

Legends of East Gippsland: Louis Pruscino

After a lifetime of coping with a disability, Louis Pruscino remains philosophical about the card he was dealt at the tender age of 18 months. "You accept what happens and move on, I'm still luckier than a lot of people", says Louis, who was born in Bairnsdale in 1940 and contracted polio at the height of the Australian epidemic. "I woke up crying with a fever in the night unable to support my leg." He says people are affected differently because where the virus rests in the spinal cord determines what part of the body is affected, but treatment at any level was prolonged and arduous and at the time meant years in hospital.

Lou's story reveals just how much attitudes towards people with disabilities have changed in the last 50-60 years, and just how much a determined youngster can achieve despite the odds. His parents, Antonio and Filomena Pruscino, always treated him equally with the other children in this close and industrious family. They were from Sano Lupo, Italy, 100km from Naples. In 1938 Antonio was sponsored by his brother Pasquale who had lived in Wy Yung for several years. "Dad came out on a merchant ship and was sick every day, he swore he'd never go back." His brother had come out several years earlier and worked as a laborer. "Dad did laboring, truck driving and worked with the Country Roads Board. About 18 months later he brought out my mother and my elder brother, Giuseppe, who was two years of age - they came on the last ship leaving Italy before the war broke out."

They were still living in Wy Yung when Lou contracted polio. He was rushed to Sale Hospital where he spent a couple of years. At it was wartime his dad was interned at Maffra, working on the sugar beet, and had to walk or borrow a bike to visit Lou at Sale - it was almost impossible for his mother to see him. Then he was sent to the Austin Hospital in Melbourne - where he could hear the trains - and was always telling people he would be a train driver. "I was about seven when I finally came home and the family was renting a small house on the same property as the Exchange house in Lucknow - years later the family bought the property and started the store." By then there were three more siblings, Assunta, Albert and Lena.

I came home with two calipers and two walking sticks as well as a brace for the spine as I had curvature of the spine. Therapy was severe - at night he would be tucked into a splint - spreadeagled and unable to move with his hands and feet tied. He had to walk to school at Lucknow and one evening Chas Yizzard, the Peugeot agent who owned the business behind the servo, saw him walking and called in to see his parents, offering to help.

"Eight to 10 years earlier Chas had been bedridden with no hope of walking again, but after visiting an osteopath was back in action after six months. So from his own heart he took me and another young man from Paynesville, to Melbourne, to visit the American osteopath Alice Virginia Farnam, who worked from a private residence in Brighton at weekends and had a practice in Collins Street.

She would manipulate my spine and said we could throw away the brace - the spine needed to be re-educated. Also the left leg caliper should only be used on alternate days. She said it was weakening the leg. The right could not be helped - but her main concern was for the health of the spine. I saw her for 18 months then she said she couldn't do any more. She did this at no charge.

During this time the polio specialist from the Department of Health would visit the Bairnsdale Hospital once a month. He said if I continued going to the osteopath he would have nothing to do with me - despite the obvious improvement. My local doctor would also have nothing to do with me and referred me to another doctor.

We moved back to Wy Yung - next to the pub - there was no water, no electricity. The school bus passed by but I couldn't be picked up because I was under the three mile limit. Here I am losing school - so as a last resort dad saw Sir Albert Lind one Sunday. By the Wednesday wed got a call that the bus would pick me up on Thursday but because the route went to the high school I had to go to state school 754 to do grade six, though brothers and sisters went to St Mary's.

When I was at Lucknow, because I was growing, every six months the caliper and brace would need replacement - needing four or five weeks at Yooralla. I'd stay at the Deva Hostel in Acland Street, St Kilda - home for 20 country children and adults. A Red Cross driver and vehicle would take me to Yooralla and back each day - I have great admiration for what Red Cross do for us.

Those early years of school were difficult with all the interruptions - I always had a lot of catching up to do. My parents didn't treat me any differently from my brothers and sisters. Exchange House came up for sale and we bought it and moved back to Lucknow - I could still get the school bus to high school and did all my schooling there including being house captain and prefect in my final year. I wanted to be a teacher or a chemist but although the head master, WD Gibbs made appointments with the banks and others, they all had an excuse and wouldn't put me on because I was disabled."

He finished school and wondered what to do. The family had opened the shop; they grew vegetables and ran the milk bar and Lou helped out. An opportunity came up at Dahlsens - "I worked in the Manchester department for three months, then in the office to do book keeping and advertising".

