

CHAPTER 26

A Thousand Words Paint a Picture

WORD DID NOT TAKE LONG to spread. Words rarely did when your grandad was involved.

It was one of the intricacies that we, as a family, thankfully did not need to worry about. It was all being taken care of by the ABC, WAIS and the amazing people whose lives your grandad had touched. Who were saddened and near crippled by the news, but who carried on. For him.

Your Great Uncle John began to make the phone calls to the contacts he was provided as your nana, Uncle Mark and I sat in a hospital courtyard, attempting to come to terms with our new reality. We re-joined the extended family in the café a short time later. The logistics had been managed: the ABC and WAIS were advising ahead of time those they needed to, before the broadcaster would make the public announcement ahead of the 4pm news. That was about half an hour away.

The ABC had also been tremendous in proactively managing the requirements of rival news organisations. It was a deliberate, collegiate approach taken by Deborah Leavitt which reflected that same trait she respected in your grandad. The ABC put out information to the media network from the moment your grandad had his heart attack, until the close of the public memorial service. In an equally appreciated show of respect, the other outlets had no issue with the arrangement.

That system was in full-swing Thursday afternoon when Russell Woolf returned a call from the family. He needed clarification on one of your great uncle's instructions. When he had been told that the family wanted him to make the announcement, surely we just meant the ABC, right, and not specifically him?

Your nana grabbed the phone from your great uncle.

"No, Russell. Wally would have wanted you to do it."



The term “Bush Telegraph” is the name given to the phenomenon that is country gossip.

Any event of significance, from a new arrival to a community to the loss of one of its members, has an innate ability to jump fence-lines, cross properties and spread like wildfire throughout a region, simply by word of mouth. And it does so at a speed that would have even the most devoted modern-day Twitter executive in awe. The Bush Telegraph, you could say, was the world’s first social media.

Still, Amman, Jordan, would have seemed like a stretch of its powers. It would undoubtedly be one of the last places on Earth expected to receive news of your grandad’s death, but it did so at 11am on a blistering hot day.

NINE Network’s *60 Minutes* reporter Liam Bartlett felt like his eyes would burn out of their sockets as he glanced out the aeroplane window. He was on assignment in the violence-ravaged Middle East, having moved on from his first assignment in Beirut, Lebanon, where a barrage of Israeli bombs and rockets landed close by, mid-filming.

Bartlett had that year – 2006 – moved from hosting ABC Mornings in Perth, to rival Radio 6PR, then shortly after onto *60 Minutes*. Your grandad had been a close confidant for Bartlett in making that decision, given he had experienced similar short-term job hopping in his move from Nine, to the ABC in Adelaide, then back to Perth to take up the directorship of WAIS.

Your grandad was among the last to farewell Bartlett, having been in attendance – and, by all reports, in fine form – at the latter’s last supper at Perugino Restaurant in West Perth. He was there among about 20 of Perth’s media personalities, including *The Sunday Times*’ Billy Rule, Russell Woolf, former 6PR broadcaster Simon Beaumont and even former Liberal Minister Troy Buswell. Bartlett went straight from that dinner to the airport to fly to the Middle East.

Bartlett used his time on the Amman tarmac during refuelling to check his messages. He switched on his mobile phone. A flood of messages began arriving, the first of which was from Nine colleague Michael Thomson, advising him of your grandad's death. He immediately called Thomson.

"I couldn't believe it. I wasn't feeling too good, actually," Bartlett said of the day.

"At that stage, I'd been on a particularly difficult shoot and I was commuting to Sydney, so I hadn't seen a lot of the kids and my wife Claire and I was feeling a bit homesick. I remember saying to Thommo: 'That's sh-t and that makes me feel like I'm over here and what the hell is the point?'

"I was having one of those self-indulgent moments, but it came as a huge shock and I knew I wouldn't be able to get back for the funeral. I remember Mike saying to me, 'Mate, just put your head down and your bum up. Wally was so proud of you getting that gig and he would be all the way with you, just hang in there'.

