

# Heart & Soul

## A tribute to Professor Bob Graham

When you're traveling in a royal motorcade the traffic lights are always green. This random thought suddenly occurred to Professor Bob Graham as he sped along a Sydney street sitting in a darkened car next to Diana, Princess of Wales. Belatedly he realises; It's not every day you head to the airport to pick up a Princess...





In his 25 years as the founding Executive Director of the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute, there would be times that raced by with the speed and excitement of a Royal motorcade. And there'd be other times when the road ahead was unforgiving, marked with stop signs, detours and dead ends.

In 1996, Princess Diana was the Guest of Honour at the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute's Royal Ball, and Bob was her host. After the extravagant black-tie event, the Princess personally invited Bob and his children to her Double Bay hotel room for a pot of tea. Paparazzi in helicopters whined outside the window, unaware that this would be the last time Her Royal Highness would publicly visit Australia.

A yellowing photo of this rare moment still sits behind Bob's desk in his office. The dusty frame is competing for space, and the Princess is barely recognizable behind images of former students,

colleagues, Nobel Prize-winning-friends and of course, grandchildren.

Suspended above the photo collection are six timber cupboard doors which conceal heavy textbooks on anatomy, physics, English grammar and non-fiction stories. The little library is like a glimpse inside Bob's brain – full of knowledge, gravitas and compassion.

"He really is a walking encyclopedia," his longtime friend and Institute Board Member John Kean will tell you. "He has a hunger for knowledge well beyond science. I'd say he's more gifted than the rest of us, mere mortals."

The very same word was often used to describe Dr Victor Chang – "*gifted*".

Bob was working in the United States when he was informed of the tragedy. It was a horrible shock. In the early seventies, the pair had briefly worked together at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, where

Victor was Bob's boss. According to Bob, this was "long before Victor was famous." But even then, there was something unique about the way Victor saw the world and the way he cared for people.

Other than discussing patients, Bob and Victor had fairly limited interaction. But what they would share in common was the impact they had on people's everyday lives.

With Victor's tragic passing, a worldwide search began to select an Executive Director to build a research institute named after an Australian hero. It was more than just finding someone who could do the job. You had to be worthy of this great honour.

At the time, Bob had clocked up 17 "stellar" years building an enviable career in the United States, working at Harvard Medical School, training under a Nobel Laureate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, before leading a large laboratory at the Cleveland Clinic. On weekends he went heliskiing with friends. Life was undeniably good.

But the chance to start an institute from scratch back home – well, that was too tempting to turn down.

"It's one thing to have the aspiration, it's another thing to actually execute. But with Bob there was never any doubt, he was the total package," says Peter Joseph, a former Director at St Vincent's Hospital.

Back then, the calibre of scientific talent was in stark contrast to the place where they worked – a pokey, dishevelled demountable in a dirty carpark. But not in Bob's eyes. With great pride, heavyweight recruitment prospects were given the "grand tour" of the makeshift laboratory. Professor Richard Harvey, co-Deputy Director of the Institute, thought it was a joke.



Prof Bob Graham with a portrait of Dr Victor Chang in 1994

"He brought me in for an interview and I said to myself, 'Bob, you've got to be kidding.' But before long I saw he had an exquisite sense of potential, a profound understanding of building a family, combined with a deep appreciation for biology. I was charmed over lunch and he convinced me that my future was better here at the Institute rather than anywhere else."



The Hon Neville Wran with Diana, Princess of Wales and Prof Bob Graham in 1996





Former Deputy Director Prof Ahsan Husain and Prof Bob Graham in 2008

Long before the ten-storey Lowy Packer Building was constructed Bob had already seen it. This was more than just a dream, it was practically a prophecy. Magnetised by Bob's vision, some of the best scientific minds in the world were captivated one by one.

Among them was former Deputy Director, Professor Ahsan Husain.

"I was truly impressed by how little he actually had," Professor Husain recalls. "But as unimpressed as I was with the lab, I was very impressed with Bob's idea to build a centre full of scientific athletes."

Now all Bob needed was funding. Lots of it.

