

THE ULTIMATE SURVIVOR'S STORY OF A YOUNG BOY WHO WAS ALMOST BURNT ALIVE AND HIS INCREDIBLE BATTLE TO BELONG



SAVING ROBERT NORTH



“I threw that match over my shoulder and the whole bed went up behind me and came over me.”

“Try picking yourself up by your bootstraps when you don't have any fingers.”

BEN HARVEY DARYNA ZADVRINA

Ask Robbie North to name the hardest thing in life and you see a young man fall into deep concentration. People with burns this bad to this much of their bodies have a lot of options. He could choose the chronic pain that racks his twisted torso every moment he is awake. He could choose the frustrations of going through life with no hands. He could choose the slow gait he lives with, which is caused by having wrecked feet. Maybe it's the monotonous trips to hospital three times a week to have the open sores on his legs treated and dressed. Or the open sores themselves, which have defied the best medical brains in the country and stubbornly refused to heal. The list could include having to enduring constant stares as people look at the twisted flesh that make up his neck and face. After a few seconds of thought, he responds. "My bloody car. It's a piece of crap. It's always breaking down. I have never had any luck when it comes to cars."

It says a lot about this 33-year-old's outlook that he reckons the hardest thing in his life is a crappy old Holden Commodore. Pressed again, he starts thinking once more. He is genuinely drawing a blank. It is the same reluctance to admit hardship that journalists see when they interview billionaires. Robbie hits on something. "I find it really hard to hang out my washing because I can't get my arms up high enough. The skin is too tight. That's why I had a dryer. I know it's expensive to run..." Robbie is on cloud nine when The Sunday Times spoke to him recently. He had just moved in to a new apartment in Maylands, where he lives with his pet galah, Benjie. He has a job he enjoys. His medication is working well, keeping the pain and anxiety at bay. And he has just celebrated his birthday. Most importantly, he has just qualified for NDIS funding. How it took this long, given his obvious impairments, is a mystery. "It's been a pretty good few days,"

he says standing at his kitchen bench grinning. If there is any person in WA that deserves a pretty good few days, it is this bloke. Getting Robbie to a point where he is happy and safe has taken an enormous effort by a great many people. Family, doctors, friends, social workers. There has been an army of people in the battle to save Robert North, not least of all Robert North himself. Try picking yourself up by your bootstraps when you don't have any fingers. The fight to save Robbie began on the morning of January 23, 1992. That was when a four-year-old boy fumbled a box of matches off a coffee table at a house in Balga and smuggled them into his bedroom. Sitting on his bed, surrounded by blankets made with material far more fire prone than those of today, Robbie began striking matches and throwing them behind himself onto the bed. The first two didn't catch. The third did.

“Neighbours save boy from fire” was the page 9 headline in The West Australian on January 24, 1992. “Quick action by neighbours saved the life of a four-year-old boy who was badly burnt in a fire which started in his bedroom while his mother slept yesterday morning.”



A story on the fire showing Robert's sister Kylie with their grandfather, Ron Palmer.

the report said. “Cups, buckets and two garden hoses were used by neighbours who joined forces when one of them saw smoke coming from the child's bedroom at the Balga house.” With lights and sirens piercing the dark, quiet night air and the fire raging inside, one woman stood wrestling with a thought that will send a shiver down the spine of any parent reading this. “My children are in there.” Minutes earlier, Margaret North's partner Karl Seymour had been in a hallway in the house in Fitzroy Street, Balga, watching black smoke billow from under the door to Robbie's room. He went to open the door but it was so hot, he was unable to get close to it. In a panic, he grabbed Robbie's two-year-old sister from the next room and fled outside as neighbours started dousing the house with water from garden hoses. After an agonising few minutes, Karl was able to get into Robbie's bedroom. The sight that confronted him when he opened the door is unimaginable. A small sobbing, shivering mess of charred flesh was on the floor next to a bed, which was on fire. Scared to touch him lest the small amount of skin slid off his body, the simple act of getting Robbie into an ambulance was harrowing. The child died several times in