"It's self-indulgent talking about what I lost, but I think I lost a really great mate who would have been with me all the way into the future. I would have been laughing with Wally for 30 years. I think that's very sad from my own perspective, but I thought it was really sad for your mum and that's who I thought of most of all.

"He was such a vibrant bloke and she was such a young person, physically and mentally, and knowing the sort of relationship they had through all the stories that Wally would tell. They had such a strong marriage, they were such a strong couple. From a family point-of-view, that was what I was thinking of most."

The Bush Telegraph again took flight. Its next stop was two fence-lines away.



"I'll be honest with you, Kim: I'm petrified of the fast bowlers."

Kim Hughes laughed and raised the beer glass to his mouth. The post-training drinks at the Floreat Hotel were nothing if not

a source of honest conversation. And as far as an explanation went for your grandad's refusal to play cricket higher than Fourth Grade, he could not fault it for honesty.

"That's what I love about you, Wal; you're a coward, everyone knows you're a coward, you know you're a coward, so it's all ok."

Hughes put the beer glass to his mouth as he turned to continue the conversation, but your grandad was gone. So too was the Floreat Hotel. It had transformed into an empty Dubai hotel room. The beer glass at his lips was replaced by a phone.

"Wally's bloody passed away," Hughes' wife, Jenny, said on the other end of the line.

The former Australia cricket captain cursed, then almost fainted. He had been in the Middle East for a six-a-side competition, "or some bloody useless thing". There was no way he could make it back to Perth in time to farewell his mate. All he could do was remember.

"Lyn and Wal were going to move into the new home and all that sort of thing, the kids were growing up and the next phase of their life was going to be so exciting," Hughes said. "Your dad was, what, 58? Then," he clicked his fingers.

"The other day I heard young Corbin Middlemas say on Sports Talk, 'Right, we've got something to play, because it's six years to the day'. I thought, 'Six years? It can't be'. A lot of those blokes I grew up with – George Young, Dennis Baker, Gary Green – I don't see anymore, just because we've all had kids and your lives change.

"But Wally was a bit of a conduit for us all. If Wally organised something, everyone would come along."

Word took flight again. Its next stop was 3200km away in Athens, Greece.



The idiosyncrasies of a Ken Casellas statistical analysis were as synonymous with an ABC AFL call out of Perth as any of the commentators.

The metring and measure of his delivery was more akin to a drum solo than a stats reading, rising in volume and intensity with every number announced, before dropping and picking up speed for the connecting explanation: THUMP-badoom, THUMP-ba-ba-badoom. TWO tackles, SIX effective handpasses.

Casellas' contributions were like an art form and, like any work of art, it was not defined by a single component, but combined with the elements around it to achieve completion; the drama of the game, the crowd noise and atmosphere through the effects microphone, the skilled descriptions of commentators such as Glenn Mitchell and your grandad and the experienced analysis of the experts such as Ken Judge and Jon Dorotich.

The ABC Perth AFL team might not have been the best work of art in the country – especially in appearance – but they were a band content with making their music. Their art. They enjoyed each other's company and held an immense respect for the sound that each member brought to the ensemble.

But all bands break up. And when they do – especially when not by choice – there is an empty pit left if the stomachs of the remaining members. That pit began engulfing an ever-growing space until it forced Casellas to hunch over, sliding onto the baggage carousel as a makeshift seat in the middle of Athens airport. He held his mobile phone to his ear as George Grljusich delivered the news that your grandad had passed away.

This was a man he had first met in 1972, when your grandad took a cadetship with *The West* and bizarrely replaced another man named Wally Foreman. The pair had reunited throughout their careers and expanded the band with the ABC's football broadcasts.

Casellas could no longer contain the despair of loss that grew inside him. He burst into tears. It was a scene of juxtaposition: he had been on holidays in the Greek islands with his wife Pam, a journalist with *The West Australian* and also a friend of your grandad's, with their cadetships at the paper only a couple of years apart. It was supposed to be happy occasion.

"Pam grabbed the phone and found out and there we were, both crying in the middle of the Athens Airport," Casellas said.