In the early 1990s when Kerry Packer was asked for \$3million to help establish the Institute he famously replied "Jesus, that's a big ask! Isn't there any other bastard out there?".

Philanthropist, Chuck Feeney, was a little more subtle. In 2005 Bob traveled to San Francisco to persuade him to finance the construction of a purpose-built heart research headquarters.

"I was thanking Chuck for his time, and he had just turned to walk away when he said: 'Oh, by the way, you can have the \$20 million to build your research centre'. He said it so casually," Bob recalls.

In a blink the bulldozers were on site, the tower rose up, the scaffolding came down and Her Royal Highness Princess Mary arrived in Sydney to cut the ribbon - officially opening the new research complex: The Lowy Packer Building.

To this day, Sir Frank Lowy and Professor Bob Graham are dear friends.

Mr Steven Lowy was Chairman of the Institute's Board for six years. He took the reins from former NSW Premier Neville Wran, before handing them to Mr Matthew Grounds, then CEO of UBS Australasia.

Bob has formed enduring friendships with all three Chairmen. He speaks of their outstanding contributions in equal measure, but their admiration for Bob is as intoxicating as the fireside Scotch they've shared.



Prof Bob Graham with Mr Steven Lowy and Mr Matthew Grounds in 2014

"He's a leader, a humanist, a world-class clinician, a renowned scientist, and a bloody good guy," explains Mr Lowy.

Current Chairman Matthew Grounds emphatically agrees. "The reality is, over the past 25 years I don't think there's any other Australian who's done more for heart research than Professor Bob Graham."

Let's pause a moment to let that statement sink in. In a quarter of a century it's widely believed that not a single person in the country has championed the fight against heart disease as successfully as Bob Graham.

Colleagues near and far, old and new, join in the applause.

Prof Bob Graham at the Institute's 25th Anniversary Celebration



Charles Homcy MD first met Bob in 1980 at Massachusetts General Hospital. They've been confidants and collaborators ever since.

"Oh, I think he's had a big footprint on heart research, my God! Just building the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute... what a wonderful body of work. A real magnum opus, an enduring institution. That by far is a remarkable achievement," says Dr Homcy.

With high praise like that, a lesser man would find his humility challenged.

"I think it's rare to have a leader whose ego is very much under control," explains Professor Sally Dunwoodie who has worked with Bob for 20 years.

"With Bob you get the constant impression he's not in it for himself, he's in it for everyone else."

Over and over Bob demonstrates his genuine modesty and fundamental care for his colleagues, his patients and total strangers. In 2014 a gardener was working at the Institute when he suddenly suffered a cardiac arrest right in front of the statue of Victor Chang.





Bob with his father Gunther and older sister Monica in the 1950s

“What will stick with me forever was how Bob immediately took over, got down on his hands and knees and started resuscitating him. He saved the life of this guy, and he did it with such style and commitment,” Professor Harvey recalls.

Moments like that stay with you.

In the early seventies Bob was working at a hospital in rural New Zealand as a medical student. During one of Bob's shifts, a young mother who had just given birth, suddenly went into cardiac arrest. A senior doctor picked up a gigantic needle of adrenalin and told Bob to plunge it into the middle of her heart. He hesitated then stabbed. The injection was meant to shock her heart back to life, only it didn't work. So they bundled her into an ambulance and they headed for a larger hospital in Auckland. For 45 agonising minutes as the ambulance screamed through the countryside, Bob pumped the woman's chest with all his might. The new mother was dead by the time they reached the city. She never got to hold her baby in her arms.

Much like a Royal motorcade, the traffic lights are always green when you're traveling in the back of a speeding ambulance too. Only that time Bob was too exhausted and focused to notice.

Perhaps it was this moment that provided the morbid inspiration to forge a Herculean career in heart disease. Or perhaps Bob was thinking of the mum he couldn't save in the quiet moments late at night as he put the finishing touches on one of his 284 scientific research papers (and counting).

