Robbie Giannini — a search for feeling

How do you tell someone's story when they are no longer able to tell you it themselves? You ask the person closest to them and hope you can catch a glimpse of their life as refracted through their gaze.

If we are lucky, we find a soulmate to make the journey through life with us. In Robbie's case, his soulmate is his wife Angela, his 'principessa', who we asked to tell us about Robbie who can no longer speak. There are lots of things Robbie can no longer do. A combination of Alzheimer's and Frontal Temporal Lobe Dementia will do that. Strip away the abilities you spent a lifetime acquiring and perfecting. For Robbie this happened quickly. He lost his ability to speak, to feed or wash himself, and then his coordination and mobility. But his journey continues. As does the love.

L: Robbie, Mordialloc, 1970s

R: Robbie and Angela, Port Lincoln, S.A. 1993

L: 'The Muse' sculpture of Angela by Robbie, exhibited at Launceston's Nisart Gallery in the early 2000s. Picture taken in October 2025
R: Angela & Robbie wedding day, 14 May 1994

Angela was Robbie's muse — like Camille Claudel was for Robbie's favourite sculptor, Auguste Rodin. Robbie may no longer create art works depicting her and what she has meant to him, but Angela remembers and shares her memories of the sociable, broadminded man with an off-beat sense of humour she loves.

Robbie and Angela were in their 30s when they met in 1993. They first met in a friend's kitchen before going to an exhibition of her art at the Australian Gallery in Collingwood, and they just clicked. Six months later Robbie proposed, and on 14 May 1994 they married at the St John's Ambulance Hall in Mordiallic and set up home together in St Kilda, where they lived until they moved to Launceston in April 2000.

The couple had a lot in common. They were both artists, they had grown up in neighboring suburbs in Melbourne, and they were both from large migrant families; Robbie is one of seven siblings—three of whom are deceased— and Angela is one of five. Robbie's father Eduino migrated from Tuscany in Northern Italy in 1952. Two years after he arrived, Eduino met Robbie's Australian-born mother Barbara, a nurse with an Irish heritage, when he spent six months in the Prince Henry Hospital with a badly broken leg that required an 18-inch nail to join the broken bones; always jovial, Eduino's singing of Italian folk songs to Barbara and other hospital staff made the papers. Angela's parents also migrated from Europe after the war. Her Hungarian father came from Czechoslovakia in 1950 and her mother from East Germany in 1954; both never lost their Europeanness. Her father, Alexander Komives spent two years in a Russian prison camp during the war. Her mother, Lilly-Annarose, escaped from East Germany before the wall was built and lived in Frankfort before emigrating to Australia where she was called just Ann.

Looking back Angela knows that it took a special kind of man to feel comfortable in her family. Her family is not for the faint-hearted. Her father was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease in his late 40s, and he was a patient at the Alfred Hospital the first time Robbie met him. Her mother was not in a good mental state, and she had two brothers with disabilities, one with Autism and a brain injury from birth the other with schizophrenia, and her sister suffers from chronic fatigue. Only she and another brother had good health.

Knowing Angela's family history has a significant bearing on how she has navigated Robbie's illness. Having grown up living with the medical conditions experienced by family members she was used to it; it was her kind of 'normal'. When her brother with Autism was born in 1964 there were few services available to help with his care, and Angela helped her mother take care of him at home for the first seven years of his life. When he posed a threat to a new baby in the house he went into day care at a sheltered workshop before eventually moving into Kew cottages and later a Supported Independent Living (SIL) home in Hawthorn. She also witnessed her mother caring for her father through his depression and Parkinson's disease for 20 years, before her own decline from vascular dementia that began when she was in her 60s. For the most part Angela doesn't find illness scary: 'Illness is not an alien thing – or an abnormal thing either,' she says, 'It's just a physical thing that happens to you and life goes on.' While she has profoundly emotional moments, she then just gets on living and has never wavered in her steadfast and loving care of Robbie.

Robbie captured Angela's greatest gift to him in a birthday card inscription he wrote to her in 2009 that says: 'To my beautiful girl – You make me Feel.' To be made to feel has always been a key driver for Robbie's artistic temperament, in both his career and life choices. Although he got into sculpting and painting in his 20s, exhibiting works in solo and group exhibitions in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania, music too has always played an important part in Robbie's life. Both making it and listening to it. Robbie was a BIG BIG Beatles fan, and he got into drumming at an early age. He never played in a band, but as a young man he filled in as a drummer with different rock'n'roll and blues groups. He also worked at Billy Hyde drum clinics and helped set up drum kits for visiting bands, such as Fleetwood Mac.