the few minutes he was in the back of the van on the way to Princess Margaret Hospital. Each time, paramedics brought him back. As the ambulance screeched to a halt at the front of the emergency department, a team of medicos was waiting. The first part of saving Robert North — getting him to hospital — was over. It was, as Winston Churchill said, not the end of this battle. Nor was it the beginning of the end. It was just the end of the beginning. I don't remember exactly what actually happened that night,” Robbie says. He knows the lead-up to the flames but not actually the getting burnt. It's a story he has recounted time and time again over the past 29 years of his life but he shows no sign of impatience. “I woke up and went out of my bedroom and saw some matches on a coffee table,” he says. “I picked them up and went back to my bedroom and started flicking them. “The third match stayed alight. I was sitting on the edge of my bed. I threw that match over my shoulder and the whole bed went up behind me and came over me.” Robbie spent the best part of 1992 in a coma as medical staff treated his wounds. One of the doctors who pieced together the little boy as he lay unconscious for a solid nine months was a young Fiona Wood. He was clad head-to-toe in a pressure suit for months after he emerged from that long coma. Then came the skin grafts. Over the next few years, he endured more grafts than he can remember. Seven years after the fire, his biological father, John, had skin stripped from his own back. It was sent to Melbourne to be grown and transplanted onto Robbie. John spent three months in hospital, his back in ruins. “I just told them to do whatever they needed to do and take it off,” John said. Repairing this much skin was an extraordinary feat. Successful transplants presented a new problem — movement. Hour upon hour of physiotherapy was needed to gently stretch the tight layers that covered Robbie's body.

Was it painful? “Yeah, it was. It hurt a fair bit,” Robbie says in a tone that suggests “fair bit” is an understatement from a fellow who is no stranger to discomfort. There was a huge amount of work to his face. If you look at the picture of him in school uniform compared with the main image of him today, you can appreciate the number of hours of reconstructive surgery. “I have pretty good movement now, better than when I was younger,” he says. “I used to hit my head a lot. I used to keep tripping because my legs were so stiff. “I used to wear a mask so I didn't hit my face when I fell. That's why I have got a dent in my forehead, from the mask.” It is tempting to frame Robbie's story as one of one person's fight against the odds. One person's life in a society that found his story too confronting and too hard. The less comfortable truth is Robbie has been through periods where he was less than a perfect patient. He often shunned help as he grappled with the complexity of his life. He may outwardly struggle to come up with examples of how his life is more difficult than for others, but deep down he knows his day-to-day battle takes its toll. At times, he has exploded with rage. Rage against how unfair it all is. Rage against the pain. Rage against the stares. Rage against a life that can never be ordinary. Rage that he has to be grateful for small mercies, such as a couple of pain-free hours in the morning. “I have always been an angry man,” he admits. “I have got AMS. Angry man syndrome. “If something pisses me off, I will go off. To the point where four coppers will show up. They never touch me though. They ask me to go off the property, go for a walk and calm down. I can't believe it takes four of them to do that.” That anger was the main reason he spent the best part of his past 17 years living on the fringes of society. Not quite a life on the streets but pretty close to it. If you sit back and look at all the goodwill extended to him from so many people over so

many years, you wonder how he ended up drifting like he did. Rewind 29 years to that PMH hospital bed and it starts making sense. His family life started slowly disintegrating during the nine months he was in a coma. His mother was understandably racked with guilt about whether the tragedy could have been avoided. “I think she got to the point where she wanted to turn the machines off,” he says. “I was under Fiona Wood and that's when Fiona stepped in. Every time me and mum had a fight, she always blamed me, she said it was my fault.” Robbie was confined to hospital for more than a year. His mother's visits became less regular as the months passed and the parenting void was filled by the many doctors and nurses who looked after him. One nurse took a particular shine to him and in an extraordinary act, she applied to adopt her little patient. For 10 years, he lived with his foster family, first in Noranda and then Dianella. Robbie was younger than his two foster brothers and one sister and it was as normal a life as it could be. But by the time Robbie was 16, that home life was getting fractious. He is reluctant to explain what went wrong, other than to say, “I didn't do right by them”. He was in the media briefly in the mid-noughties, a period when he used his minor celebrity to warn school kids about the danger of playing with fire. Then he quietly slipped off the radar. Couch surfing. In and out of hostels. He occasionally secured his own house but people claiming to be his friends quickly invaded and took over. They were possibly attracted to his regular disability pension payments. Either way, people took advantage of him. Many of them

