

APPENDIX B

STORY ALISON WAKEHAM

PRIDE, *IN THE NAME OF LOVE*

WHEN BARRY BRANDIS' PARTNER JUDY DIED, HE HAD JUST ONE WISH — TO SHOW HIS LOVE AND RESPECT BY WEARING A SUIT TO HER FUNERAL. DOWN ON HIS LUCK, HE HAD TO RELY ON THE GENEROSITY OF STRANGERS TO MAKE HIS WISH COME TRUE

It was a simple Facebook post: an elderly gentleman wants a nice outfit to wear to his wife's funeral. Its weight lay in what wasn't said: circumstances had led the couple to sleep rough in their van, the man's wife had died in that van suddenly, surprisingly, now he fiercely wanted a suit to wear to symbolise the love and respect he had for her.

The overwhelming response that followed would not only fill him with pride but fuel his belief that even when life is at its darkest, small acts of kindness shine brightly. "People," he says, "are bloody great."

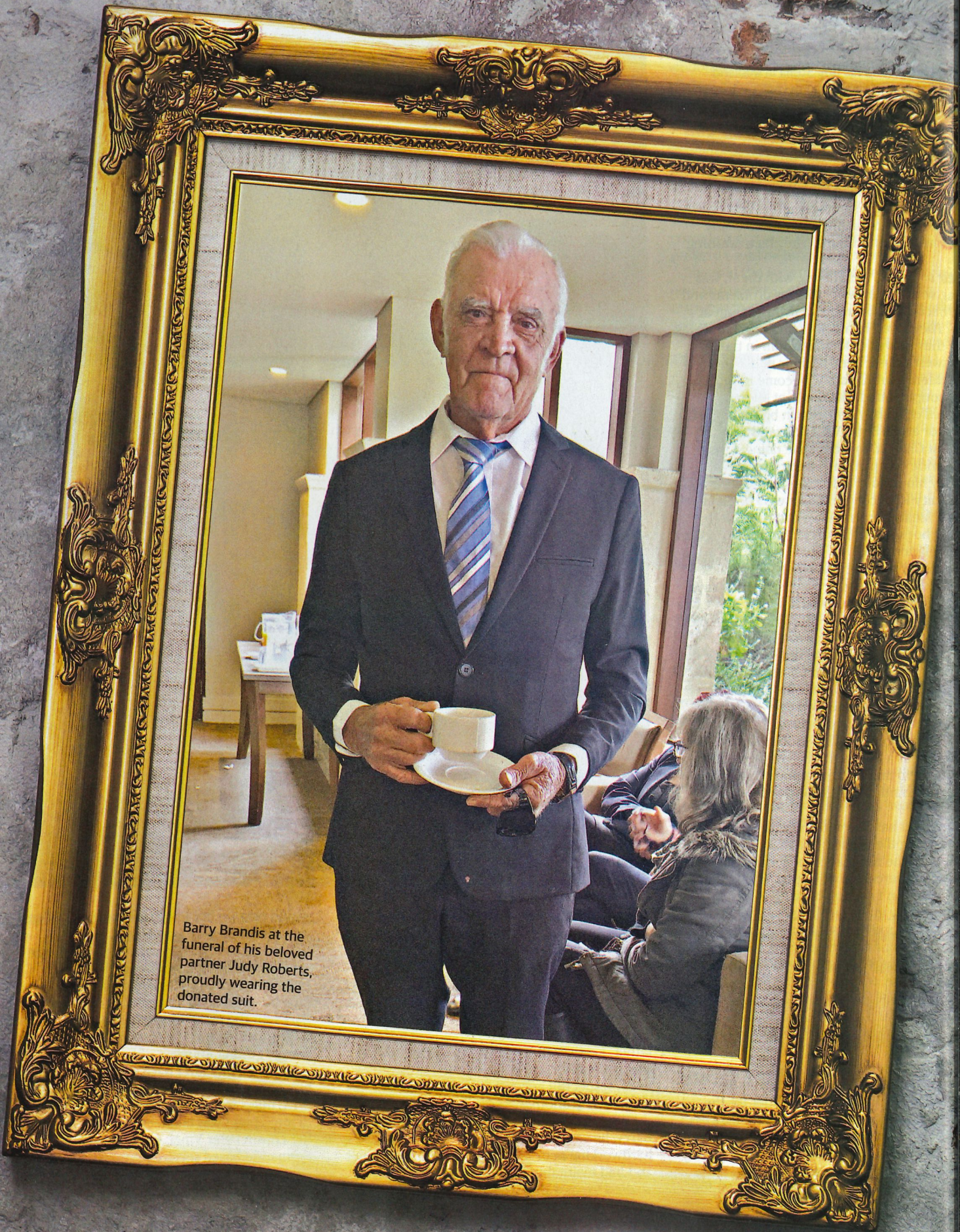
Barry Brandis and Judy Roberts had known each other since their schooldays in Middle Swan but life, relationships, children, meant it would be two decades before they would see each other again at a local club.

