

Alan Breslau: legend transformed lives globally

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Alan Breslau and wife Delwyn with burn-injured kids at World Burn Congress, Providence Rhode Island. Photo supplied

Alan Jeffrey Breslau's undying, resilient spirit was shining bright at the celebration of his life at St Andrew's Church, Howick, on December 5.

The founder of the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, who passed away on November 26 at the age of 94, had glowing tributes from thousands of people worldwide.

The outpouring of loss from different parts of the world had people whose life he had transformed, lovingly called him a 'rock star', 'true hero', 'legend', 'saviour', 'gift to the world', whose tireless work for burn survivors and their families helped them rise like the proverbial Phoenix from the ashes.

At 37, Alan's life changed dramatically after a commercial plane he was a passenger in flew into a tornado. The Mohawk Airlines plane with 40 passengers crashed and burnt as it broke into two in Rochester New York.

Trapped, unconscious in burning wreckage, Alan, who was on a business trip, was held upside-down by a seat belt, surrounded by seven dead people, including the pilot and co-pilot.



A beautiful celebration of Alan Breslau's life was held on December 5 at St Andrews Church, Howick. Photo supplied

Alan sustained third and fourth-degree burns over 40 per cent of his body, losing the top of his head, an eye, ear, nose, thumb and some fingers. The chemical engineer who helped design Neil Armstrong's seat to fly to the moon went through the ordeal of over 80 surgeries.

Refusing to be overcome by depression, Alan rebuilt his life and helped thousands of other lives by establishing the Phoenix Society. He also initiated the first World Burn Congress – a global movement for burn survivors that brings hope and healing to help those who have been through horrific experiences.

He helped establish the first camp for burned children in Pennsylvania and also started the Magic Carpet programme to fly burn-injured children and adults from third world countries to the US for pro-bono surgeries.

Acknowledging Alan's phenomenal legacy and zest for life, Dennis Gardin from Atlanta, USA, paid tribute on video streamed at the funeral: "I am not offering my condolences, just heartfelt gratitude and abundant thankfulness deep from my heart to Alan for making this world a better place. The world needed his tenacity, commitment and insanity as he taught us about being a burn survivor and not a victim. Alan would be the first to tell you that being burnt was the best thing that happened to him. At first, I thought he was a bit crazy! I'm not sure he knows how many lives he has changed all over the globe."



Together they worked to change the lives of burn survivors. Alan and Delwyn at a Phoenix Society get-together. Photo supplied

Acknowledging the role that his devoted wife of 30 years, Delwyn has played in Alan's life as the couple spent a lifetime in helping the scarred find beauty in disfigurement, he spoke about their fairy-tale romance.

"It felt like Delwyn was dancing on air when she was in his arms. A love like theirs is rare to find."

Delwyn, who had meticulously arranged a celebration of Alan's life to the last tiny detail including displaying innumerable awards he received and books he's authored; honoured Alan's glorious life with a touching poem: "An incredible man who had an amazing life...such a privilege it was...to be his wife."

She spoke of his sense of empathy, kindness and unlimited positivity.

"It didn't matter what time of the day; he was always there for survivor fears to allay. There were times during the night when the phone would ring, sometimes even around two. From a dead sleep, his cheery voice saying, 'Good morning Phoenix Society, how can we help you?' "

Despite being charred to the bone, Alan maintained that those who are burnt essentially get another crack at life in a new appearance, Delwyn told the *Times*.

"The part of the person that survives after severe burns is their personality and character. Those who are disfigured from burns can go on to live more fulfilling lives, doing things they may have never achieved before. Always being a victor of circumstances and not a victim," she said.

Delwyn has well-documented her husband's life. He played tennis till he was 89 and could no longer see the ball, and even played the piano till the very end. Overwhelmed with messages of support and love, she says she will continue to ensure that Alan's legacy lives on forever.

Some of Alan's honours, awards and medals included the Dawn Johnston Koru Award by Dawn Johnston, the Local Hero Medal, Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Burn Association, Medal of Honor from the World Burn Congress, Canada, Inaugural Award for Distinguished Service and the Jade Phoenix from the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, TVNZ Good Sort Award and Kiwi Bank Local Hero Award from Mayor Phil Goff-to name a few.

Video link to the funeral: <https://youtu.be/XIZaPbnPNpY>