

Robert not one to live in anyone's shadow

Robert Pyne doesn't think he'll follow his father, Cairns mayor Tom Pyne, into politics, but he is studying the subject at university and has taken on the role of president of the James Cook University Student Association.



Weekend Profile

By KAREN FORMAN

ROBERT Pyne slumps back in his wheelchair, flashes a toothy smile, then dares to ask: "You're going to ask me if I'm going to follow Dad into politics, aren't you?"

Well, I had to admit the idea had crossed my mind once or twice ... and now he had broached the subject, this seemed as good a time as any.

"Are you going to follow Tom into politics?" I ask the dark haired, bearded young fellow sitting before me, trying very diligently to put on my serious, Jana Wendt-type investigative reporter's face.

I fail and we both laugh.

It's difficult to be serious with Robert on this occasion, because we have spent the first hour or so of our interview laughing and cracking jokes about Robert's escapades as a youngster growing up in Edmonton.

(The story about his "escape" from the police sniffer dogs after a night of fun on the town, but subsequent "capture" thanks to an on the ball Cairns Post reporter who saw him hiding under a car, really takes the cake.)

At 28, Robert is a good looking, likable young man with a bright personality and a positive outlook on life.

"This is fun, going back over old times," he says with a grin, "it's lucky I don't want to be a politician!"

A-ha.

Doesn't want to be a politician, he says. Why then has he taken on the role of president of the James Cook University Student Association?

Let's look into this a bit further.

Managing to be a little more serious this time, I repeat my question.

"Do you want to be a politician?"

Robert smiles.

"Well, Dad is a fairly unique individual — I meant it," he says, with obvious fondness.

"He is a really good person and extremely good at what he does, but he also handles the stress and pressures of public life better than anyone I've ever seen. He's incredible at how he does it.

"If I thought I could do it half as good as him, I might have a go at politics — but I doubt it."

Serious statement over, Robert admits that was the only "line" he had rehearsed in preparation for our interview.

"I lay in bed last night and thought of it," he said.

So why become involved in student politics?

"Simply because the last president, Michelle Hollywood, suggested I have a go," he said.

The job, he says, is a full-time one, and he gets paid \$300 a week for the 40 or so hours he puts in.

What does he do on the weekends?

"The study I should be doing during the week," he replies with a laugh.

One thing's for sure, if Robert Pyne did decide, later on, to enter the political arena, he would certainly be well prepared for the lifestyle.



ON the job . . . Robert Pyne talks with fellow students. Picture: Dean Lewins.

He describes his childhood as a "typical working class childhood — that is, I played rugby league and performed poorly in high school".

His Dad was Mayor of the now defunct Mulgrave Shire in those days, but always found time to take young Robert along to his weekly footie matches.

"I saw a fair bit of him," Robert says.

Born at Gordonvale hospital on April 23, 1967, Robert was Tom and wife Marion's first child. He has a sister, Joann.

The family lived in Edmonton for most of Robert's young life and he attended Edmonton primary and Gordonvale high schools.

Football was his life and being strong from regular gym workouts, he played mostly in forward positions.

"I wasn't a big fellow to start with but as I got older I got bigger and stronger," he said.

Like most young people, the young Robert thought the world was his oyster and had no notion of anything too terrible ever happening to him.

He spins a yarn or two about old times, conceding he was a bit of a "wild larrikin" as a youngster.

"Being the son of a mayor might make you a bit wild," he says with a glint in his eye, "but honestly, I was just a typical young person. You know, I was pretty health conscious, playing football and going to the gym. I'd be fit during the week and let go on weekends."

Football went pretty much by the wayside, however, after a knee reconstruction operation.

But Robert says he "wasn't much good anyhow so it didn't matter".

Told by a career's adviser that he wouldn't be going to university, he finished school at 17 and took a job as a clerk with the National Bank.

It wasn't his ideal career, but he stuck it out for eight months before accepting a position as a clerk working for the Public Trustee of Queensland.

The work involved conveyancing deceased estates and will making and he loved both the job and his workmates and probably still would have been there had it not been for an accident that left him a quadriplegic only weeks before he was due to be married.

Robert had met Jenny Brelsford at a workmate's 21st birthday party (he had been going out with someone else at the time) and by 1991 the couple was engaged to be married.

The date had been set for December 28 that year and a Tasmanian honeymoon had been planned.

But a stroke of misfortune on December 1 resulted in a few changes.

Robert takes up the story.

"Let's talk about the psychology of someone who breaks their neck," he says, with absolutely no self-pity, no regret and no bitterness.

"I was out in a boat on Trinity Inlet — somewhere, I don't remember now — with Jenny and her parents and I dove out of the boat and hit a sandbar.

"I broke my neck so I'm lying in the water and staring at the sand below me.

"As soon as I did it I knew I had broken my neck. I knew this was it man, I'm (expletive).

"And you know, I was thinking, don't pull me up, just let me drown. I couldn't feel anything, no pain. I couldn't roll over, I was face down in the water."

ROBERT pauses for breath, then continues the story about the incident he describes as the "most traumatic period of my life". "Then Jenny's dad put a hand down under my chest and lifted me up above the water and I got a big breath of air. Then he dropped me back down into the water," he goes on.

"As soon as my face hit the water, I thought 'pick me up, pick me up'. It's that quick. The strangest instinct in the human is the will to survive."

After that, it as "the normal shit. Go to hospital, get transferred to Brisbane, spend nine months in the spinal unit..."

It was an understatement, Robert says, when doctors in Brisbane told him things didn't look "real good".

He had broken his neck — a bit lower than actor Christopher Reeve's break, which meant he retained more use of his limbs.

"I can't walk and I've got 50 per cent use of my arms," he said.

"The higher up the break the less feeling you have."

Doctors operated to fuse the broken vertebrae and once the

operation site healed, he was allowed into a wheelchair.

"The first thing that happens is you faint," he said, matter of factly.

"When you become a quad you get low blood pressure. It takes a couple of months before you can sit up without getting dizzy."

Robert's rehabilitation was easier than some because he accepted his lot.

"Many people come in and because the media reports all these miracles, they can't accept things," he said. "They say they're going to walk again. I'm pretty realistic. I accepted it straight away. Like in war it tends to bring out your sense of humour. So you'd be laughing ... and the next minute you'd be crying."

He was still in hospital when he filled out an application to study at the Cairns James Cook University campus and still in hospital when he got married.

"There was a chaplain in the hospital so we thought we'd ask him to marry us," Robert said.

"He put the job on me that he didn't want to do it, that we should wait. He didn't think I could consummate the marriage."

Hospital staff cheered as Robert took a day and a night's leave to marry his sweetheart in a ceremony at a Brisbane city hotel on February 22 1992, but it was back to hospital for another seven months for the young bridegroom.

Finally returning to Cairns, the couple set up home near Tom and Marion's house at Edmonton, but have recently moved to Kewarra Beach.

They've talked about having kids, but Robert wants to be financially stable before bringing little mouths into the world. Besides, having kids means going to Brisbane for IVF treatment.

Meanwhile, Robert is enjoying studying history and ... you better believe it, politics, at JCU, and is toying with the idea of doing honours in politics later on.

He says his lot in life has been made easier by the fact he is married — Jenny does the things he can't do for himself — and through the assistance of Centacare worker Louisa Tyrer, his "arms and legs" who helps him three hours a day.

"I'm off the pension, Jenny is off her pension, we pay taxes ... we are lucky."