

ROB STARY

By Peter Gordon

When I first met him in 1974, Rob Stary was in year 12 at St John's College in Braybrook and I was in year 11. He was the wildcard entry in the 'Mr St John's Competition', which was meant to showcase the strongest and most athletic of the blokes. Rob Stary's late and unexpected entry could fairly be said to have changed it indelibly. In fact, they never held it again.

He entered under the pseudonym 'Flasher'; an epithet that stayed with him for many years. He turned up wearing a plastic raincoat and sandals, making everyone nervous about what might be underneath. When the inevitable happened, the French-Canadian brothers who ran the school were apoplectic.

The jocks who assumed they would fight out the title were humiliated. The whole thing ended in farce. But Stary had made his point.

When Rob and I got to Melbourne Uni law school, we were the only Western Suburbs kids there. We became close and were increasingly politicised by the injustices we saw in our own community.

By year three, we were ideological extremists. We were running several community legal services and helping out with a weird variety of other progressive causes.

Once, we appeared pro bono for 900 residents of Tottenham in a planning case. The residents were trying to stop the Smorgon conglomerate from building a steel mill over their back fence. Smorgon gave up after three days and, for a few weeks, we felt invincible.

It was always our dream to set up a poverty law practice together in Footscray. We got that chance when Slater and Gordon agreed to employ Rob and open a Footscray office in 1984. We were joined by our good friend, Paul Grant, now president of the Children's Court.

Over the next five years, we did great work for good causes. We acted for many progressive groups (the Nuclear Disarmament Party, the Swords Into Ploughshares peace group); we saved the Footscray Football Club in 1989.

Rob was born a Richmond supporter but made a political decision to switch to the footy team of the West. To this day, he remains the only man I have ever known to have stopped a game in its tracks with just a comment. During a quiet moment, as a young South Melbourne footballer, Gary Frangalos, was kicking for goal, Stary yelled at the top of his voice, "You're mother's a wharfie, you transvestite!" Frangalos stopped dead. The bulldog player on the mark burst into laughter; the nearby boundary umpire looked amazed.



Rob Stary (left) and Peter Gordon at their graduation ceremony, Melbourne University, 1981.

The three of us went our separate professional ways after a few years. Grant became one of the youngest magistrates ever appointed in Victoria and has since done great work, especially in the Koori courts. I moved from Footscray to Melbourne to fight the 1992 Kennett attempt to destroy labour law firms. A little later, Rob set up his own Footscray practice. A great era was over.

Rob has offices in six different locations now, probably the biggest criminal practice in Victoria. He's still fighting for the underdog most of the time. You'll often see him in the media defending Jack Thomas and other terror suspects fighting the latest attack on our civil rights, and the increasing march under Howard and Ruddock towards a police state.

The bulwark of trial advocacy is defending unpopular causes. To do so with courage and integrity is in the finest traditions of our legal system.

I have never known Rob to shirk this difficult job. Not once. Not against the background of the tapped phones, the veiled threats, the not-so veiled threats and the all-too-regular maligning of his character and 'loyalties'.

Courage is not the lack of fear. It is the preparedness to do what's right even when you know exactly what the personal consequences might be. That's why we should be proud to number Rob Stary among our legal profession. ■

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