"Her brother and another bloke were standing there and she was standing behind them," Barry recalls. "It was funny that we would meet again."

Love found its way and the two were together for more than 39 years, though they never actually married.

"She went out and bought herself an engagement ring. I was there with her and she told me I had to pay her back," Barry says. "I never did."

He can laugh at that memory but others rip at his heart. "Everywhere I see, I keep thinking that she is going to walk out. That's the worst part," he says. »



Barry Brandis at the funeral of his beloved partner Judy Roberts, proudly wearing the donated suit.

Barry Brandis and his dog Stella in Midland.
Inset: Barry with Judy early in their relationship.

Now, he's got her life to sift through, clothes to sort out. "She was a marvellous woman, you know, just so great. She just had something about her, people loved her."

The couple had a son together 33 years ago and rode through the ups and downs of any long-term relationship until they hit a crashing low.

Their son, who was staying with them, was dealing with a number of serious problems and it had become unbearable to live with him at times. They loved him dearly and decided it was best if they moved out and left him in their Homeswest house. Aged in their mid-70s, they had suddenly, unthinkably, become homeless.

The couple found friendship at Midland Meals, a free nightly service run by Loren Pratt, the pastor at the Swan Valley Seventh Day Adventist Church, to feed those doing it tough and provide companionship to the lonely.

Mandy Mountfort, a development officer at community legal centre Midlas who helps out at Midland Meals, remembers sitting on a kerb, drinking hot soup with Barry. The two struck up a close relationship.

"I cared for my husband when he was sick and had lost him the year before," Mandy says. "I knew that Judy was unwell and that Barry was struggling. Judy loved her soup. He used to pick it up for her and take it back to the van."

Judy had been ill for some time but would not go to a doctor. "She wouldn't listen to anyone," Barry says. "I had been at her for months."

In the week before she died they had made plans to go on a road trip, back to Three Springs, where she was born, and to Moora, where she began work as a teenager. The couple never made that trip but on the day Judy passed away Barry got behind the wheel and did it on his own.

"She would have been there with you," Mandy says, breaking the silence. "Yeah, I'd say so," he replies, with the resignation of a man who, as much and as fiercely as he hopes, knows that his beloved wife isn't coming back.

