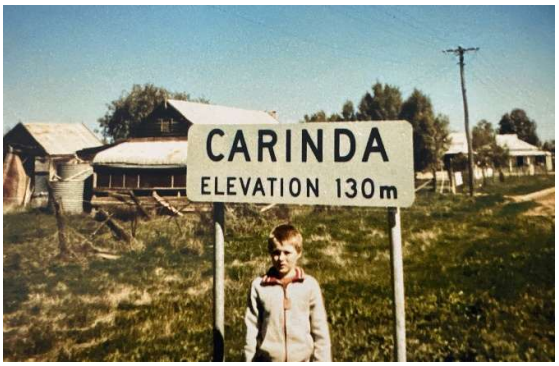
Pat Ryan— From cursing to cruising…

L: Pat and Ben, Launceston, 2023 R: Pat, Sydney, 2025

Pat is not sure he wants his story to be told. He will only tell it if he feels assured that anything he doesn't want to say will be removed. Trust is the issue. He can't read or write, so he's never sure if what he wants is listened to. He has a history of not being heard. Of being seen as a troublemaker. When you have an acquired brain injury (ABI), he knows you are treated differently and people often don't listen, don't hear him until he gets angry, so he knows he has been difficult at times – abusive, aggressive and uncooperative – trying to be heard. But he trusts Ben, the man sitting next to him who has asked him to tell his story– Ben listens, and he hears him. So, he talks. And edits, before a word is even written.

For the past 5 years, Pat has lived in Supported Independent Living (SIL) accommodation in Launceston. But his first home, where he grew up the third eldest of nine children – seven brothers and one sister–was in a small town in New South Wales called Carinda, a name derived from an Aboriginal word meaning 'you carry'. Few have probably heard of Carinda, located an 8-hour drive north-west of Sydney, but in 1983 David Bowie put it on the map when he used it as a film location in the music video of his chart-topping and best-selling single, 'Let's dance'; in *Rolling Stone* magazine Bowie described Carinda as a place of 'frankly brute character.'



L: Pat's youngest brother Bryson in Carinda R: Brothers Peter, Collin, Pat, & Steven

Pat had left Carinda by the time Bowie turned up. In 1974, aged 15, he went to Sydney. He stayed with his father Bill ('Booker'), a former shearer who got him a job in a large wool store. Pat did his best to amuse himself, driving a trolley/forklift around the store when he could, but he found the job of picking up and moving wool around boring and he left after 14 months. By this time, the rest of his family had moved to Sydney and his then stepfather, also called Bill ('Schooler'), got him his next job at an electrical company called BCL that was owned by a relative. It specialised in neon signs and Pat's job was to install them all over Sydney and around NSW. By age 18, he had bought a motorbike, and he had been encouraged to go to night school to get the education he had missed out on growing up.

The only thing Pat remembers of his time at the two-classroom primary school in Carinda was being put in a corner with six other boys, who, like him, also never learnt to read or write. Left to his own devices he often acted up that led to a caning by his teacher who gave him six of the best. His education continued to be ignored when he went to the nearest High School in Walgett, a 44-mile (74 km) bus drive away. When his stepfather Bill ('Schooler'), got a job as a bouncer at a pub in the opal mining town of Lightening Ridge, and the family moved there for a short time, Pat did learn how to fossick and once found an opal worth $500.00.

However, his attempt to improve his prospects were cut short when two weeks before his 19th birthday Pat had a motorbike accident on his way home from night school, breaking both his legs and fracturing his skull when his helmet came off. He was in hospital for three and a half months before he could walk again, but the bones in his left leg didn't knit properly and impacted his mobility as he got older. Similarly, the full impact of his brain injury also manifested later, when he started to have epileptic seizures and affect his emotional regulations, amongst other complications.

Pat received an insurance payout from his accident when he was 22. He used the payout to buy a house and a car–a second-hand brown Ford Falcon XD station wagon– and spent the next five years getting odd jobs, going to the pub with mates and barracking for the Paramatta Eels; he is a lifetime member of the Eels. He lost his membership badge many years ago, but a new one is waiting at the League shop for him to collect someday.

When he was 27, Pat sold his house and bought another one with his mum Noleen in Coffs Harbour, where he spent the next 18 years living with his mother and new stepfather Ron. He now lived on a disability pension as his seizures impacted his ability to work and triggered aggressive behaviour. After his mother died of lung cancer Pat returned to Sydney to stay with his brother Peter and his wife Narelle and their blended family of 5 children, two sons of their own and two sons and a daughter from Narelle's previous relationship. However, as Pat's behaviour became more erratic, he was admitted to Penrith Hospital, and from there he went into a nursing home in Parramatta. His 'behaviours of concern' continued to escalate, and, as Pat remembers it, after threatening another resident who kept urinating on the floor, he was moved into a secure wing at another nursing home in the Blue Mountains.

In 2018, his brother Peter's stepdaughter Kristie and stepson Aaron moved to Launceston. Kristie's plan was to live in George Town, and she arranged for Pat to be moved to a nursing home in Low Head. His father Bill (Booker) also moved to Launceston to be nearby. Although his parents had divorced when he was child, Pat had a strong bond with his father who he

remembers always looked after him and put food on the table. After his father died of a heart attack, Pat withdrew to his room, closed the curtains, and shut everyone out, which is how Ben, who was to help change the direction of his life, found him in 2020.

