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# Angels fear to tread

A near-fatal accident sent  
Richard Harkham to build  
schools around the world



# Man on a mission

Lying in hospital after a near fatal injury, Richard Harkham made a promise to a donor's family writes *Jo Casamento*

The blinding headlights of oncoming traffic were coming toward him as he lay helpless in the middle of Victoria Road in Bellevue Hill on a busy Saturday night in 2014.

Unable to move while his shattered left leg bled out under the weight of the burning engine of his motorbike, the metal crushing his tibia causing it to break in fifty different places, Bondi winemaker Richie Harkham's whole life played out in front of him.

He thought he was dead. He was strangely calm, he recalls. Waiting for the ambulance on the side of the road for an endless 20 minutes, Harkham felt good about his life. He remembers thinking "I'm ready. God take me."

But that is only the beginning, not the end, of this story.

Four years on after numerous operations including two groundbreaking knee transplants and several life changing moments which have in turn changed a thousand lives, Harkham is sitting at the The Golden Sheaf in Double Bay with *The Wentworth Courier*, recounting that nightmare life and death moment. "It was a really shocking feeling," says the motivational speaker and serial entrepreneur who also runs the not-for-profit organisation, Hark Angel.

It was months later, still unable to walk and lying in St Vincent's Hospital, his moment of awakening came. "I thought if I die, what a waste of a life it had been.

"You only get one chance. And it was an overwhelming feeling of you need to be the best you can be. Play it like it's your last role."

Harkham grew up in Vaucluse in the embrace of a Jewish family.

One of ten children, he spent his childhood quietly observing his father making deals in the Surry Hills fashion factory he owned. Like many post world war migrants, his parents had arrived with nothing.

Harkham scored his first job at 11 as a bagel boy at Grandma Moses Bakery in Rose Bay.

By aged 16, as a year 10 Moriah College student, he owned several vending machines which would net him bags of coins under his bed. He'd buy water from Campbell's for 30 cents and sell it in the machine for \$2 dollars.

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He started his second business, a book store in Rose Bay, with his grandpa. After high school he went to Sydney University to study commerce. At 21 he set up Noah's City Central Backpackers Hostel and helped run Noah's Backpackers in Bondi, a family business. Next came the Surry Hills coin slot laundromat, a stint as a beer maker, creating Skinny Blonde Beer, and in between work as a waiter and an actor.

"I was always looking to create something that doesn't exist," says Harkham, who only sleeps four hours a night.

Then came the winery. He bought a rundown property in the Hunter Valley. He learned how to make wine by hand during harvesting. Focusing on preservative and additive free "honest wines", he established Harkham Wines in 2005. "I think wine is God's gift to the world. It elevates your soul!"

Restaurateur Tony Bilson put them on his menu and by 2012 Harkham Wines was making 25,000 bottles a year selling to Japan, New York, Hong Kong, Paris and in Sydney, where it is on the menu at Icebergs, Fratelli Paradiso, Bentley Bar and Fred's, to name a few.

By 2014 he was on top of the world. With the roar of his motorbike making beautiful sounds as he turned into Victoria Road and a big full moon in the sky, he was on his way to Bondi to meet a friend,

Harkham could see a parked car waiting ahead. He thought he saw the driver turn his head and acknowledge him. He felt it was safe to move his bike to the centre of the road, but the car accelerated.

He remembers every single second. "I was in hospital; my whole world was overturned.

"I couldn't understand how 24 hours earlier I'd beat my running record. I was fit, I was strong, I was a healthy person on top of the world and in one second my life changed forever."

Four years of hospital hell followed. A top orthopaedic surgeon



**Main: Harkham during a trip to Myanmar earlier this year.**

**Picture: Hark Angel.**

**Right: recovering in hospital after his motorcycle accident**

in Hanover, Germany, asked if he would be the first in the world to have a graft for a new transplant with 3D technology.

That transplant was from a woman who died in a car crash.

For 100 days he lay in the German hospital, his mother by his bedside. "I always saw myself as running again. I always had the newest Nikes. In my hospital bed I had a dumbbell doing weights so I felt like I'm an athlete. I never gave up, not one time, in the whole recovery."

He returned to Australia to learn to walk again. He would crawl up the steps at Bondi Icebergs to use the pool. But one morning, he awoke in chronic pain.

The same doctor in Germany suggested a double transplant, including part of his knee. This time



the donor was a 14-year-old boy who had tragically died in a traffic accident with his mum.

Lying in a hospital bed yet again, Harkham met seven other people who had received life-saving parts from the same young boy.

