

Eulogy for Mark Andrew Brabham
Saturday 30 April 2016
Albert Street Gallery Richmond

My name is Donna Kennedy and I thank you all for being here today to celebrate the life, and honour the spirit, of Mark Andrew Brabham.

Everyone who is here was part of Mark's life— some were closer to him than others, some spent more time with him, but you were all important to Mark – he had a huge collection of people in his life. I know you all have your own stories of Mark and I am sorry we cannot tell them all here.

A few people here I would like to mention, his family – his Mum Rhona, sisters Ruth, Judy and Jenni and their families; Rachel and Sam, Sabrina and Scarlett. Cr Amanda Stone from the City of Yarra; Laurel Kohut and Elaine Miles representing Ausglass; Norm Beilby representing AGDA; Suzanne Brett representing Kirra Galleries; Jeff Hamilton who has travelled down from Sydney, as has Brian Hirst – and thank you to the people who have travelled from country Victoria - and of course everyone else who knew and loved Mark - personally, through his work and through his love of art. I wish I could name you all – but that would take us hours!

Mark was born on May 5 1958 at Jessie McPherson hospital in Melbourne to Rhona and Les, their fourth child and only son. Mark grew up in the family home at 44 Drummond Street Oakleigh with his three sisters, Ruth, Judy and Jenni, who all loved him and especially were thrilled when they could play with him as a baby – much better than their dolls! Mark was a happy and easygoing child, and loved the family camping holidays in Bright – a place he continued to love throughout his life – and as you will see from the photos a bit later, he was very cute. Hard to believe but Mark did have musical interests before Bowie, and for his fourth birthday he received a black plastic Beatles wig which he wore proudly. You can just imagine Mark in a black Beatles wig – or maybe not. Mark went to Oakleigh State school and later to Waverley High. As much as he was a happy child he was somewhat of a rebellious teenager, and began the questioning and exploration of ideas which would become a hallmark of his life. He was a good student, although according to his sister Judy he obtained much better results in the subjects he was actually interested in.

Upon leaving school and without a particular direction in mind, he started working with the company run by his father Les and his uncle Lyle, and began an apprenticeship in Scientific Instrument Making. He completed the apprenticeship and gained other qualifications as required during his working life. Mark and his father established a separate business, Australian Combustion Services in the early 1990's, and in 1992 his father Les had to undergo a serious operation and Mark realized it was time for him to step up and lead the business.

He expanded on providing gas fittings for glass blowers and services for glass and ceramic artists working on their furnaces, glory holes and gas kilns. He knew his business was going to be successful when he won the contract to supply the gas workings for the Gas Brigades at Crown Casino on the banks of the Yarra in 1997. The initial flame throwing was so successful it resulted in some unfortunate BBQ pigeon – but Mark soon fixed that. He continued to focus on supporting artists through his work, and increasingly in other ways – he started to collect glass and ceramics, became heavily involved with the Meat Market Craft Centre in North Melbourne, and was a long time supporter of Ausglass – he was Victorian representative in recent years - as well as various ceramic organisations. He did a pottery course to better understand what was required in his work. In later years Mark supported the architectural exhibitions of AGDA; and when I approached him in late 2014 about starting a new glass organisation, Mark was instantly enthusiastic and agreed to sit on the Board for the first year; which he did and he was extremely supportive in many ways to help establish Glaas Inc.

I found an interview online given by Richard Morrell in 2007 where he mentioned Mark – Richard was referring to the differences he found here in Australia after arriving from England, and I quote:

“In England, if you tried to start a small business or get something happening, no one would go out of their way to give you a hand or support. In contrast, I found Australians were very supportive of anyone making an effort to get ahead or do something different. A good example would be Mark Brabham from Australian Combustion, who I met in 1981; and he went miles out of his way to help me set up my first studio. This kind of positive attitude is one of the things that makes Australia such a wonderful place to work and live.”

Pauline Delaney remembers having to call Mark to the Meat Market at midnight one night to fix the furnace – she said Mark turned up, chirpy and calm, and fixed the problem. I suspect midnight call-outs are quite rare amongst tradies, especially one turning up and being happy! But Mark was like that – Nick Mount said he just remembers Mark’s kindness and generosity – and also his eccentricities. Creative people are often known for their eccentricities and perhaps that is why Mark got on so well with them. (with us!)

I read the following words on behalf of Peter Kolliner, Director of Kirra Galleries:

‘On behalf of the Directors, Management and Staff at Kirra Galleries I would like to send our sincere condolences to the family of the late Mark Brabham. Mark was a great friend of Kirra Galleries, a passionate supporter of the arts, being a collector of glass and ceramics.

His passion was shown through his involvement with Ausglass, his attendance at exhibitions, and in setting up the Albert Street Gallery so that artists’ work in general, and glass art in particular would be exposed to a wider audience.

Kirra Galleries was fortunate to have worked with Mark at his Gallery and we found him to be an extremely generous host. Nothing was ever any trouble and he went out of his way to assist in setting up exhibitions.

