of my eyes’.

On both occasions my company represented Australia in the World Championship of Information Technology, which was held in Malaysia. We are often asked how we went, and Lise’s standard answer is, “Before we can win, Paul has to learn not to tell the judges that they’re idiots.” Lise does have a valid point; it is something I must learn. My version is, the judges at the international level were either corrupt or have no idea what they are doing. Losing never bothered me, I had what I wanted. I was, however, annoyed to be told by one of the judges that they were instructed to share the awards between different countries and not allocate them based on the merits of the products. So ‘Stuff them!’ was my attitude.

This period of my life was full of highs. After those years of turmoil I had every reason to be happy with my position in life. But every now and then a reminder was sent my way that indicated I should never be complacent. I was not to

know that one of the greatest disappointments I would ever encounter lurked just around the corner. I rarely remember when a high point in my life was not quickly wiped out by a disappointing low. As if life was not hard enough.

Adam and I had been very close over the years, especially through his teens when we lived together. I helped him in every way I could. He looked after me like a favourite son does for his father. We had a friendship that I thought was unshakable. When he decided to leave home and set up house for himself, Lise and I assisted him financially and provided him with sufficient furniture to guarantee his comfort in his new home. Adam was there to build my office walls and furniture; there was nothing he wouldn't do for me. Lise always helped him move house, cleaning and helping in any way. She saw it as helping me to do my part for Adam.

It would have been mid 2003, and to this day I have no idea what was happening in his life the day he phoned me. He let me know he thought I was a bastard and that he was sick of pretending to like Lise.

“We come as a package, so you make your choice,” I angrily told him. The phone slammed in my ear and that was the last time he spoke with me. It was heartbreaking.

In late 2005, Lise and I entered a restaurant in the Mt Ommaney Shopping Centre. After a few minutes, I saw Adam sitting with his wife and their baby daughter, Emily. I spoke to him twice, and twice he refused to acknowledge my presence. I left the restaurant with Lise and moved on with my life. To be excommunicated from his young family and excluded from playing my role as grandfather rates alongside not being allowed to give Rebecca away at her wedding. It is not possible for me to articulate the extent of my pain when I think about my son and daughter. I can

only assume I did something unforgivable to both of them. I decided to put the entire episode behind me.

Except for this one incident, my life was more relaxed, and achievements were no longer measured by the almighty dollar. Self-satisfaction and helping others to achieve their own goals in life were more important. For a number of other reasons, 2003 was a significant year. My peers in the Australian Hydraulic Services Consultants Association awarded me life membership for Outstanding Service to the Plumbing Industry. I was very proud to receive the award; only five members throughout Australia have had the honour bestowed on them.

Also, in that year I was appointed a referee on the Queensland Building Disputes Tribunal and in 2006 the appointment was extended for a further three years. The position provided me with a reason to keep abreast of the latest rules and regulations of our industry. I enjoyed the high profile case such as the Gold Coast City Council versus Jupiters Casino. Any thought that my eyes may be limiting me from doing what I wanted was now in the background, although it is fair to suggest I altered my life to be involved in projects and activities more suited to my situation.

In late 2004, searching for a new project, I enrolled as a student in two subjects for the Diploma of Engineering at the Yeronga TAFE. I was interested in continuing my professional development. Having had extensive experience in the education field for the plumbing industry, one night while sitting in the classroom, I concluded that the students were not being taught relevant industry information. I was not alone with my assessment. It had been a general complaint for some years and no one wanted to listen. I felt teachers needed better textbooks for their courses. Estimating for Plumbers was a successful textbook

and I decided I wanted to write another book. The current pipe sizing book used by trade colleges hadn't been updated for thirty-five years.

In April 2004, I planned the outline for a new pipe sizing book. My friend Allan Archie offered to be my head technical advisor and also write the chapter on water hammer, which was not my strongest area of expertise. I also gained the support of Ken Crase, a leading hydraulic services consultant, as my second technical advisor.

During the following week, I presented the plan for my proposed book to a trade teacher, who agreed that there was a desperate need for it. He intimated that the college would adopt it as a text. The team was in place and I had completed an outline for each chapter. All I had to do was start writing. The cost of printing was the furthest thing from my mind, as sponsorships had always shown up when I needed them. This occasion was to be no different. Less than six weeks passed, when I received an email from an industry friend, Neil McPherson. He had heard of my new book, 'Pipe Sizing for Building Services', and he wanted his company, Kembla Copper, to be part of it. His question was open ended. What did I want them to do?