He set out to thank the anonymous boy donor's family through a letter which would be passed on to them. "What do you write? I wrote to the boy's father. I said 'I can never repay you. But one of the things I can do is build a school in a third world country for children your son's age' I want to build one in his honour'.

"I never knew his name. I called him my Hark Angel."

In the child's honour, Harkham decided set up the Hark Angel charity using proceeds from his wines matched with a personal donation. His plan was to build schools in the world's poorest area. It was decided that the first would be in Mandalay.

But there was one more serious bump on the road to recovery.

Harkham woke one morning to

Turn to P11

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from p9

see a hole in his knee, spewing yellow puss. He was rushed to hospital and told he was facing a potential leg amputation from a Golden Staph infection.

During the ensuing 84 days hooked up to 24-hour antibiotic IV drip Harkham wondered if he could go on. After a final operation, he made a superstar recovery.

He now has part of a donor bone in his tibia and a prosthetic knee. "It's a mish-mash, it looks like a shark attack basically," he says of his leg, rolling up his jeans to show off his scar.

The Hark Angel schools are built in the name of organ donors. There are now seven schools, teaching 1277 kids in total, so far around Myanmar's capital Mandalay. Later this year Harkham will head to Laos, where he plans to build the next.

Last month he returned from a month-long visit to Myanmar

where he took a group of 20 people to build his seventh school, in honour of a new Hark Angel — 10-year-old Jack Power, who was hit by a car crossing the road at traffic lights when the illuminated man was green. Jack and was a donor to over 36 Australians.

Jack's mum, Bonnie, came to open Jack's school in Myanmar.

"You never think something like that will happen to you. One minute your life is perfect, the next minute your son is dead," Bonnie Power told the *Wentworth Courier*.

"Jack was the kindest boy who would help anyone. The essence of what Jack stood for is now emanating through the buildings Richie is making in Myanmar.

"Richie is using his compassion and being so grateful for organ donation. To honour Jack and celebrate what he did brings me such joy. It means Jack keeps on giving. He is spreading kindness and com-

passion, and the schools are in communities where they embrace the help they are getting and they are just so grateful.

"It's amazing the difference individuals can make."

Hark Angel works with the community to contribute to the building of the school, usually by local construction companies overseen by the Hark Angel team. Govern-



**Main: Richard Harkham atop Noah's in Bondi. Left: Bonnie Power holds a plaque dedicated to her son, Jack. A school has been built by in Jack's name in Myanmar. Picture: Hark Angel charity**

ment approvals are secured to ensure there is funding for teachers to staff the schools. The community owns the school with the charity staying in contact to offer support. Says Harkham: "Educating a child can change a community. These kids have no electricity, no running water, no toilet but they're the most kind and grateful people you've ever met.

"Before my accident I had everything single thing I wanted. I wasn't under-appreciative – but I didn't know how good it was..

"If life is a lemon I'm going to squeeze every single thing out of the lemon and eat the friggin' peel.

"I have learned my purpose in life is helping others achieve happiness in their life.

"I've learned to really roll the dice like it's my last turn."

Donate to Hark Angel through: [harkangel.org](http://harkangel.org)  
Book Richie to speak [richieharkham.com](http://richieharkham.com)

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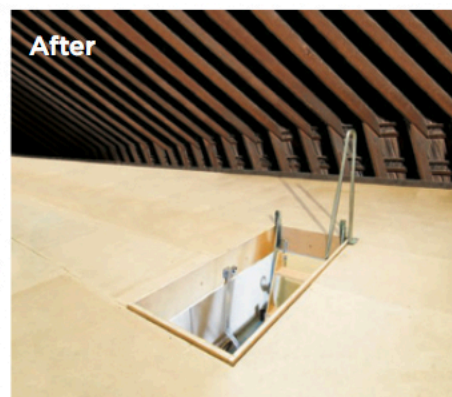
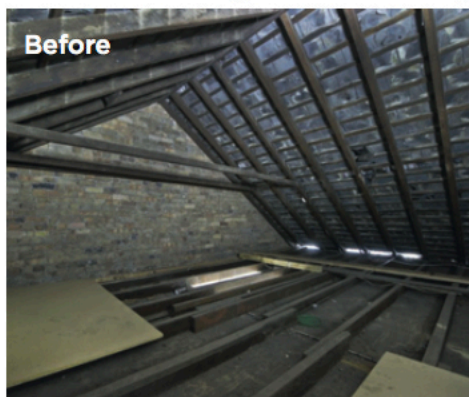
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