were heavy drug users. “In the past, I had gone to people and said ‘yeah, you can come and live with me’ and then it would take months for me to get them out,” he says. “What attracted them to you? “I don't know,” he shrugs. “Everyone asks me that. I don't know.” He drifted through life as a figure on the streets of Perth. You may have seen Robbie selling Big Issue in Hay Street Mall. You probably dropped your eyes when you walked past him. His regular visits to hospital were a rare constant in his life. “For a while there, I didn't feel like I had much support,” he says. “But I wasn't interested. I was just young and dumb and pissed off.” Finally, it all got too much. Robbie was tired. “I realised I was getting too old for this s---,” he recalls. “The people I was living with were doing my head in. I needed my own space, so my carers could come in and do what they needed to do. “I think I am just getting wise about it now because I matured at a later age. I had some learning problems because I was affected by the smoke.” Robbie had heard about the homeless charity, St Bart's, and decided to make contact. “I needed a fresh start,” he says. “I just had to get away from the people I was with.” “When he first came to us, (Robbie) was very hesitant of what the program, or what we were about,” St Bart's case manager Rachael Nudds said. “He was hesitant of what we could be and what we could do for him.” While Rachael saw Robbie's strength in seeking help, he saw it differently. “There was a real part of him that believed asking for help was not OK — that it was a sign of weakness,” she says. “He got so far in his life already that if he was asking for help, that was his sort of failing. “My job was to make him realise that it was OK. There was support out there that he was completely

From P22

entitled to. "It was a big turning point for him."  
For the next several months, the pair saw each other once or twice a week, gradually building his goals and knocking down his doubts.

"The first thing would be the mental health," she says. "He was very frustrated, feeling very low, hopeless and down."

"So we linked him with a GP, we did a mental health plan and got any medication necessary. Then, after a period of time, it was just working on his self-esteem."

That almost non-existent self-esteem received a boost when Robbie started volunteering at Second Bite, a warehouse where food leftovers from places such as supermarkets were processed and distributed to different charities.

"I was volunteering since November or December and after that, they put me in part time," Robbie says. "They are just a good group. They helped me through some tough times. They are lovely people."

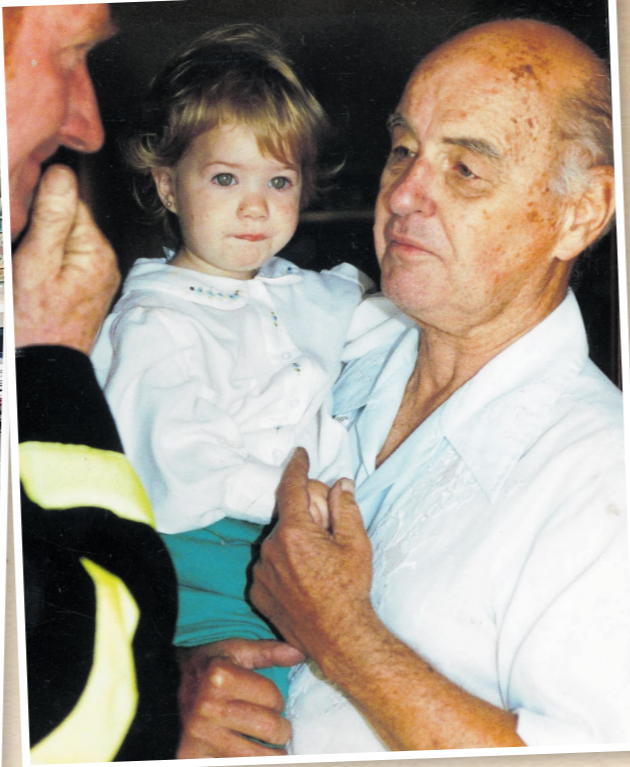
"I do eight hours a week. Centrelink goes by what I earn, so they take \$150 out but that's OK because I am earning \$500 or \$600, so I am actually in a good position."