He keeps an exact tally. Research paper number 173 overturned more than a century of scientific dogma. Previously, it was widely accepted that heart muscle cells in mammals stopped replicating shortly after birth. Bob put a blowtorch to the theory and proved the heart has the remarkable potential to heal itself. The discovery was widely celebrated and published in the prestigious journal, *Cell*.

“His work ethic is unbelievable,” says former colleague Professor Andrew Owens. “You could never imagine the amount of hours he spends doing the hard yards. Lots of scientists are hardworking, you have to be. But Bob is ferociously hardworking.”

Bob, a father of four, did his best to ensure this didn't impact his homelife. According to his daughter Caitlin, while he'd often work late into the night, on weekends he was at home cooking crepes and schnitzel, teaching her how to ride a bike or building the latest jungle gym.

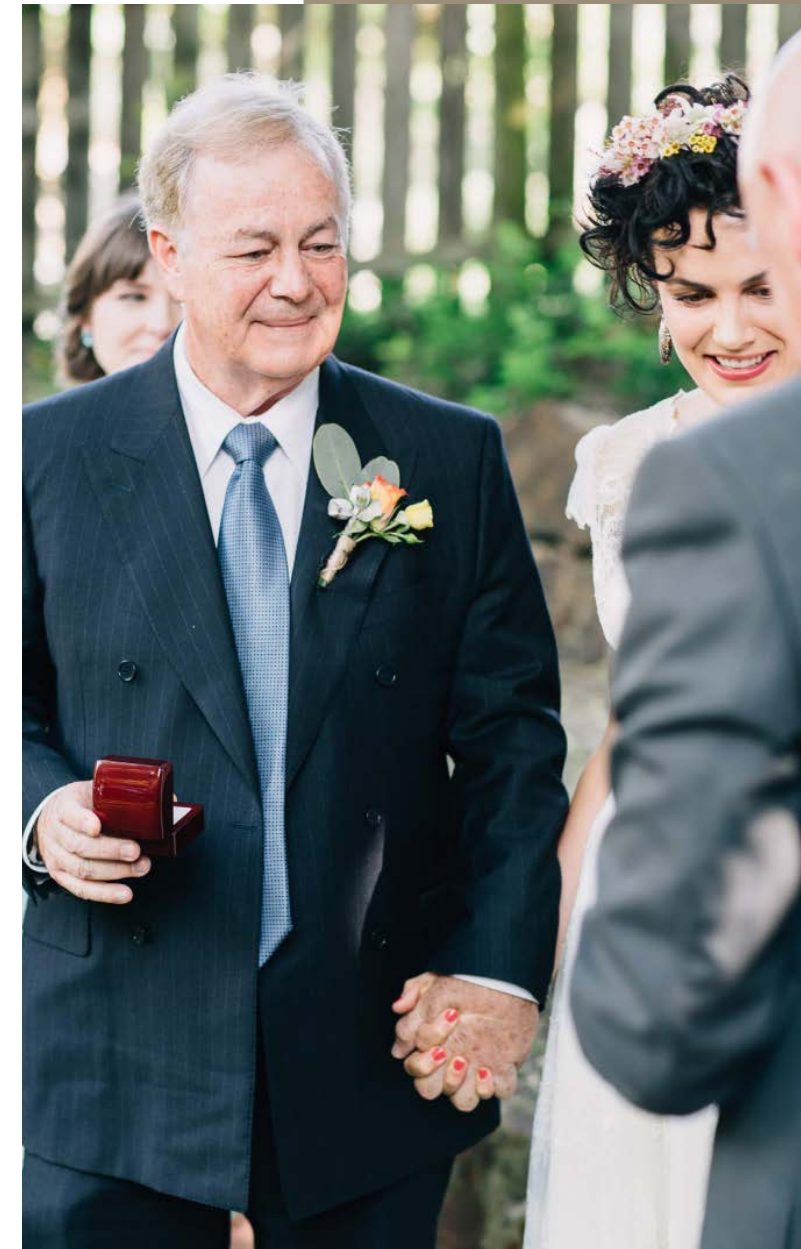
“We saw a different side of him at home, he's a silly, fun, pretty dorky dad who sends us the lamest dad jokes. But he has always had high expectations of us. From a young age I was very aware of how much he believed in me.”

