

The Peteris Ginters Lunch – In honour of his retirement from practice

Robert Reitano



On Friday 27 October 2017 a group of 70 or so barristers, former barristers, clerks and chambers staff gathered at the Marigold Restaurant in Chinatown to celebrate the retirement from practice of one of the bar's own, Peteris Ginters. Peteris was diagnosed on 7 November 2016 with motor neurone disease. The lunch was an opportunity to say thank you to a friend, a colleague, a mentor, a fellow practitioner and most of all, to one of the good blokes of the New South Wales Bar. Few of you will ever know the feeling of emptiness that surrounded me on the morning of 10 November 2016. After not seeing Peteris for two days, he entered my room, closed the door and uttered the words I will never ever forget: 'So do you want to know my news? I've got motor neurone disease.' There was nothing to say so I filled the silence with the only word I could think of: 'f**k'. After that I went through all those things that I suppose people confronted by such news from others go through, 'This might be a mistake, you need to get a second opinion'. He left chambers that day with the promise that we would still have lunch. And we certainly did on 27 October 2017.

It is not uncommon to question why it is that someone who has lived a healthy, productive and blameless life can be struck down by such a debilitating disease without warning or provocation. There is no satisfactory or remotely appropriate answer to such a question. On any level there is no good that can come of this. Or at least that was what I thought until I considered what I had learnt from the experience of watching my friend and his wife, Caroline's response to motor neurone disease. Those at the lunch were privileged to witness Peteris's response to his diagnosis of a disease without a cure. The good to come out of this lay in the sterling example Peteris offers to each one of us in confronting this challenge.

From the time of his diagnosis Peteris has faced the challenge with strength and sto-

icism. His primary concern has been his family and the pressure the disease has placed upon them. Peteris loves his family and his thoughts are about them and not himself. He knows he has a battle on his hands but his primary concern is to shelter his family and

ience than their colleagues practising in commercial and personal injury litigation.

Peteris has proven himself to be a leading member of the industrial bar. His colleagues invariably describe him as



Members and staff of 15 Wardell Chambers. Standing from left to right: Andrew McSpedden, Adrian Canceri, Andrew Joseph, Tim Reilly, Larissa Andelman, George Lucarelli, Erik Young, Geoff Johnson, Hanna Roberts, John McNamarra, Casey Thomas. Seated from left to right: Paul Jones, Peteris Ginters, Robert Reitano.

friends as best he can from his suffering. Peteris has entered a trial of a new therapy under the care of one of Australia's leading neurosurgeons, Professor Dominic Rowe AM, acknowledging that while his experience may assist others, it is unlikely to extend his life. In true Peteris style he took the opportunity to speak in support of Professor Dominic Rowe's Research Project at the lunch, and as a result \$16,000 was raised for the cause.

As a bar, one thing we do very well is close ranks in adversity. This was certainly no exception. This was an advertisement for everything that is good about the bar. It was a remarkable celebration from beginning to end. Ingmar Taylor SC as master of ceremonies was as perfect as ever. The speech from Moses SC was greeted with a standing ovation like no other. Peteris replied to Moses SC in a speech that left no eye dry in the house. Kenzie QC proposed a memorable toast.

Moses SC's remarks included:

We know that collegiality matters in this profession which can be bruising. However, I should note, that according to a survey undertaken recently of the New South Wales Bar, the data showed that members of the criminal and industrial bar, where collegiality is the strongest, reported higher scores for quality of working life and resil-

digent, bright, punctual and capable: an absolute delight to work with.

As some of you may know, Peteris began returning briefs late last year, following his diagnosis with MND. He has shown great courage, dignity and determination in the face of what must have been a great shock to him and his family.

I should note that when Justice Marshall retired from the Federal Court in a ceremonial sitting in 2015, he singled out Peteris for special praise, saying that he had been ably assisted by Peteris as his associate. Justice Marshall referred to Peteris as a leading member of the Sydney junior industrial bar. The judge was wrong to say that. Peteris is a leading member of the Sydney industrial bar, period. He ran rings around senior counsel, especially some present today, including myself. Had Peteris remained at the bar, I believe he would have been appointed senior counsel.