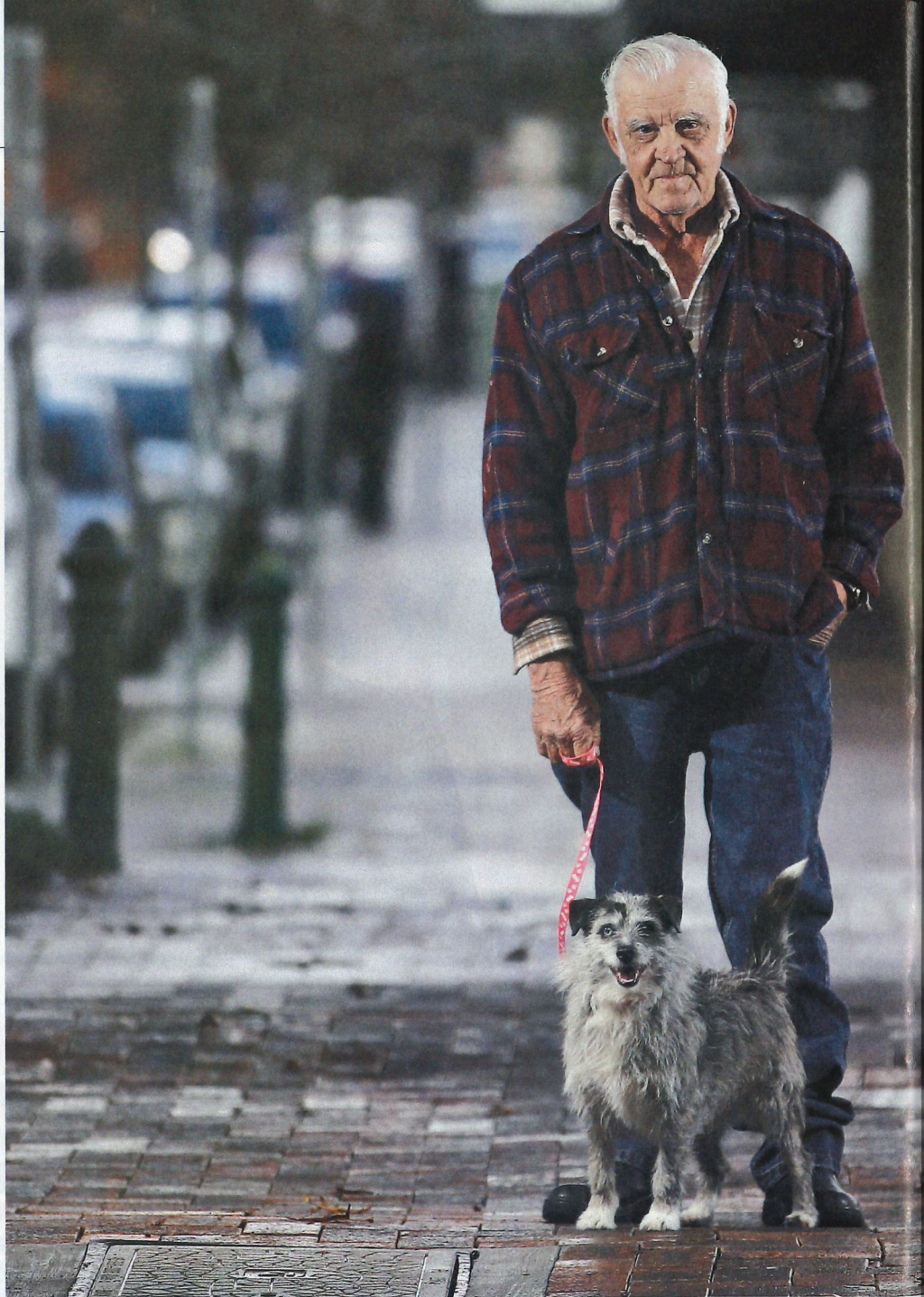
"It was funny in the week before she died," he says. "She told me she loved me."

Lost in the confusion of grief, he turned to Mandy, Midlas and Loren for help – help to get him through the worst time of his life, help to arrange Judy's funeral and help to honour the wish that he wear a suit to the funeral.

"You couldn't get a better bunch of people," he says.

Wendy Pryer is the general manager of communications and engagement at St Bart's, an accommodation and service provider for the homeless. She got a call from Dress for Success, a charity that supports low-income women with clothes for job interviews, asking if they had any suits in storage.

"There was a woman called Mandy at Midlas trying to find a suit for a 77-year-old man," Wendy says. "After checking with our services



and chaplain and coming up with nothing, I sent a quick text to Mandy apologising that I couldn't be more helpful."

But she kept thinking about it, picturing a man who simply wanted to pay his wife one last respect.

"I'd never met Barry, I didn't even know his name then, but I just kept thinking of my own father, Kevin, who is 79, and like other men of that generation, salt of the earth, hardworking, loyal, respectful and would give the shirt off his back to help another.

