



Making A Difference

A man whose name is synonymous with government in the Far North is vying for a place in the Cairns City Council at next year's elections. Disability advocate, Robert Pyne, tells **TONY HILLIER** about his decision to run for council, and other life-changing events. Photo by Robert Kellett.

It was on December the 1st, 1991, that Robert Pyne's life as he knew it came to an abrupt end. He dived off a boat into unexpectedly shallow water, broke his neck, and became a quadriplegic. The accident happened a few weeks before Robert was supposed to be married.

"Jenny and I were married three months later, while I was still a patient at the spinal unit which was against the advice of many people, including a local Minister of religion. He expressed concern about whether I could consummate the marriage, which we felt was none of his business anyway," said Robert.

That was 15 years ago, and Robert has just turned 40. He's philosophical about the event that radically reshaped his future. "Who knows why things happen, but I guess that, for me, the accident meant my life was just going down a different path and I tried to make the best of it."

With physical activity severely restricted, Robert turned his attention to cerebral pursuits, completing a Bachelor of Arts degree with honours in history and politics at James Cook University and a law degree at Queensland University of Technology.

"I stayed at uni and became more interested in local government and some of the problems that society's facing," he said. That focus, coupled with his heritage,

has led inexorably to a decision to stand for Cairns City Council as part of Val Schier's Cairns First team.

Government is certainly in his pedigree. The Pyne family roots trace back to the early days of European settlement in the city. His father, Tom Pyne, gave nearly 40 years of unbroken service to local government before retiring in 2000. It was his father who defeated Kevin Byrne to become the first Mayor of Cairns, following the amalgamation with Mulgrave Shire in 1995.

As FNQ Regional Disability Council Chair, Robert has had good grounding as a prospective councillor. As well as his roles on the regional and state disability councils, Robert is Cairns Region Disability Liaison Officer for JCU and the president of advocacy group Rights in Action. "I have become passionate about what I'm doing because there is such great need out there," he says, stressing "I'm in a position to make a difference."

The fact that the JCU and TAFE campuses are currently so accessible for people with disabilities speaks volumes for Robert's advocacy. Robert intends applying that same passion and commitment if elected to represent Mt Sheridan and White Rock residents next March. Robert lives at Forest Gardens in the heart of Division 3 with his wife Jenny, and his nine-year-old daughter, Katherine. "We were very

lucky – the first time we went on the IVF program we were successful."

If he gets in, Robert says he'll make sure council meets any statutory obligations it might have in regards to people with a disability – "as it should to all groups in society," he hastily adds. Robert said it's interesting the extent to which issues cross over. "A lot of the things that affect me as a disabled person using a motorised wheelchair also affect mothers with children in prams and people who use bikeways."

Other big issues he identifies in his patch are the utilisation of disused cane train lines to alleviate the traffic problems south of the city, and curtailment of hillside development. Robert said his father's work ethic and the community spirit his council engendered is something to which he aspires.

"Growing up, I was lucky enough to see the Mulgrave Shire as very much a community-based council where all of the councillors were in tune with what people wanted. It's important to try and retain that connection with the community because it gives people the feeling they've got a voice in how their council's run. I think a lot of people, these days, think they've lost that, and it's a shame." □

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