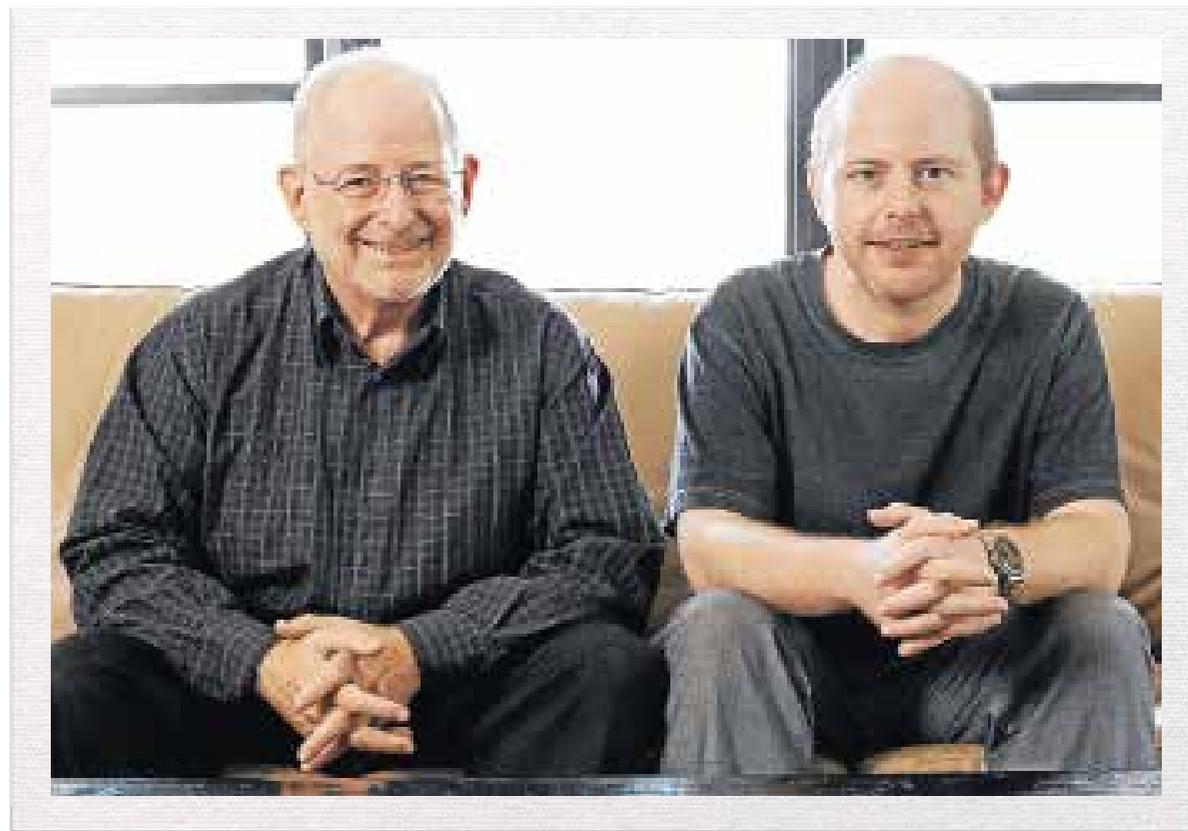


Two of us

NORBERT SCHWEIZER & RICHARD SCHWEIZER

Richard Schweizer (right) was diagnosed with schizophrenia just over a decade ago. Since then, the 33-year-old has, with the help of his father, business lawyer Norbert Schweizer, 65, managed to rebuild his life and achieve academic success.

INTERVIEWS BY CARLA GROSSETTI



NORBERT: Richard's schizophrenia presented as far back as November in 2003, when he was 22. My wife Sonja found him sitting on the floor in the middle of his bedroom, crying. She phoned me at work and I came straight home. It was very confronting. Richard told us about hearing voices that told him to do terrible things, voices that told him he was worthless. He said he'd been unwell for about three months. We took him to our family doctor who prescribed medication for schizophrenia. Facing the fact that my son might have this disease was definitely the worst day of my life.

Richard was admitted to The Sydney Clinic the next day and was there for the next eight weeks. He was frightened out of his mind. I was shit-scared, too. My darkest moments occurred in those early days.