“I cut the holiday short, so I was at the funeral at WAIS. It was amazing the amount of people there. That’s an illustration of how I felt about Wally, because I can still remember it now: I collapsed and sat on the luggage carousel at Athens Airport and burst into tears. People, fundamentally, love decent and honest people and that’s what it’s all about. If you live a decent and honest life and you’re straight forward, people hold you in a pretty high regard.”

The band had lost its first member. It would lose more as the years went on.



Roanna Edwards’ thoughts were racing.

It was Thursday afternoon. She had been given the day off, having been told by Karen Tighe not to bother coming in, “because it wasn’t the best place to be”. She instead spent the day shopping with her parents, who had driven from the country to support her as she attempted some form of normality.

Just four days prior, she had been filled with excitement about the three-week holiday to the US she was supposed to be leaving for the next day. Now, she didn’t even know if she wanted to go. Edwards was in the car with her parents when the phone rang. It was Tighe. She wondered if it could change anything if she just didn’t answer the phone.

“Are you with mum and dad, Ro?” Tighe asked.

“Yes,” Edwards replied, already choking back tears. “Is he gone?”

“Yes, Ro. He passed away a short time ago and he had his family with him.”

There was little else to be said. Tighe was her usual, caring self and did all anyone on the end of a phone could do to ensure Edwards was as well as could be expected, before hanging up. Undoubtedly to make another phone call.

Edwards was told that Russell Woolf would be making the announcement in about half an hour to let the public know, followed by he and Glenn Mitchell hosting a special Drive

program dedicated to your grandad. Edwards sat in the back of her parent's car sobbing. The man she had idolised, who had been so caring to her as a trainee, was gone.

"Wally taught me the importance of the listener, how integral regional listeners are to everything at the ABC and he showed me you could be the most successful of men, while always remaining humble and true to your good ol' country foundations," Edwards said, remembering that day.

"The Australian sporting landscape, lost so much the day Wal died. It lost a passionate advocate for athletes. It lost an incredible professional and very talented broadcaster. It lost a warm, wonderful man who, unlike so many in the trade, operated without ego and always with inclusiveness. But for all it lost, we should be grateful we had enjoyed so very much."

Edwards listened to the car radio and waited. Then, Afternoons presenter Bernadette Young introduced an interlude of music with the unrelated, seemingly rushed time stamp of, "You are on 720, the time is eight-to-four", that also betrayed the sense of confusion in her voice.

It was immediately evident – to the broadcaster, as well as the listener – that something was not right. Music began to play.



Pachelbel's Canon will be a song I will never forget.

It is not easily forgotten as a piece of music, let alone as music with significance attached to it. However, despite being arguably the most well-known piece of classical music, its evoking powers are founded in a rather simple structure. The entire piece is only eight bars of music that are continuously repeated, but because a trio of violins play the melody at different stages to create a canon, a beautiful harmony is formed over a cello bass part. It is almost mathematical in its composure.

ABC Perth Local Content Manager Deborah Leavitt selected Pachelbel's Canon as the score for the public announcement of your grandad's death. She made the choice having previously

discussed the piece with your grandad. Plus, Johnny Cash did not seem particularly appropriate for the occasion.

It was one of several seemingly rudimentary tasks for Leavitt and the ABC that was anything but rudimentary. In some ways, they had been through the routine before – an event of significance occurs and all the planning and preparation is put in place as a response – but your grandad's passing was different. He was one of their own, who was now gone. That had to be handled as sensitively within the ABC, as outside it.

The planning for the announcement occurred first: Leavitt had received your nana's request that Russell Woolf read out the news and, together with Glenn Mitchell, the three worked out how that would unfold, including playing Pachelbel's Canon – an obscure choice for ABC Local Radio, particularly the Afternoons program – to ensure the listeners' attention was gained and they were prepared for what was to come.

Staff advisory was the next phase – it was to occur at 3:30pm – and included ensuring how to best manage and support Afternoons presenter Bernadette Young, who was on-air at the time other staff were informed.

