

Eastern Courier

Lifelong commitment to burns survivors acknowledged



MEGHAN LAWRENCE / FAIRFAX NZ
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Delwyn and Alan Breslau, of Half Moon Bay, are proud recipients of the Kiwibank Local Hero Awards for Auckland.

East Auckland couple Alan and Delwyn Breslau have been honoured with Local Hero Awards in the annual Kiwibank New Zealander of the Year Awards.

The award aims to identify and reward everyday people doing extraordinary things in their local communities.

The Breslaus, of Half Moon Bay, have shown lifelong commitment to burns survivors throughout New Zealand and around the world.

Alan was extensively burned in a crash of a commercial airliner in 1963, while living in the United States and working as a chemical engineer.

"I was on a business trip from New York to Rochester with the president and vice-president of my company," he says.

"The pilot knew there was a tornado coming, but he thought that he could take off and get home before it hit.

"As the plane went up, the tornado hit us and knocked us over and we crashed on the ground and started to burn."

Alan sustained burns to 45 per cent of his body, and was the only survivor of eight passengers and crew sat in the front of the plane.

"I spent five years in the hospital and had 52 initial operations [now more than 70]," he says.

"My whole face and my left hand were destroyed, and I had no hair. I had all kinds of treatments; every kind of treatment you can think of."

From his experience Alan realised the importance of peer support for those with burns injuries and went on to establish one of the first burn support organisations in the US, the Phoenix Society, and the World Burn Congress.

"I called it the Phoenix Society because the Phoenix is a bird who builds a nest, then fans its wings and starts a fire. It burns up in the nest and is reborn more beautiful than before, to live another life," he says.

On the other side of the world in Auckland, Delwyn was helping her son Brendon deal with extensive burns.

On February 19, 1984, the then eight-year-old was involved in an explosion in Papakura and hospitalised for two months.

"He underwent two skin graft surgeries on both hands, shoulders, lower back and his leg," Delwyn says.

"It was as a result of that experience that, like Alan, I discovered there was no psycho-social support here for people who had been burnt or disfigured, or for that matter for their families, so I founded the Burn Support Group Charitable Trust."

The trust has been running for more than 30 years, creating burn prevention awareness, fostering the sharing of information between burn survivors, and supporting burn survivors with recovery and reintegration into society.

Alan and Delwyn met at the first World Burn Congress, after writing letters to each other for the preceding seven months.

"We met in the hotel lobby and from that moment on, life was never the same for either of us," Delwyn says.

"By the end of the congress [four days later], he had told me that he was going to marry me."

After a five-year long-distance courtship, the couple married on March 13, 1993, and emigrated to New Zealand 10 years later.

It wasn't long before they were both patrons of the Burn Support Group Charitable Trust and heavily involved in organising burn camps and support meetings.

When asked what inspires them to keep supporting burns victims, Alan says "the success".

Delwyn adds: "We see how much value there is to the people when we get them together.

"We can see how much they enjoy being together and how much they enjoy sharing their stories. They seem to garner strength from each other."

During a speech at the World Burn Congress this year, Alan addressed strategies for overcoming adversity.

"Wear your scars proudly as badges of courage," he said.

"We're not our disfigurement. Don't dwell on what you can't do, but on what you can."

He says the biggest issue burn survivors have to contend with is people staring.

"Making the comment, 'would you like me to tell you my story' is a good way to satisfy the curiosity of the staring public," he says.

"People only stare out of curiosity because they don't understand. Once they understand they are empathetic."

Now aged 90 and 70 respectively, the pair has travelled all over the world in support of burn survivors and show no signs of slowing down.

"Today, I live more intensely than before," Alan says.

"My accident and disfigurement have given me an edge. I regret nothing. I feel no bitterness. I blame no one. I am a victor of circumstances, not a victim - what I have now is life - and life is everything."

- Stuff