His passing is a tragic loss to his loving family and we will also miss seeing him at Kirra Galleries where he often called in 'just for a chat'.

Vale Mark Brabham'.

Suzanne Brett was instrumental in setting up the exhibition that Peter refers to in that letter; and Mark had a high regard for Suzanne and acknowledged that he had learned much from her, during their many discussions over the years, that was of great benefit to him in setting up this gallery.

The turning point of Mark's life was when his children were born during his 17 year relationship with Rachel Brydon – Sam in 1995, Sabrina in 1999 and Scarlett in 2005. Rachel recalls that she and Mark had firmly decided on Nicholas for a boy's name for their first child, but as soon as Mark saw his baby boy born, he excitedly proclaimed to Rachel – "It's not a Nicholas it's a Sam!" And Sam he was, and Sam he is. That was so like Mark – impulsive and very in the moment – and often right!

Becoming a father changed Mark and never were the words 'pride and joy' more applicable to a parent – Mark and Rachel's children were the joy of Mark's life, and he was so proud of them – he encouraged them, he loved them, and he gave them the greatest gift a parent can give a child – he allowed them the freedom to be who and what they are. His greatest wish was that his children fly free to be in their own truth, and he supported them in this all the way. He enjoyed encouraging their creativity - Sam sings; Sabrina writes; Scarlett is the visual artist, and some of her work hangs in the front gallery today. Being a good Dad was one of Mark's greatest achievements, and there is no doubt that his main legacy is his children, with their distinctive personalities and their creative gifts; and their father's love to carry through their lives.

Glass – and art – helped Mark to find his true self. He once told me that glass changed his life – and opened his soul. There followed one of those fantastic conversations you could have with Mark – this one about the energy of glass and its inspiring qualities and leading to other topics. These conversations could meander around many landscapes, go down the rabbit hole and out again, through complex themes – and often ending with Mark cutting through the complexity to a simple and deep truth. Or ending on the tip of a complex idea – to be continued! I am sure many of you have enjoyed such conversations with Mark.

Greg Ash talks about his lengthy emails with Mark, about Mark's determination to get things done when he could see a need for action, and called Mark "a passionate, hard hitting doer of a man". Mark could be passionate and when he was determined to help he was 100% on your side – and equally if he was not happy with you he showed that as strongly!

As I learned more about Mark's life for today, there emerged a clear picture of a man who, through providing practical and vital support to artists in his business, came to a philosophical understanding of the importance of art and beauty in life. His patronage and support of artists over many years demonstrated his understanding of this; and he led firmly by example.

And while it is difficult to understand now in the pain and grief of his loss, Mark has left us many gifts – the main one being his love of life and his determination to live it to the full. In a Facebook post earlier this year Mark commented on a story and mentioned 'his wonderful life' – he created the life that he wanted to live, he demonstrated the possibilities of becoming who he wanted to be; and he achieved that.

We should remember this when we think about Mark – his energy, his never ending curiosity about life, and primarily his gift for seeing life as a series of opportunities, new experiences, and the belief that life could be wonderful.

Nick Wirdnam, glass artist, is now going to talk about his lengthy friendship with Mark.

Malcolm Munro will speak about his friendship with Mark.

Tracy Hammill will speak on behalf of the community of Yarra Primary School.

Rachel and Jenni will speak on behalf of the family.

PHOTOS (music 'Starman')

Mark's family has placed donation envelopes for the Alfred Hospital ICU, where Mark was so cared for, on the table at the front. You might also like to view some of Mark's glass collection which Nick has arranged in the front gallery, also Scarlett's art work. There is also a visitor book to sign if you have not done so. After the service there is an opportunity to join us for a tea or coffee and talk about Mark at the Richmond Library, details on the back of the running order.

Just before we finish I would like to share something with you. On Saturday 5 March we had experienced a very successful gallery opening here – over 100 people, lovely food, good wine and great glass. I knew Mark was very pleased with the result.

I came here on the Wednesday after that to sit the exhibition, and found Mark as happy as I had ever seen him. He was thrilled with the successful opening and the exhibition, he was full of plans to market it and was talking about the special people he was going to invite to a night time viewing of the exhibition. He told me that he was starting to get bookings for the gallery, and he wanted to run it in a way that would allow him to offer the space free for glass and ceramic exhibitions 3 or 4 times a year. More patronage!

He was so happy, in this beautiful space he had created, realising his dream and living it. He talked about his children, as he always did, and went off to plan the night time event.

Tragically that was the day of his accident. I want to remember Mark as he was that day, loving the life he had created for himself and appreciating every minute of it. I hope you can remember Mark that way too, along with your own special memories of him.

I would like to read from The Prophet – ‘On Death’:

You would know the secret of death?

But how shall you find it, unless you seek it in the heart of life?

The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery of light.

If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.

For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.

In the depth of your hopes and desires lies your silent knowledge of the beyond;

And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow, your heart dreams of spring.

Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity.

For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?

And what is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides,
that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?

Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.

And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb.

And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.