What to do for the rest of the day's programming was the next consideration, with Leavitt and producer Damien Rabbitt agreeing on clearing the schedule and running a state-wide, Wally Foreman-focused Drive program with Woolf and Mitchell, to allow the public the chance to grieve.

The material that had been compiled by Mitchell, Karen Tighe and Adam Sallur was invaluable and would be played, while even more was sought and developed into a special tribute CD that was placed in ABC Shops. Preparations for a TV special also commenced, with camera crews sent to the homes of identities such as Justin Langer and John Inverarity, then all the way to Bruce Rock to capture the thoughts of your grandad's childhood friends Ray Williams and Bryan Kilminster, as well as shots of the town that had been built to almost mythological status.

It was an enormous amount of airtime and coverage for one man, yet all the plans were approved by the eastern states

executives. They might not have known your grandad as well as the locals did, but they understood that Perth had always been a little bit different. A little bit special.

“They understood that it was a local identity, but I think they were quite surprised by the public response and they allowed us to respond to that,” Leavitt said.

“I wanted to make sure that it was handled in a way that the family would have wanted and I was concentrating on that, as well as making sure the support was there for the staff, because we were like a family. In places like Perth and Brisbane, they’re smaller and so the sense of friendship and camaraderie is strong. And everyone had a Wally story.

“When we were looking at all of those things in terms of the broadcast coverage, it was important, but there was also an appetite; there was an appetite from the public that we felt was compelling and it wasn’t our own indulgence. We were really thinking ‘Audience First’ and I remember the email response was so huge – and we printed them all out for the family to go through – but I can tell you that we never had one complaint asking us why we were going on about it.

“It was the opposite: we had people contacting us asking, ‘Can you re-broadcast this’, or, ‘Can you replay that story again’. I do look back on it all and I feel really proud of what we put to air and that it honoured Wally in a way that was the right way to do it for him.

“He was a very special person in the hearts and minds of a lot of people in WA.”



The scene seemed grey, like the ABC was broadcasting in black-and-white again. Like a pall of sadness had been draped over the office. There was no wailing, but there was a sense that the boundary of grief could almost be defined.

That was the way Russell Woolf recalled the moment staff were informed of your grandad’s death. There was a lot of hugging

and even more tears. To this day, the sense of the room remains with Woolf. And then he had to go on air.

It was an extremely challenging, confusing and conflicting moment for Woolf. Challenging for the obvious reason, that he was not only having to come to terms with the fact his friend was gone, but he had to announce it to the world. Confusing, because “the guy was a rock” and no matter how long the defibrillator took to arrive, no matter how hurt your grandad was, Woolf could not imagine him staying down for anything.

And it was conflicting, because despite the pain, despite never wanting to ever read anything like that out, if it had to be read, Woolf was honoured to be the one to read it. And so he did. He clutched the statement in his hand. The statement that had been sent to the ABC from Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, on behalf of the family. The statement that your nana insisted he read. And he walked towards the main studio.

Bernadette Young had received a message on her monitor, requesting that she play Pachelbel’s Canon as soon as possible, then make her way out of the studio. Deborah Leavitt was waiting for her in the control room. Woolf preferred not to sit in silence, so waited until the final minute before slipping into the studio. He had not thought about what he was going to say, nor had he rehearsed the statement. It would be easier that way.

Another reason Leavitt chose Pachelbel’s Canon as the prelude was that its duration was such that it could run for as long as Woolf needed. He entered the studio and lowered the music at 3:59pm.

“On 720 ABC Perth and ABC Radio state-wide. Good afternoon to you, it’s Russell Woolf with you, just a minute away from news at four-o’clock,” he said, followed by a long pause and an audible inhale.

“And I’m honoured and saddened to be with you at this time. I have an announcement to read out: Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital regrets to announce that much-loved broadcaster and former administrator, Wally Foreman, passed away this afternoon. Wally was brought to the hospital on Tuesday after suffering a cardiac

arrest. Wally's wife, Lyn, and sons, Glen and Mark, would like to thank the public for their support over the past two days. They've requested that the media and the public respect the family's privacy at what is, obviously, a very difficult time.