Bob's parents, Erica and Gunther Graham, had extremely high expectations of their son too. Gunther grew up in Eastern Germany in a little town called Breslau.

“Both my parents had to flee because of Hitler,” Bob explains. “My father was actually in a concentration camp for three months before he got out and fled to England. It was right before the Holocaust in 1937 and 1938, this was even before the prisoners received tattoos in the camps. My dad was a strapping, big guy who played goalie for the state in soccer and they made him dig the latrines for the camps. He escaped, but dad's parents succumbed and so did my mother's side of the family too.”

In 1938 Erica and Gunther arrived in Australia as migrant refugees with hardship in their eyes and a determination in their hearts that would inevitably be passed onto their children.

Few people realise Bob drove taxis to pay his way through medical school. Even fewer would be aware of the wild months he spent working at a hospital in remote Papua New Guinea, treating cannibals with exotic diseases, surviving an earthquake, and battling a plague of a billion locusts.



Prof Bob Graham with his daughter Caitlin on her wedding day





Prof Bob Graham with former PhD student Jason Kovacic in 2007

It's a long way from his office at the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute in downtown Sydney. In the centre of the room, paperwork cocoons his computer. To his right in the corner are two golf balls and a putter. In the other corner are some empty cardboard boxes. The boxes seem out of place and [Author's note] I wish they were. Bob is starting to pack up his office. After 25 spectacular years as Executive Director, he's decided it's time to move on and focus on his true passion, the research.

For the first time in 25 years another worldwide recruitment search has been underway, with only an elite few shortlisted for the role. And just as it was back in 1994, to fill such big shoes you have to be worthy of this great honour.

Scratch the surface and you'll find many similarities between Bob and his successor, Professor Jason Kovacic. As Cardiologists, they both spent several fruitful years working at hospitals and laboratories across the United States. Both have European heritage, refugee parents and speak fluent German. They also share a love of skiing, cycling, onion rings, and astronomy, and believe it or not, they even started working at the Institute on the exact same day 25 years apart.

They share an uncanny personal connection that seems to have been cast by destiny, a true master and apprentice tale.

The pair first crossed paths back in 2002. Kovacic was interested in doing a PhD under Bob's tutelage.

"I went to Bob with a head full of crazy ideas about what I wanted to research and Bob said, 'well, you can win the Nobel Prize later but right now I think this is a better idea for a PhD topic.' It was some of the best advice he ever gave me," Professor Kovacic laughs.

He completed his PhD in 2007 with Bob by his side. A photograph was taken at the time, without any awareness of its future relevance or significance – an image of a master and his apprentice looking with a mutual eye towards the future.

As the baton is passed, we are at the commencement of a new era, where Professor Kovacic will no doubt be eager to put his own personal stamp on the future direction of the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute.

Time and again Professor Kovacic has proven himself to be a *gifted* leader.

At Mount Sinai's Icahn School of Medicine in New York, he established a world leading laboratory focused on cardiovascular cell biology, while caring for patients with fibromuscular dysplasia and spontaneous coronary artery dissection.

Previously, Professor Kovacic was also a champion athlete who rowed alongside Australian Olympic Royalty, the Oarsome Foursome. And, incredibly, he was the medical doctor on tour with the Rolling Stones, personally treating Mick Jagger and Keith Richards.

But that's a story for another time. This story is dedicated to celebrating the man who has done more to combat heart disease than any other person in Australia.

With a worthy replacement ready, Bob feels it is time to move back to the laboratory.

Bob has cleaned out the bottom draw of his desk already. The faded photo of Princess Diana won't even be bubble wrapped before it goes into the moving box.

And as he packs, a painted portrait of Victor Chang hangs high on the wall watching over. It's the only physical possession Bob will leave behind.

After all there's something far greater he'll bestow to his successor. Something you can't touch or hold in your hands. And something you can't capture in a simple photograph. A legacy.

Prof Bob Graham with incoming Executive Director Prof Jason Kovacic