Ben had heard about Pat during a conversation at a conference. Believing aged care facilities were inappropriate for younger people, Ben had gone to see if he could assist Pat and help him live independently in supported accommodation. The transition was hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic, but in 2021, Pat was moved from the Low Head nursing home to one in St Leonards for six months. His physical and mental wellbeing continued to deteriorate, exacerbating his 'anti-social behaviours', and there was talk of sending him to the Roy Fagen Centre in Hobart, a facility specialising in assessing and treating older people with mental illness and dementia. However, before that happened, he was admitted into hospital with suspected delirium, where he remained until the renovations for the shared SIL unit in Newnham were completed.

Pat was at the Newnham unit on Alanvale Rd for 18 months. It was a difficult time for him. He was now no longer mobile enough to use a walking frame and didn't yet have a wheelchair, and he was confined to bed, or a princess chair that he was unable to move by himself. He also needed to recover from some serious respiratory health issues. He trusted only Ben and still acted out with the support staff. Pat's behaviours escalated after Ben left the company then that company managing Pat's affairs and they eventually ceased his services.

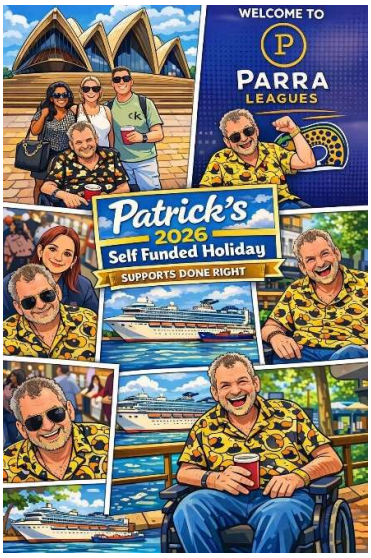
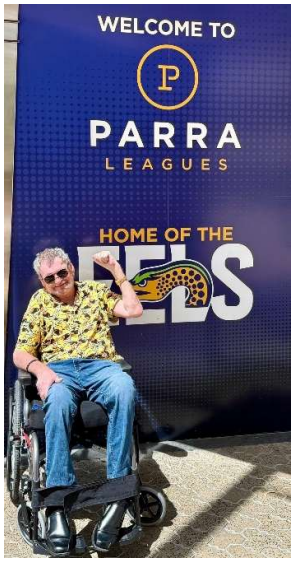
Things began to improve for Pat after Ben, who had established his own NDIS business in 2022 was contacted to see if he would assist him again. In 2023, Pat moved to his current two-bed SIL home in Newnham, arranged by adaptCARE. He now has his mobility back and can do a stand transfer with the assistance of one staff member. He also now has a manual wheelchair as well as an electric wheelchair with dual controls, one set at the front for him to use, and another at the rear for staff, which allows him to be more independent at home and to go out and attend community events or shop when he chooses.

Gradually he began to rebuild his life as his support team learnt to recognise his need for routine and for 'things to be done in a particular way'. As his mental health improved so too did his physical strength, and he went from being a bed-bound, angry, abusive and isolated individual to a mobile, out-in-the community, courteous and thoughtful human being. And by the end of 2023, Pat was able to go with support staff on his first ever holiday. He went to Cairns. 'It was good', say Pat, 'but hot.' His favourite bit of the trip was going to listen to bands playing at the Reef Hotel Casino. Pat loves music. He likes all genres, particularly Aussie rock bands like Jimmy Barnes and Cold Chisel and ACDC, and of course, David Bowie.

At the beginning of 2025, Pat went on his second holiday, this time a cruise from Sydney to Brisbane. He loved trying out all the restaurants on the ship and sampling the different cuisines on offer, with Chinese food being his favourite. Pat likes to do a bit of cooking. He used to cook a Sunday roast for his nephew Aaron and his children -a roast chicken with home-made gravy, and he sometimes prepares another family favourite, corned beef, adding in a can of beer to the cooking water to help tenderise the meat like his mum used to do, and makes broccoli or cauliflower in white sauce to go with it. Connections with his family are important. The highlight of his last holiday was the day he spent in Sydney before the cruise departed, catching up with his brothers Peter and Bryson and their families on Australia Day. Pat and his supports, together they watched the fireworks display off Sydney Harbour Bridge, something he had never done when he lived there.

Left: Pat with brothers Bryson & Peter in Sydney, Australia Day– 26 January 2025
Right: Ready for cruising with adaptCARE staff, Bobby-Jo, Bianca, Ben and Adam, Jan 2025

Pat is now planning his third holiday, another cruise that will set sail in early 2026. In the meantime, he spends his time watching his favourite shows on television, re-runs of *Mash*, *Pawn Shop* and *Storage Wars*, and any programs featuring people hunting for gold or opals. Sometimes he goes to church in Newnham. Pat was brought up as a Catholic and believes in God and his mother's last husband Ron used to read the Bible to him. But arguably the outing he enjoys best is going to adaptCARE's monthly discos at St Catherine's Hall in Norwood, where he can listen to music in the company of others, and where being confined to a wheelchair doesn't stop him dancing. It's a pity Pat didn't get the chance to dance in the Carinda pub when Bowie was there, he would have liked that.

L: Poster of David Bowie at the Carinda pub in 1983 R: Pat at adaptCARE Disco, Launceston, 2025

Postscript: Pat's cruise and holiday in Sydney, February 2026