I took this as a sign from my Guiding Master that the book was going to happen. Neil met with me on a number of occasions and agreed on a generous sponsorship. It represented seventy percent of my target. I was impressed with the offer and the contribution Neil made as a former trade teacher. Over the years, credibility was everything to me and this was one time it paid off. I attracted the leading companies as sponsors; in this case Rheem Hot Water came on board, as did Reliance Worldwide and Viking Sprinkler Fittings. The printing costs were covered for the first three thousand copies. I completed the final draft for the book

in December 2004, and in February 2005, Lise and I held a book launch in Sydney, followed by one in Brisbane and then one in New Zealand at the World Plumbing Conference.

My eyes gradually faded a little each day, and at best they were equal to a pain in the bum. Regardless, I was pleased that I never let them stop me from fulfilling my dreams. I recall my sister Beth telling me that the main reason for my success was because I was an idiot, and that others would have given up. That was about as good a compliment I was going to get from her and I loved it. She was right; I did find it hard to give up. Some days giving up was all I wanted to do and it would have been so easy. But it has never been an acceptable option and never will be. In fact, no one has ever provided me with a better alternative than the ones I have.

Asking for help is one of the hardest things a disabled person has to do. I think we see it as a sign of weakness and helplessness, or that we are not as good as the next person. We don't want to burden others with our troubles. There is nothing dignified about being a businessman who needs to be guided to the toilet by my wife while dining at a restaurant. The time did arrive for me to learn to say the words, 'Would you mind helping me, please?' Crossing a road, catching a bus, shopping, or finding my way to the toilet; I have no choice, I have to ask others to assist me. Much to my delight people want to oblige. They want to help me, but are not sure if they should offer.

During one of my trips to the USA, I visited Chicago to deliver an estimating lecture. My tricky eyes were at their best. My brother-in-law, Mervyn Channell, accompanied me as my minder. I had strict instructions from Beth to make sure I took him to see the sights of 'The Windy City', and Sears Tower was the obvious place to start. On a clear day

it is possible for fully sighted people to see four states. After exiting the building, we jumped in a cab, but after only one block we worked out the cab driver didn't know where The Pier was on Lake Michigan. For some reason I was unable to communicate our destination to him. We asked him to pull over and we jumped out.

I called to Merv to hurry as I had another cab lined up. I couldn't hear him telling me not to get in the car; it was very windy and noisy amidst the tall city buildings. I raced up to the driver, and asked him if he could take us to The Pier. I remember thinking he looked neat in his uniform. The driver looked me up and down. In his deep American accent he said, "Buddy, the only way you'll get in this vehicle is with a set of cuffs on. Do you want to get in the back now?" I felt a little foolish as he explained it was a police patrol car. I knew I made his day. He couldn't stop laughing. I'll bet his wife liked his version of the story that evening.

All types of travel are challenging for vision-impaired people. Over the years, QANTAS Airlines has contributed most to making life comfortable for me. I was on one of my trips to the United States in 2003, where I was attending a Trade Show and delivering a seminar in Indianapolis. The plane touched down at LA International. The steward asked me to wait till everyone had disembarked. QANTAS staff had arranged an American Airlines hostess to accompany me through customs. The steward explained the plane was not at the terminal and that we would be taken by bus to the customs and immigration area. I was a little embarrassed at causing extra work for the staff and I left the plane with the other passengers. What a mistake! The glare from the concrete reduced my sight to about two percent. I asked one of the ground staff where the bus was, to which he angrily answered, "Behind you." I felt silly. With my cane in the half extended position, and assisted by

a helpful passenger, I was guided safely onto the bus.

We arrived at the luggage area and the situation became worse; there must have been over fifteen hundred people scrambling for their bags. A short Japanese American lady walked up to me and asked if I was Paul Funnell. She thought she had the right person when she saw my white cane. Again I was treated with kindness beyond the call of duty. She stayed with me for two hours, helping me through customs and immigration and then delivered me to the waiting area for my next flight.

Allowing people to help me was not easy to accept, but it most definitely made coping with life a lot easier.



Paul, after a days reef fishing off Cairns