"We'll be bringing you a very special state-wide drive program following the news at four-o'clock today. I'll be joined by Glenn Mitchell for the two hours between four-to-six. Your thoughts are welcome."

Woolf's voice began to quiver and crack as he continued.

"Obviously, we send our love and thoughts to Lyn and the boys and the rest of Wally's family and we'll mark this day down on our calendars – the second of November 2006 – because we've lost somebody that we loved very much, that we worked – and enjoyed being – with. And we're sure that you feel much the same.

"I look forward to your company after the news at four-o'clock on 720 ABC Perth."



It seemed so unfair that it was confusing. So confusing that it could not be true. It had only been a few months earlier that Geoff Hutchison had used your grandad as a sounding board in returning to Perth. Hutchison was living in Melbourne with his young family and with no intention of leaving Victoria.

However, after filling in as host of the Mornings program for Melbourne's ABC 774 and enjoying the experience, he decided it was a role he wanted to pursue more permanently. Shortly after, Liam Bartlett left ABC Perth and the Mornings job at 720 became vacant.

There was one person from whom Hutchison wanted advice: your grandad. He was the man who had been so approachable and given so much of his time when Hutchison was a 15-year-old work experience student from Kalamunda High School, placed with the ABC Sports Department of 1975. He was the man who, later at the NINE Network, pushed for the major broadcaster

to give a chance to the young Golden West Network reporter Hutchison, bringing him back up to the city.

The pair had not spoken for more than a decade, but your grandad was “the one person” Hutchison felt he needed to speak to. To ask if he would be capable of doing the job.

“Yep, I’m sure you can,” your grandad had replied. “It will be hard and I know you’ll be different from Liam Bartlett. It will be exhausting, but I have absolute faith that you would be able to do it.”

Hutchison had put the phone down and thought, “How great is this; reuniting with Wally, it’s going to be fantastic”. It was the “clincher”, as he described it. He packed up his family and returned to Perth. At the time of writing this, Hutchison remained as the very successful, well respected and enjoyable host of the Mornings program at ABC Perth.

But that day he felt robbed. Robbed of time and an opportunity that had felt promised to him by fate itself. And it compounded a difficult time for the family, whose son had experienced a bad accident in Melbourne from which he lost sight in one eye. It was followed by the job in Perth, shifting the family at an inopportune time. And then your grandad died. It seemed so unfair.

“We were renting a house in Floreat and I remember walking into the kitchen and telling my wife that Wally had died and I began to cry,” Hutchison said.

“Then Hugh came up to me and put his arms around me. I thought, ‘This is a kid who a few months ago had one of the most awful experiences you could possibly have’. But that was it. Absolutely shithouse. We were always that close to going out for dinner or something, but we just never did it.

“Life is littered with those types of experiences and always will be. I owe him an enormous debt, particularly at the start, but I’m glad the conversation I had with him about the job was the clincher. What you’ve lost is profound – absolutely – and what his family and friends have lost is profound, but for me it’s a lost opportunity to get back among his world again. It was only a few months, but it was enough to remind me who he was.

“There’s a great sadness for me, absolutely a great sadness, that there’s this huge gap where I didn’t get to see him and then, when I finally got to see him again at the end, I didn’t get to spend much time with him. I’d been back four months before he died: to me, it was all about this great return and getting to know your dad again.

“I think if there’s one legacy that I would hope your dad had left behind for you, it’s that there would be no shortage of mentors of a certain age. If you reflect on the moments that he was a bit remote from you, I think you’ll remember the things that you share.”



“I look forward to your company after the news at four-o’clock on 720 ABC Perth.”

Bryan Cousins barely heard that closing line from Russell Woolf. He had never cried so much in his life and the tears did not stop for about an hour. Cousins had been carting hay on his small farm in Oakford, before returning to his truck for a break and switching on the radio. It was tuned to ABC 720 Perth and it was closing in on four-o’clock.

“I got rung by a couple of radio stations that knew Wal and I were close, but I just couldn’t go on, because I knew I’d be that emotional. I went on one – the ABC, with Russell – but that was the only one I did,” Cousins said of the day your grandad passed away.

