

My dad's BRAVE DECISION

When Peter “Bilzy” Bilsborough awoke from an induced coma after a surfing accident, he told his three children that when he was back on his feet, he wanted them to make posters announcing his return to his beloved Avalon, on Sydney’s northern beaches. “He said, ‘I want ‘BILSY IS BACK’ on the Bilgola Bends,’” says his daughter Kristen Wolthers.

Fourteen weeks later, Wolthers and her siblings, Jodie, 28, and Matt, 23, fulfilled their father’s wish—but with a heartbreaking twist: the posters were put up for their father’s living wake. Despite initial hopes, Bilsborough’s spinal-cord injury—similar to the late actor Christopher Reeve’s—was deemed “catastrophic”: he was unable to breathe without a life-support machine. In chronic pain and susceptible to deadly infections, on July 10, 2010, Bilsborough came home to celebrate his life, following his decision to cease the treatment that kept him alive.

“I didn’t let myself believe it was the last time he’d come home,” says Wolthers, 31, whose cousin Tracey Roberts tells Bilsborough’s story in *The Will to Live, the Courage to Die* (A&A Publishing, \$34.99) to raise awareness and funds for paralysis. At the

bittersweet homecoming “he shone,” remembers Wolthers, through tears. “He was so proud of his home and family and friends.”

Three months earlier, on Easter Sunday 2010, Avalon local Wolthers, a sales manager for Quiksilver surfwear, and her bricklayer husband, Bjorn, 38, witnessed a surf rescue at Palm Beach. Says Wolthers: “I had an instant sick feeling because Dad loved surfing there.”

Wolthers waited by her dad’s car. When he didn’t return, Bjorn called the police and discovered the man rescued was indeed her father, and he was clinging to life. Bilsborough had wiped out in choppy conditions and his injuries, which included severe lung damage from ingesting sand, meant he would never leave intensive care. Unlike euthanasia, which is illegal, doctors explained that Bilsborough, 60, could choose to die by refusing treatment, just as a cancer patient may refuse chemotherapy.

“He told me that’s what he wanted, and I respected that,” says Wolthers. “There was no way he could live stuck in that hospital bed getting sicker and sicker. He was in all that torture, but we got to say beautiful goodbyes... A lot of people don’t get to do that.”

In his final days, Bilsborough, a builder who loved the outdoors and cherished his family,

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—Kristen Wolthers



“People don’t realise that with paralysis, you suffer horrific pain,” says Roberts, whose uncle, Peter Bilsborough (at Avalon for the last time on July 10, 2010), was left quadriplegic.

reminisced about good times, such as when the teenage Wolthers “reversed into the front fence in his ute,” she recalls, laughing. “He just shook his head and said, ‘As long as the ute’s OK. We’ll fix the fence.’ He was positive and supportive. We had a nice, close relationship.”

One of her dad’s regrets was that he didn’t have grandchildren, but 18 months after his death, Kristen gave birth to Axel Bilzy Wolthers, now 8 months. “He would have been such a good grandfather,” says Wolthers. “He would have taught Axel how to surf. I’ll be reading Tracey’s book to him a lot.”

Eleven days after his raucous living wake, at which a band belted out 1960s rock classics, Bilsborough died the way he lived—with passion and joy. “He said, ‘I want some really good wine, no crap, and asked me to put on the Rolling Stones song ‘Sister Morphine’, so we played music and put wine to his lips,” says Sydney art dealer Roberts of her uncle, who was more like “a big brother.” On July 21, 2010, the day after his life support was turned off, Bilsborough died surrounded by family. “He would give his cheeky grin every now and then and was at peace,” says Wolthers. “I told him he was the best dad in the world and that he’d always be with us.”

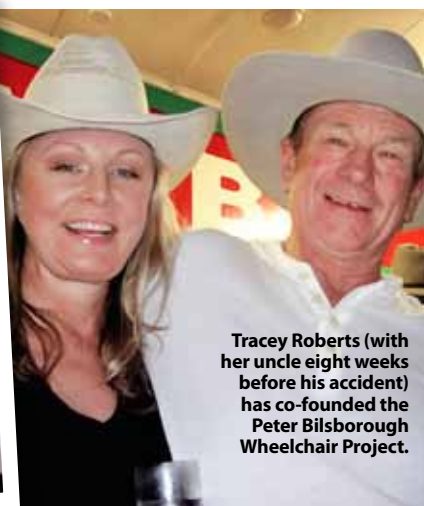
■ By Annette Dasey

To donate to paralysis causes, visit thewilltolive.net

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Bilsborough (left) and his estranged wife, Narelle (centre), joined their children Jodie (in red), Kristen and Matt at Kristen’s wedding in 2009.



Tracey Roberts (with her uncle eight weeks before his accident) has co-founded the Peter Bilsborough Wheelchair Project.

After a catastrophic spinal injury, a Sydney surfer farewelled loved ones before switching off his life support

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"Dad said, 'I hope some good comes of my injury,'" says Kristen Wolthers (with son Axel at Sydney's Avalon on Sept. 16), who is supporting a Rotary Five Dock fundraising dinner in March to buy an \$18,000 chin-controlled wheelchair for Royal North Shore Hospital.