"When I actually had the privilege to meet Barry, he was just like that – a decent, loyal, hardworking man who had fallen on hard times and had maintained his dignity and pride. He wanted to wear that pride on his back when he buried his wife."

Wendy phoned Mandy again and said she

would post on her Facebook page, confident that she could get something.

"I was overwhelmed with responses," she says. "Firstly, my brother and his fiancée, Russell and Emma. He gave me a suit that was a little bit smaller than needed (it is now at St Bart's for the many men who may need it) but most touching was the responses from the many people I didn't know.

"Those who didn't have a suit were offering to buy one, offering shirts and ties, offering to drive miles from where they lived to drop it off to me. Then I was connected by a good friend to her cousin Peter Vinci, who runs a Fremantle-based service for men called Impress for Success. He provided the suit for Barry and asked me to let him know if Barry needed any adjustments made."

Wendy, a former political reporter who has

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BART'S SPOKESPERSON
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PICTURE: DANELLA BEVIS

been at St Bart's since February, says she wasn't surprised by people's generosity. "I have learnt how many kind and caring people there are – many of whom who have had their own hardships – who have dropped off goods, made donations, all to support others in need.

"It really has restored my faith in humanity. It is easy to become cynical, easy to think the world has gone mad and that people only look out for themselves, but that isn't true. People like Barry and Mandy, and those who responded to the post, represent what many Australians are – good and generous people."

Kylie Dardha doesn't know Wendy but she has known Emma for more than 20 years, and Emma had shared Wendy's Facebook post.

"As soon as I saw it, my heart went out," Kylie says. "I thought of my own parents, who are in their 70s, and the pride that they would have in dressing well for each other's funeral. It would be massive.

"It was nothing to help out. If my father were ever in the same circumstances, you'd want him to be looked after."

Kylie offered to pay for a suit but told that one had been arranged, she donated a silk tie and bought Barry a new white shirt.

"It must have been wonderful for him," she says, when she learns that Barry had been able to fulfil Judy's wish. "But I'm not surprised. I think it is part of your being to do this, to bring happiness, to give if you have the ability to do so."

Peter Vinci relies on the generosity of businesses and private donations to make Impress for Success a reality, and through them was able to offer a new suit. "It broke my heart when I heard about it," he says. "It was great just to be involved."

Barry was unsure when the suit arrived, but excited when he finally put it on. "I felt great," he says. It was only the second time he had worn one – the other was at his first marriage.

Loren gave the eulogy at Judy's funeral and his

supporters at Midlas made sure the day went smoothly. The couple's friends from the street packed the chapel, dressed in their best clothes. "Judy had a way about her," Barry says. "She could talk to anyone."

Data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics on Census night in 2016 estimated there were about 9000 homeless people in WA, about 1000 of whom were sleeping rough.

Sarah Patterson, the chief executive at Midlas, says there are many stories like Barry's. The coronavirus pandemic had shown that a fall into poverty could be just one step away.

She said the Federal Government's decision to double JobSeeker payments as part of its response to the coronavirus crisis had eased some of the pressure but it would rise again when payments were reduced.

Restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the virus had also thrown up an increase in the number of people looking to fight loneliness. "We had one seriously ill man who didn't want to die alone," Sarah says. "We were able to put him in touch with a family that looked out for him."

Barry's future is looking brighter. He has been given a lovely little dog called Stella, who never leaves his side, his son is getting help and it is hoped he can soon get into a new house. His street friends are chipping in money to buy him a new van and he has a group of people by his side in Midland who love him.

He also knows there were dozens of people around Perth who cared enough to ensure he could honour Judy. What does he think of them?

He is quiet, then says that their generosity surprised him because he didn't think people still had the heart to donate. "You want to know what I really think, do you want to know the honest truth," he says, lifting his head. "I think they are great, bloody great."

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St Bart's: 9323 5100, stbarts.org.au; Midlas: 9250 2123, midlas.org.au; Midland Meals: 0405 534 479, lp Pratt@adventist.org.au



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