“You have, I suppose, friends and acquaintances, but then you have people like Wal. The real test of any friendship is not when things are going good and his integrity in such a tough time for us to be going through ...”

Cousins trailed off, before continuing.

“He was as close a friend as I bloody had. I don’t think I’ve ever known a more balanced and fair person in an industry that’s so competitive. There may be guys with integrity, but no-one’s integrity was more on display than Wally’s was. You just knew everything about him. He gave of himself.

“I remember being at Wally’s service and sitting next to a young lady athlete. She was obviously upset by the loss of Wal. Lyn had trained this young girl and she told me this story that she had wanted to do extra training and wanted to pay Lyn, but Lyn didn’t want to accept payment. The girl refused to do any training unless she paid Lyn, so she duly did. This was when Wal was director of WAIS.

“After several years of training, she’d become an Australian champion and there was an international meet that she couldn’t afford to go to. She said Wally and Lyn turned up one night and said, ‘You are going’, and all the money she had given Lyn for training, they had put it into a separate little account, with the knowledge they were always going to give it back to her.

“I think that’s just the nature of not only Wally, but Lyn, and we forget what a great partnership they were, because Wally might have been the voice on the radio, but they were such a great team.

“He had every quality that you’d want about yourself. If I look at myself and think there’s traits I don’t have, that I wish I had, Wally would have them. He always took the best view about somebody; if there were two ways to look at something, he always took the way of fairness and benefit of the doubt.

“Life’s precious and we never know how long we’ve got and what’s going to happen. I don’t think there’s any person the community could miss as much as Wally. He had a wonderful life in his 58 years and his passion for sport knew no boundaries.”



Russell Woolf exhaled and paused as the news headlines were read out, with the leading story confirming what he had just announced to the world: your grandad had passed away.

What followed was two special hours hosted by Glenn Mitchell and Woolf and filled with a flood of calls, sobs, tears, well-wishes and disbelief, but more importantly memories and laughs for your grandad, as well as his music. There were special guests sharing their thoughts, people such as Bryan Cousins and those

guests were accompanied by the recollections of the two hosts.

They were special words, as were the words of the hundred-or-so talkback correspondents who often prefaced their comments with, “I never met Wally, but”. And our family is incredibly fortunate that we have every one of them on CD.

“In some ways, I couldn’t think of a better thing to do than play a role like that, because we knew how it was going to affect people, that there was going to be an outpouring of love and grief, and we hoped it was going to be quite cathartic for the family, for colleagues, for the community,” Woolf said.

“On the second of November, every year, at eight-to-four, I play that back – the music and the statement – and I can’t listen to it without crying. I know it sounds weird, listening back to my own voice, but I hear my voice and I hear it faltering and it just takes me back to how shattered we were – all of us.

“It doesn’t take a lot for me to cry when I think about Wal still. I don’t hide my emotions: I’m not this 1950s bloke, who can’t shed a tear. The world’s moved on, thank God, and it affected me. I was emotional. My eyes were wet the whole time and I was catching breath in order to stop bawling.

“Then we had that two-hour program and it was just guest after guest after guest; the Premier, his mates, sports administrators and the public. The messages coming through from people, it was the most incredible two hours and it was organic; it wasn’t two weeks in the making or anything, it was this instant pouring of love and grief.

“I spoke to Lyn again that night. Your family – your extended family – was very good to me. John, your uncle, drove down to the ABC to thank us for the job that we’d done and the rest of the family at other times. It was all part of the grieving process. It was an event that brought people together. Wal had talked about these people a lot and I felt like I knew all of you, but I guess it was sadly his death that made us all friends and brought us close together.

“When I think of Wal, it’s always with a smile, with those tan-coloured trousers, ironed cotton shirt. He was the practical joker, who would always run around and do things in the office. That’s what I remember.

“It hurts to think that we’ve all been starved of that since that day.”

Woolf and Mitchell ended the broadcast dedicated to your grandad, but paused to embrace before leaving the studio.