Rachael says Robbie's job at Second Bite was a defining moment. But one thing was still missing from Robbie's life — a place to call his own.

Rachael filed a request for NDIS and was by Robbie's side throughout the medical assessments, tests and tedious paperwork.

About two months ago, his support package came through and a month later, he moved to Maylands.

"He's now in his private rental —



Clockwise from far left: St Bart's case manager Rachael Nudds; Robbie's sister Kylie with their grandfather on the night of the fire in 1992; Robbie in 2004 with his pet rabbit; and Robbie today. Main picture: Nic Ellis

which is huge — he never, ever thought he could have that."

Rachael says. "His actual words to me were 'I actually now feel alive.'"

"He's not living with anyone else, he's not being exploited, he's not vulnerable, (or experiencing) all those things that used to go on at the different places he's lived."

"For myself and the team,

watching Robbie's story and journey unfold in front of us was a privilege. "I'm so incredibly proud of him."

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The past few months have been stable but it wasn't all smooth sailing. Robbie is grateful for the help he received from St Bart's

says he occasionally found the environment at the East Perth building quite suffocating.

He was frustrated that people in far better situations were leaching off him.

"I would come home to St Bart's and everyone would say 'have you got a cigarette' and I would think 'f--- off mate I have been busting

my a--- at work all day',"

he says. "A few times when I first moved into St Bart's, I went off. And everyone heard me."

He loves his house — a neat-as-a-pin, two-bedroom flat near the railway.

"Where we are right now, I have never had anything like this." His

home is immaculately clean. It needs to be because his open wounds are prone to infection. He gets sick often as the bugs that cover a healthy person's skin burrow into his soft raw flesh.

"They loved me at St Bart's because my place was clean all the time," he says. "If I get an infection, I start feeling sick." He feels balanced,

thanks to a daily dose of medication that keeps his anxiety and depression in check. And for the first time in his life, he is sleeping well.

"Physically, I feel fit," he says. "It's just these pain-in-the-a--- wounds. It's my legs. The wounds just won't heal. We have done everything. I am like a guinea pig. I have got to keep getting them dressed. I have a

15-minute soak and then they clean them up."

Robbie is resigned to the fact his legs won't heal. He is resigned to the fact he has regularly attached a machine to his legs that sucks away the fluid that builds up relentlessly.

The one thing that he isn't resigned to is having a crappy car. He recounts two stories that

make sense of something that seems to be an odd obsession.

The first story revolves around the hoops he had to jump through to get his driver's licence.

Understandably, the Department of Transport took some convincing that someone with no fingers would be a safe driver.

The second story really gets to

the nub of why someone with no hands and, at-best, limited movement covets reliability more than most.

"I was driving through the Graham Farmer Freeway and I blew a tyre slap bang in the middle of the tunnel," he said.

"Can you believe that? Right there in the middle of the tunnel with cars screaming past me on each side."

That would test the resolve of anyone. But for someone with no hands, it presents a particularly pressing problem.

"The thing that p----- me off is I am still paying off the last car I had," he says. "And that was a poxy lemon as well. So I am paying \$149 a fortnight on this other car that I don't even own anymore because I had to get rid of it because it was such a piece of crap."

A reliable set of wheels is priority No.1 in Robbie's new life. A puppy is No.2. He misses his old dog, Doug, who ran away a few months ago.

"He was an American staffie and he followed me around all the time," he says. "Every time he heard someone coming up, he would growl."

"He was found by a ranger but I couldn't get him out of the pound because by that time I was at St Bart's and I couldn't take him. He was a good mate."

A distant third priority is an Xbox.

"I can actually work the controls pretty well, you know," he said, motioning with his arms.

The story of Saving Robert North isn't over.

A fairytale ending isn't guaranteed. But if the end of the story is more uneventful than the start, then that will be just fine by Robbie.

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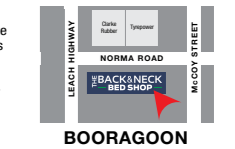
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