

## **MODELS OF ACHIEVEMENT**

### **EP 8 SEG 2 ROBERT**

ANNETTE SHUN WAH: Welcome back. From a rural village in Northern Ireland, Robert headed off to university with high hopes. But his plans of a university education hit several roadblocks before his persistence and talent helped him realise a remarkable achievement.

ROBERT: My name is Robert Beech and this is my story. I was born in County Derry and we was out in the country. It was a little thatched cottage with mud walls. I never had any electricity or running water until I turned 19. I was the first kid in my family ever to go to high school. My favourite subjects in high school were physics and mathematics and chemistry. I was a science student. The girls did arts and the boys did science.

I went to Queens. I did alright in the first year. The second year I discovered drinking, gambling and smoking. I failed the final exams two years in a row. So I dropped out. I tried to get back into the game but it wasn't easy. Then in 1970 I was picked up for DUI. I lost me driving licence and that's when I decided to get out of the place.

So I came here to Sydney on the 14th of November 1970. Drinking in Sydney was a fine art. I was drinking and drinking and drinking and getting worse and worse and worse. Then in 1972 I worked with the NSW State Treasury Department. They had the first computer installation in Sydney.

In September of 1988 one Saturday morning I went to see my doctor to get something for the flu. I was all beer belly, all blubber and beer belly. And he took some blood and he said, "Come back next Saturday morning and I'll give you the results." I didn't have to wait till Saturday morning. He phoned me Monday afternoon and he sat me down and he said, "There are the results of your blood

tests." He said, "If you don't stop drinking I can't give you any more than six months to live."

That hit me hard. I didn't want to die at 45. So I tried to give up but I couldn't. I went to the pub and sat all day staring at a schooner. Then I went home that night and I did something that I hadn't done for 30 years. I got on my knees at my bedside and said, "Lord, I can't do this myself I need your help." And he came to me at 4 the next morning. In three days I lost the desire to drink. Not one sober day in 24 and a half years and in three days I just lost the desire to drink. I never looked back. But I cured the disease without curing the underlying causes. I stopped drinking but I was still an alcoholic in my habits. I was still gambling.

On the 4th of August 1997 the day after my 44th birthday I was told by the doctor I had Parkinson's disease. I said, "Thanks for the birthday present." As soon as I told my boss he said, "We can't employ you as a driver." Then I tried to get a job for a while and it was no good, I had plenty of interviews but as soon as they saw me that was the end of it. They sent me for an assessment. They spent two days they tested me for everything. Mad cow disease. They sent me back a folder. One word was in it 'unemployable'. I said I'll show you who's unemployable.

In February 1998 I got a flyer in the mail from Mount Druitt TAFE College. And I said, "What's the toughest course that you got?" And they said, "A 2-year full-time for an advanced diploma in electrical technology." The head teacher said, "You have a choice, you can stay here for two years for the advanced diploma or you can do 18 months here and 18 months at the university." So I saw the senior lecturer in mathematics, Carmel. She was a lovely lady.

CARMEL: When I first met Robert he was very much a character and he had high expectations of himself. After I got to know him I also had some high expectations and he did some mathematics courses with us that led him into his undergraduate degree with us.

ROBERT: It was a 3-year course, I did it in two years. If I'd had to do the examinations by hand I couldn't have done it. But they let me do them on the computer. So in that respect the universities in general are very accepting.

CARMEL: After completing his undergraduate course he then spent a year doing honours and after honours he then went in to his PhD program. With his PhD he actually completed that in 2008. He would have taken about five years and so while he was only tapping with one finger it really didn't take him as long as it's taken some full-time students.

ROBERT: I graduated with a PhD on 23 September 2009. When it came to time to do my PhD they said, "You have proved yourself in fibre optics, what about doing some research on the Schroedinger equation?"

CARMEL: The Schroedinger equation was considered unsolvable and what Robert has done is actually done some numerical calculations to actually make it more useful and what he actually did there was to further the work on solitons which are actually important in optical fibre telecommunications.

ROBERT: I just refused to give up. Parkinson's disease is different for everybody. It adjusts to the body that it's living in. I can't stand up anymore for longer than a couple of seconds at a time. I can walk with the aid of a walking frame. That is how it got to me, all of them are different. I can go to the pub and have a glass of coke and it doesn't bother me. I wouldn't even think about drinking a beer.

QUIZMASTER: 78% of the word's atmosphere is made up of what element?

ROBERT: Nitrogen. To win trivia you have got to have teams. You can never find somebody who knows everything.

CARMEL: I certainly remembered when I first saw him and those high expectations of him and I knew that he would overcome all of the difficulties that he was having from a health point of view and he certainly did that. He has the determination that I haven't seen before in students with disabilities like Robert's. The work ethic of very few people that I have ever seen, it's so good and his determination to succeed is just mind blowing.

ROBERT: Never give up, if you want to do it, go for it. Don't let anybody stop you.

CARMEL: And so anybody who comes to university, whether they're disabled or not who has a tenth of his work ethic and also a tenth of his determination will succeed at university.

ROBERT: My name is Robert Beech and this is my story. I started my first degree in mathematics in Belfast in 1962. I dropped out in the third year, by that time I was an alcoholic. It's your life you've got to make the best you can. You've got to play the hand you're dealt. You can't get a second deal. I was dealt a couple of twos and a couple of threes but I still made a full house out of it

ANNETTE SHUN WAH: Following Robert's Bachelor of Science Degree in Mathematics he received a Doctorate in Mathematics and continues to enjoy his trivia nights. To learn more about these personal stories from people of very diverse backgrounds and their study pathways make sure you visit our website at [www.modelsofachievement.com.au](http://www.modelsofachievement.com.au). See you next time.

END OF TRANSCRIPT