



# SWEET CHARITY

Former advertising executive Trevor Fearnley used his talent to help homeless youth, writes HELEN GREGORY.

If there is one person qualified to sell Port Stephens to the world, it is former advertising executive Trevor Fearnley.

"Port Stephens – a thousand miles from the cares of the world," he muses of a possible campaign slogan. "Relax, unwind, enjoy our natural beauty and bays."

Fearnley has done that and much more in his autobiography, *Midnight at OASIS*, a story that culminates in the establishment of a haven for homeless youth in Sydney. In his words: it's a story about making a difference in life and leaving behind a legacy.

Fearnley first visited Port Stephens as a 20-year-old, camping with his new bride, Liz, in a VW convertible at Fly Point and tucking into a T-bone steak at the Country Club Hotel at Shoal Bay.

Four decades later – after a career in which he helped raise \$100 million for charities – Fearnley and his wife continue to return to their favourite destination three times a year.

Fearnley was managing director of AdPartners in 1989 when he watched David

Goldie's documentary *Nobody's Children*, about homeless street kids, addicted to alcohol and drugs, living in squalor.

"I sat there transfixed for the next two hours as I heard young people telling their stories about why they had ended up on the streets," he says.

It triggered something in him.

"I seemed to have it all," he writes in his autobiography. "The big house on the North Shore of Sydney, happily married, three kids at private schools. The Range Rover and the BMW. I was managing director of a successful business in which I was a shareholder. What more could a person in his late 30s want out of life?"

But, deep down, he says, "something was missing".

Fearnley's decision to phone a number shown on the TV screen at the end of the documentary would change his life.

Envoy Alan Staines from The Salvation Army answered the call.

Fearnley asked how he could help and

Staines spoke of his dream to open a centre for homeless kids, open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, providing a safe place to sleep and wash, and access to counselling and medical services. Staines estimated it would take \$150,000 and 18 months to build.

Fearnley knew the advertising industry could play a role.

He uncovered some shocking statistics: one in four homeless girls are sexually abused before the age of 18, 34 per cent of homeless young people leave home because of physical abuse, 67 per cent are alcohol- or drug-dependent, and 60 per cent of all the street kids come from families where the parents have separated.

He won the Advertising Federation of Australia's support to raise money for the construction and operation of the Oasis Youth Care Centre. Premises in Surry Hills were secured at the peppercorn rent of \$1 a year for 25 years.

The project would cost \$600,000 and take three years to get off the ground.

"Once I say I will do something, I never give up until it is achieved," he says. "Trying and failing is better than not trying at all. I have had a lot of failures in life, but I skip over those because the successes outweigh the failures."

While the Salvation Army agreed to put \$200,000 a year towards the centre's running costs, the AFA committed to the balance.

Fearnley organised an Oasis Ball, which would become an annual fund-raising event. He and his family joined volunteers with buckets collecting donations outside Sydney theatre performances and events.

"You lead by example in life," he says.

"How could I ask people to help out and not do it myself? Liz and the kids offering to help was the bonus."

He set himself to making submissions and writing letters, making thousands of pleas over 10 years for fund-raising dollars and sponsorship.

His dedication was rewarded in 1996 when he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to homeless youth.

"Apart from my wedding day and the birth of our children it was one of the happiest days of my life," he says.

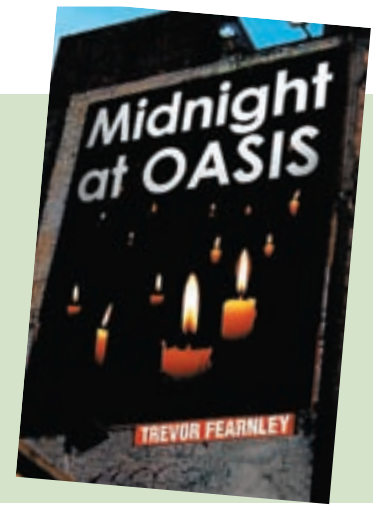
"It was a big day in my life and one that spurred me on to try and do more for my adopted country.

"Having the full support of Liz was incredibly important. She was with me every step of the way."

Fearnley grew up in Ealing, London, in awe of his father and much loved by his mother. At 13 he was sent to a public boarding school where he endured two years of bullying that included having to warm a prefect's toilet seat. Despite being a good student, he failed his second-year exams because of crippling nerves in the examination hall.

He was expelled at 16, after standing up to a teacher who had thrown a piece of chalk at a student.

"Once I say  
I will do something,  
I never give up  
until it is  
achieved."



Fearnley met the love of his life, Liz, at 17, and they travelled through Europe. He enrolled in a business studies course at a technical college and started work in a London ad agency.

It wasn't long before the newlyweds left for Australia, arriving in 1972 as "ten-pound Poms".

Just four weeks after arriving in Sydney, they drove their VW to Fly Point and camped overlooking the bay. They would return to stay at the Country Club in Shoal Bay every Christmas for 10 years while their children were growing up.

Fearnley started work as an account executive at Hansen Rubensohn-McCann Erickson. Clients included Singapore Airlines, Hilton Hotels, Lockheed and Dairy Farmers.

He got his first taste of working with the charity sector when he was given two accounts to work on pro bono. Instead of spending 10 per cent of his time on the Australian Red Cross Blood Bank and The Children's Medical Research Foundation accounts, he allocated 30 per cent.

"Advertising is a strange job – lots of ideas, egos, clients come and go. Lots of politics," he says. "The charity accounts seemed to be real. When I saw the skills we offered them and the

outcomes, I just wanted to do more and more."

Fearnley later joined what was then known as Advertising Partners. He expected to be there for six months, but was there 30 years.

As he spent more time at the office his close-knit family saw less of him. At 38 and managing director Fearnley started to question the meaning of life.

His agency won the account to promote the Red Shield Appeal, beginning a long relationship with the Salvation Army.

A ferocious storm hit Salamander Bay on November 18, 2001, in which Fearnley was knocked off his feet and left shaken. The near-death experience confirmed Fearnley's commitment to making a difference.

Then 50 and a CEO, he wrote a list of what he wanted to achieve in the next 10 years, planned an exit strategy from work and upped his commitment to charity.

AdPartners worked at charity rates to help the fund-raising efforts of Austcare, AusAID, Legacy, The Salvation Army in New Zealand, The Fred Hollows Foundation and Australian Rainforest Foundation.

Fearnley and his partners sold up in 2009, and he retired. Officially.

Now 60, Fearnley's retirement has been as busy as his working life. He is on the National Council of Scouts and has helped the Salvation Territorial Advisory Board produce a documentary about recovery services for drug, alcohol and gambling addicts.

A new list of goals has been written, including improving his piano playing, helping his daughters with building projects, and writing a book about his world travels.

"And having time to drive around Tasmania in my car with the roof down and the wind in my non-existent hair," he says. "If we ever actually retire, it will be to Port Stephens."

The Oasis Youth Support Network has helped 25,000 young people since it opened in 1992 and has grown into a network of centres with educational facilities, a radio station, film studio, camps, long-term supported accommodation and workplace opportunities. Although no longer on the board Fearnley still visits regularly.

**Midnight at OASIS is available at [vividpublishing.com.au/midnightatoasis](http://vividpublishing.com.au/midnightatoasis).**



**UNITED THEY TRAVEL:** Trevor Fearnley with his wife, Liz, his constant companion and a keen supporter of his charity work with Oasis. The couple in Switzerland, top left.