The most stressful thing about this disease is the high suicide rate, and that was my first and worst fear. My next thought was, "How can I help him?" My aim ever since has been to give him hope and reinforce that he is a very worthwhile human being.

Growing up, Richard was a typical young boy. He was a prefect in high school and excelled at everything he did. He rowed, played rugby union and the bass guitar, and spoke German and French very well. He was very outgoing and a warm, loving, generous boy.

When Richard was diagnosed with schizophrenia, he was in the third year of his law degree. He had won an internship at the NSW attorney-general's department, had broken up with his girlfriend and had been smoking a bit of cannabis – all of which we believe helped trigger his schizophrenia.

When he became ill, his whole life went on hold. After he was released from the clinic, we took him

to Vanuatu on holiday. As soon as we arrived back he said, "I need to go to hospital." He'd had suicidal thoughts. It took about six months for Richard to feel confident enough to resume his life.

Now, nearly 12 years on, I am in awe of him and unbelievably proud of him. In the years since his diagnosis, he has attended New York University as an exchange student, has completed his law degree and an arts degree, both with first-class honours, completed a master of journalism, and is undertaking his PhD in the Department of Sociology at Sydney University. His thesis is on schizophrenia. Richard is also a patient ambassador for the Schizophrenia Research Institute, and hopes to one day help advise on the development of mental-health policies.

"Schizophrenia feels like rolling a boulder up a big hill, only to have it roll back down again."

What do I find most disturbing about this disease? Richard hasn't been in a relationship for 12 years and I don't know if he will ever have one. He is never going to be the outgoing, gregarious person he used to be. He still lives at home, but I encourage him to be independent. I need to know he'll be okay when we're gone and hope to give him enough tools to live a fulfilling life.

The schizophrenia has brought us closer together. I really admire Richard's achievements and his strength. Of course, there have been times when I've wanted to shake him and say, "Get over it." But it's not frustration with him; it's the frustration that he has schizophrenia and that he will never have the life we hoped he would have.

RICHARD: There were a few events leading up to my psychotic breakdown. I was smoking a bit of pot at the time and I had delusions where I'd watch TV and it would feel like there was a message meant for me. I had obsessive, irrational thoughts I couldn't stop and had a voice in my head saying things like "You're crazy". I had violent thoughts and was afraid I was going to hurt myself or someone else.

My memories of going to hospital are hazy because I was on a lot of sedatives, but I do remember understanding that Dad felt very helpless. Admitting to him that I had suicidal thoughts was difficult. He was worried he might lose me to the disease.

One of the more interesting aspects of the illness is it can cause a drop in IQ ... I was lucky enough to start from a very high point! Dad has always taken pride in my academic achievements and he still puts pressure on me to succeed. He wants me to complete my PhD because he says he wants a doctor in the house.

Dad says that the first thing he thinks of when he wakes up is me and my condition, and that it never goes away. I wish he wouldn't say that. The drugs have muted the voices and I'm symptom-free, so I'm not doing that badly. The main problem with having schizophrenia is that it makes relationships tough. I know Dad is worried about my future, but I'm hopeful there will be someone special out there for me.

Dad can be a bit grumpy. He is a fussy spot and has a short fuse, but he is still a man of great sensitivity and great intelligence. He has a number of passions, but his family is the most important thing to him and that has only intensified with my illness.

I still suffer from anxiety. I take antidepressants and Valium, which keep me sailing straight, but the biggest problem is that the medication makes me sleep 12 hours a night. It also left me with a flat, expressionless face for a while, which Dad found distressing, but I've fixed that by reducing the dosage.

Dad blows my mind in lots of ways. His capacity for work is remarkable and part of his way of making a contribution – apart from supporting me financially and emotionally – is to raise funds for research to help detect schizophrenia early.

One of the best nights of my life was joining my Dad on stage at Sydney Town Hall to talk about schizophrenia. We aim to destigmatise the disease and give hope to those who are affected by it.

I sometimes wish I could show Dad what it feels like to have schizophrenia. It feels like rolling a boulder up a big hill, only to have it roll back down again.

The fact that my symptoms are under control and my moods are stable brings Dad joy and that's a big driver for me. Dad has never made me feel guilty about having schizophrenia, but I feel pain for causing him grief. He has always been strong and always been there for me, and I see him as the rock upon which I have rebuilt my life. ■

