

A life focused on his ability



By Roz Pulley

THE same accident which took away the use of his legs, allowed Robert Pyne to discover and develop the brain he never knew he had.

Robert, regional disability liaison officer at James Cook University in Cairns, broke his neck in a diving accident on December 1, 1991 and spent nine months in the spinal unit at Brisbane's Princess Alexandra Hospital before returning home.

"I knew when I left hospital I was going to have to study to try and improve myself," says the 34-year-old father of one and Queensland Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association director.

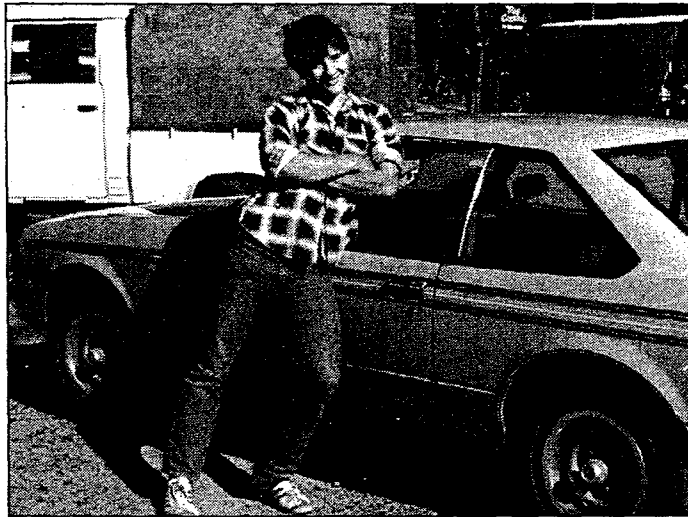
"I've never been intellectually brilliant, but I'd like to think I've got a pretty good head on my shoulders, so when the doctors said 'you're going to have these muscles, you're not going to have these' — they never say you can't walk again — it didn't take long to work it out."

Some in the spinal unit struggled to adjust, says Robert.

"One chap who'd been there nine months — he was in the same position as me — I said 'what are you doing'. He said 'I'm trying to move my toes' and thought 'get over it'."

Robert decided he wasn't about to spend the rest of his life trying to twiddle his toes.

"I filled out a QTAC form to do a Bachelor of Arts in history and politics, even though I never did very well at school. My TE (tertiary entrance) score was appallingly low. I couldn't get



1985: Robert Pyne aged 18 with his own car.

into the lowest tertiary course in Queensland based on what I achieved at high school.

"So when I enrolled in uni, most of my family and friends said 'that's pushing it a bit, Robert doing study'."

After completing an arts degree at JCU (which he credits largely to his mentor Dr Dawn May) and filling office as student union president, he enrolled in law externally through Queensland University of Technology.

"It arrived in the mail last week," beams Robert, pointing to an embossed certificate in his office which declares him the holder of a Bachelor of Laws. Next on his list is an honours degree in politics.

"The two things I'm best qualified for are politics and the law, but I like to think my ethics are a bit higher than that," he says with a grin.

Robert remembers with great clarity the day he changed from outdoors bloke to wheelchair-bound quadriplegic. He was sailing off Cairns with fiancée Jenny (now his wife) and her father. "Jenny's dad was showing me his boat. It was very hot and I just dived off the boat and didn't realise there was sand there. I hit my head on sand.

"I didn't lose consciousness. I'd been hit around the head a lot harder than that in my time. I was lying face down and knew straight away what had happened. I knew I was paralysed and thought 'don't lift me up anyone, I just want to die' because I was a very physical person. I used to go to the gym, ride bikes.

"Then Jenny's father picked me up out of the water and I thought 'you bastard'. Then he put me down in the water again, face down, and I was looking at the bottom of the water and started to get a bit short of breath and I was thinking 'help me someone, I'm going to drown'. It's amazing how you can have an idea along certain lines and how that idea can change."

The son of former Cairns mayor and Mulgrave shire chairman Tom Pyne, Robert never allowed the accident to dampen his sense of humour or darken his mood — even from the beginning.

"I probably felt the best I've felt in my life about an hour after the accident 'cause they gave us gas in the ambulance. It's top stuff," he jokes.

His approach to life and ability to relate to others equip him well for his JCU job, in which he



1968: Robert at 18 months.



Today: James Cook University regional disability liaison officer Robert Pyne, 34. Picture: Sue Wellwood

encourages disabled people into tertiary education.

"What I say to a lot of people is that when you have a disability — regardless of whatever anti-discrimination legislation is in place — you're going to have to be as well educated as the next person and better educated if you're going to have a chance of gaining a good job and holding it down. I'm not afraid to tell people that."