L: Robbie the drummer

R: Robbie the sculptor

Two of four paintings Robbie entered in the Archibald Prize in the 1990s featuring two St Kilda identities: artist Mirka Moira and Baptist Minister and social justice advocate Tim Costello. The portrait of Tim Costello is now part of the Launceston General Hospital art collection.

Watching movies was another of Robbie's passions, particularly those featuring Orson Welles. A *Touch of Evil*, made in 1958, the year Robbie was born, which Welles directed and starred in with Charlton Heston was one of his favourites. Robbie too liked experimenting with film. After the couple decided to leave St Kilda and set up home somewhere a bit calmer and quieter, Robbie made a movie of a reconnaissance trip he made to Tasmania set it to the soundtrack of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* to show Angela what it was like. Now, listening to music is perhaps the last bastion for Robbie, the only thing left to him, where he can close his eyes and tap his foot as he retreats into sound.

Robbie first knew things were amiss in 2013, when his memory started to fail after a psychotic episode. However, it took until 2018 before his illness was formally diagnosed and named, and

although never a great reader or writer because he thought he was dyslexic, Robbie tried to capture in words how he felt about losing his memory:

‘In younger days my mind was as vital as an African Savanah, teeming with life, full of euphoric love, the tragedy, the danger and the thrills of missed opportunities, and now, vast tracks of barren land withering away – longing for things I can’t remember.’

Before his illness was diagnosed, Robbie had also had a glimpse of what caring for someone with a mental illness might look like. Soon after it was released in 2013, he and Angela watched a documentary about Australian rock'n'roll band Sunnyboys lead singer Jeremy Oxley’s journey living with mental illness and undiagnosed schizophrenia. What especially resonated with Robbie was the care and support Oxley received from his partner throughout his illness, and Angela remembers him saying: ‘Imagine how much effort it would take to look after someone like that. It would take all your energy to be in such a relationship.’ Little did they realise then that Angela would soon be called upon to find the energy and make such an effort.

Angela took care of Robbie at home until November 2024. They adjusted their lives when he couldn’t navigate how to get to places and had to stop his volunteer work delivering meals. They regrouped after an accident occurred in his shed, when he forgot to turn a drop saw off and cut his fingers in his right hand that required two surgeries and an artificial knuckle to mend. To stay positive, as his illness progressed Angela would wake Robbie up saying, ‘Robbie you are the most beautifulist man in the world.’ For a time, he would join in at the end with her and say, ‘in the world’ and put his thumbs up. Then it was just the word ‘world’, now there is mostly blankness.

For better or worse Angela wanted to help Robbie live at home while she could. She did not want him to go into a nursing home like her parents had. However, she struggled after an operation she had in 2019 to remove part of a twisted bowel, and as Robbie’s mobility and health issues deteriorated, by the end of 2024 she was exhausted and knew she could no longer safely take care of him at home and Robbie moved into a Supported Independent Living (SIL) home for care.

Angela thinks Robbie still knows her, but recently she has noticed the flicker and shine in his eyes is no longer there and she feels like he is going away from her. ‘Isn’t life eventful and peculiar,’ she says. ‘It is very difficult to get everything right. Trying to grapple with the right attitude, trying to be brave, trying to be resourceful.’ Most of all, she adds, ‘I just don’t want him to be distressed.’ When she sees Robbie get agitated or cries quite hard, she doubts what a psychologist once told her - that dementia affects the people around the person more than themselves – to be true. She thinks this platitude is not supported by evidence and her experience says otherwise. ‘It’s hard to get it right. It’s only when you look back. You can only respond to situations using the ability at the time. I have supported him the best I can. Did the best I could. I didn’t hold back. I just want to alleviate his suffering. Make him feel the best he possibly can. I don’t know if I can achieve that.’

Noone can ever be certain or know for sure what difference you make in someone’s life, but there are clues. Prominent in the living room of the house they once shared, which is full of the artwork Angela and Robbie have made, is a three-dimensional, multi-media artwork portraying Angela that Robbie created in St Kilda in the 1990s. Called ‘Heaven Sent’, it depicts Angela reaching out to hold Robbie’s heart. The hollow cavity of the heart is filled with bits and pieces

that Robbie, forever the bowerbird, collected over the years and put in it. When everything else has gone, it remains as a testament to what was.

L: Robbie and R: Angela at home with Robbie's portrayal of her in 'Heaven Sent,' Launceston, 2025