Peteris is married to Caroline, who joins us today, with whom they have two children: his son, Mason and daughter, Taylor. Both were named – not at all inappropriately – after High Court judges. Caroline has been a

great source of strength and love to Peteris and the love of his family will sustain him.

Peteris, on behalf of the entire bar of New South Wales, I offer you my sincere congratulations for all that you have achieved during a career that has, regrettably, come to an end far too soon. I also offer my heartfelt best wishes and promises of support for you and your family in the times ahead. We stand by you, now and in the future. We thank you. We love you. We salute you.

The standing ovation that followed saluting our friend and colleague resounded through the Marigold Restaurant and down the streets of Chinatown.

Peteris was then heard in reply:

It's traditional at events like these to begin with a roll call acknowledging and thanking the judicial and tribunal members and distinguished and other guests for being here. I would prefer to start by simply saying welcome, and thank you to all of my dear and close friends for being here, as that captures how I feel about everybody in this room. I am overwhelmed and humbled by the number of people who are here to share today with Caroline and me.

So, why are we all here? First, to enjoy lunch, a few drinks and a catch up with friends and colleagues. Secondly, because on 7 November last year I was diagnosed with motor neurone disease.

Motor neurone disease, or more specifically in my case, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, was first described as a neurological disease by a French physician (J M Charcot) in 1874. In simple terms, we are all full of nerve cells (or neurones) that control the muscles that enable us to move, speak, breathe and swallow. In people with motor neurone disease these neurones fail to work normally, degenerate and die. With no neurones to activate them, muscles gradually weaken and waste.

The form of motor neurone disease that I have typically commences by first attacking the neurones associated with the major muscle groups in the legs and arms. As you can see I'm a case in point. Motor neurone disease goes on to affect a person's ability to walk, speak, swallow and breathe. For this reason it is ultimately fatal.

Fortunately I am under the care of a brilliant neurologist, Professor Dominic Rowe at Macquarie Neurology. Dominic is presently the principal

investigator in a world first human trial of a drug, CuATSM. I am in the privileged and very lucky position to be a participant in this drug trial. Currently there are only about 30 people on the trial, with the hope that it will

staff from my former chambers – John, Casey, Hannah and Mitchell – for taking on the burden of managing logistics. Lastly, and most importantly, my best friend Robert Reitano, who has been a great support for me since



Members and former members of H B Higgins Chambers, where Peteris started at the Bar: Seated: Adam Searle MLC, Peteris Ginters, Ingmar Taylor. Standing left to right front: Mark Gibian, Shane Prince, David Chin, Francis Backman, Adam Hatcher, Patricia Lowson. Standing left to right behind: Darien Nagle, Tony Howell, Geoff Warburton, Andrew Joseph, Daniel Brezniak and long-standing clerk Damian Elliott.

expand to include about another 20.

To date, animal trials of CuATSM have been encouraging. For example, use of CuATSM restored health to a very sick mouse model of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, extending its one- to two-week lifespan to almost two years.

Unfortunately though, humans are not mice, so there is a great deal of work that still needs to be done to determine whether CuATSM will be safe and effective in slowing down the degenerative effects of motor neurone disease in humans.

It's very early days but I have to be, and do remain, optimistic. I've got nothing to lose, and there is a great deal to be said for the power of positive thinking!

With this in mind, and if you wish to, please feel free to contribute to Professor Rowe's research. You can be assured that every (tax-deductible) dollar donated will go directly and in full to Professor Rowe's research.

Finally, I must make special mention of a few people who helped with making this day possible. Arthur Moses and Ingmar Taylor for coming up with the idea of holding a get-together. The

my diagnosis, as well as being the driving force behind making today's function a reality.

Thank you again for all being here to share this day with Caroline and me.

There was not a single person at the lunch who did not regard themselves as utterly privileged to have shared any part of their life's experience with Peteris and to hear him speak of his life, his wife and children and his approach to motor neurone disease. The New South Wales Bar rose to its feet for Peteris that day and continues to do so in support of him and his family, honouring him as a true friend. A man of strength, courage and substance whose professional life reflects the best of life at the bar and whose family life has set a standard that can only be admired. Again Peteris Ginters, we salute you.

If you would like to make a donation to Professor Dominic Rowe's research, please contact Robert Reitano at rreitano@15wardell.com.au.