He'd taken another blow in the health department then developing Type 1 (juvenile) diabetes. So at 21 he found out all about daily injections and a restricted diet. Then came the Menzies government credit squeeze of 1961 - a lot of staff were put off, but Brian Dahlsen played golf with accountant Lloyd Porch, and Mr Porch was prepared to take Lou on at WL Porch & Co, (now Eager and Partners). He'd found his niche.

"Working with accountants I met many interesting clients, and studied for an accounting degree by correspondence with Stotts. It was quite difficult but I became a member of the Australian Society of Accountants and then a chartered accountant. We didn't know anything about football at home but at Lucknow school my mates would have footy badges from the Argus newspaper. Richmond was on the bottom so I barracked for them - but I'd have to wait until Monday to find out if they won or lost.

In 1973 I decided to work in Melbourne and boarded near the MCG where I could watch Richmond play. That first year there were three Richmond teams in the finals and they all won. I worked for PKF accountants in William Street for 12 months and part of the job was to go to various clients and collect their records. If I finished early in the afternoon I would have trouble parking - I normally came to work by tram.

There was an ad for work with a sole practitioner in Nicholson Street, Fitzroy, where I had no parking problems, but 15 months later he said he was moving to the Junction at Camberwell in six months time and he didn't know how I would cope with the parking there as there was only one parking space available and I couldn't get there by tram or train. He gave me time off to look for another job and I found one in Greville Street, Prahran with Hooke, Graham and Digby where there was plenty of all day parking."

While there, Lou married Linda and on a visit home at Easter met Bairnsdale accountant Ern Lloyd. He was at Eager and Partners and asked if Lou had thought of coming back. "So we decided to come back to Bairnsdale and work with the firm I'd left nine years previously." He retired in 2003. Although he'd wanted to work until 65 he had lost the sight in one eye which made it difficult working on computers.

"In my early years I would score for the Wy Yung cricketers and at that stage at work people said I should try bowls but I thought I was too young. In my final year in Melbourne a neighbor, a keen bowler for Ringwood, asked if I'd like to play - I didn't think they'd allow me on the green with walking sticks, but after an interview I was one of five new members accepted at the club in that year. My coach was Don Hardy who came to Bairnsdale a couple of years later and we renewed the acquaintance."

Lou is a long time member of Howitt Park Bowling Club and has quite a line up of trophies on his bookshelves. "In retirement I'm bowling whenever I can and walking as much as possible. I'm reading all the books I bought over the years and now have time to read."

He has one daughter, Cheryl, who works at Royal Melbourne Hospital.

"Despite my disability I've never lost a day's work and only vision problems prevented retirement at 65. I have made many friends at work and through bowling and find that apart from council and governments - everything goes well." Lou harks back to when he worked at the office in Service Street above where Coastcare is now. He'd had to have a toe removed and would park nearby and people from the office would lift him up the stairs. "I got a parking ticket! 'Sorry' - I was told - 'we can't do anything about it - can't make an exception.' So I spoke to Tom Eager - as I couldn't work because of the cost of fines. He wrote to council but they said again they could not make an exception. Eventually I'd get there in the morning - be lifted upstairs and one of the others would drive to the car to a longer park area."

Yet when I was working in Prahran - I'd had surgery on a toe and couldn't wear a shoe for a couple of weeks and had to park outside the office, I told the boss I'd had trouble in Bairnsdale and he spoke to the local parking officer who said 'you leave the car there as long as you want.' There was some leeway given - I wasn't a ratepayer and he didn't know me yet he was so kind."

Lou has been proactive on issues to do with disability. Polio sufferers, with varying degrees of problems, meet in Bairnsdale to discuss issues. Lou says a main problem for all who suffered polio is PPS (post polio syndrome) because a part of the body has been affected for a long time other parts have had to work harder and so they are all wearing out much earlier. "Until the last two or three years I only needed one walking stick - now it's back to two because the better leg can collapse - and there are the shoulders which have borne the weight so long. When we meet we discuss these problems - people come and talk to us - we thought it was old age - but it's PPS."

Other issues are discussed such as goods outside stores, which can be a bit of a nuisance - with any disability group you'll find what suits one may not suit another - this also affects the blind, vision impaired, wheelchair, polio sufferers - you can't all go under one umbrella. Now things have changed and there is no discrimination in the workplace. There have been disappointments - not being able to get life insurance, limited superannuation, restricted work choices, parking problems. Life's hard enough without these obstacles. But I'm happy - I was educated, worked most of life and just hope with diabetes and polio that I can live a few more years in retirement. I would encourage people to be more sympathetic towards people with a disability - remember you're the lucky ones."