

ANDREW ALLEN'S ORAL INTERVIEW WITH KEN SHAFER AT HIS HOME ON 14 APRIL 2016

AA Ken is going to tell me a story to start with.

KS You would like to know why I came to be a panel beater. In 1953 I was at my grandparent's little garage that my father looked after. I was pumping gas and a boxing fellow called Dave Sands landed in town in an old gravel truck with about 20 of the mob. They stayed in the pub all day getting drunk, he was drinking lemonade; they came in to fill up with gas about 4.00pm. At around 5.30pm we heard that near Dungog they hadn't put up a detour sign where they had taken a bridge out. He went over and the steering wheel came back and killed him.

So three days later a hearse pulls in and the fellow says "do you know who I've got in the hearse?" I said "how would I know that sir?" He said "I've got the famous boxer Dave Sands there". I looked down and the hearse had rust in the back of it. At 11, I knew the "F" word and I told him he shouldn't be driving the vehicle with rust in it. He dobbed me in so I got the poker across my backside for being rude to him. I decided that day that I would be a panel beater.

Stack's was a big company in Sydney and I had been a page boy at a wedding for them. I was 15 and I asked if I could get a job there. That was seven hours from my home to Sydney on the old road. He said that he would give me a job as an apprentice panel beater. My sister came here to teach in 1953, my brother came to work for the PMG and my other sister came to be a nurse at Beverley Park. So my parents said that they would sell up and move here. It took them six months.

I was working on Villawood Road. It was my first day at Ultimo TAFE. I don't really like the city because I am a country boy. I had an hour to wait to do my theory lesson at night so I decided I would go for a walk up to Ultimo which was about one kilometre. I saw a monument and would you believe it, it was for Dave Sands. So what goes round comes round. I could show you the shop.

The most important thing was to be indentured. I got this job on Villawood Road, Villawood with a fellow called Allan Freeman. After about a year I kept asking him for my indenture papers. He said you came first in your class, I said that it was important to have my indenture papers. He said what is wrong with being a trainee. I said you haven't indentured me have you so I am leaving. He said he was giving me £3.15.3 a week. I said I couldn't care less, I am doing

tradesmen's work, I'm not up myself but I know what I can do so I am leaving, because I was being lied to.

I then came here. Where the Caltex garage is was the Bus Depot which was Baker and Howell on the corner of Broughton and Queen Streets. There was about two acres or so of land there. Bernie Breen was the manager and they were going to start up a panel shop. I went in there and asked for a job. I said that I knew my work and they said that I would have to do a demonstration. I had to climb up a ladder and I hate heights and I had to do a ding on the top of a double decker bus. I did that and they said "grab that kid, that's unreal that was aluminium". I started the next week. They said what about wages and I said that I wasn't a qualified tradesman but I thought that I was worth eight and a half quid a week. They said "pay him". I was only there about a fortnight doing different little things and then a kid called Preston Hagan pinched his father's 54 Zephyr. He had rolled it over about four times, he was only about 14. Mr Hagan wanted it fixed even though he could have bought a new one.

5 mins

Reg Baker was a lovely man and he asked me to help him write a quote. I said that I didn't know how to write a quote. He asked me if I thought that I could do the job and I said that I would love to have a go at doing it, I was sure I could do it. Anyway I hadn't done a complete job in my life. I told him the car would have to be squared up first and that would take at least a day. So he said he would put it in hours so that was eight hours there. In those days you didn't buy panels, you took off the door skins and repaired the frame. To cut a long story short, the kids came in every afternoon and stood in the front and watched the car being repaired. Then they brought their parents in to watch and I finished repairing the car. I became Jesus Christ superstar overnight!! I was quite proud of the fact too. I was just going to put the last coat of paint on it and a fellow there Sid Cordon said that he was going to do it. He said that they said that he could do it because he was experienced. I told him that I had taught him to paint, so I did it. When it was all finished I said to him "you were fair dinkum weren't you that you were going to do it". He said Bernie Breen told him that he could do it. So I picked up a rubber block that we used for rubbing down, smacked him in the head with it and broke his glasses and said see you later.

Where Ralph's Pharmacy is now was Tripp's Garage. I went there and asked if they were looking for a panel beater. They said that they knew all about me and asked me when did I want to start. It was a small town then and word gets around.

AA So how old were you then?

KS I was still 17. When I went there Frank said I know you and you have spare parts knowledge and I said that I wanted to panel beat. So I was in spare parts.

I was lucky because when I was in the bush you got to know these things. I was welding gates for farms when I was 12 years old. That's why I was advanced when I went to TAFE because no-one else knew what a welder was. I had already registered my name when I was 16 because I decided that I was going to work for myself. I went to my dad's place on the corner of Lindesay and Dumaresq Street. I did my first job there for an assessor named Gordon Bendall. It was an NRMA job on a VW for Dave Jenkins who lived in Chamberlain Street. This fellow turned up and asked if it was Shafer's place and I said yep, the panel beater's place and I said yep. He wanted to see my father, he didn't realise that I was the panel beater. Can't you give a young bloke a break; I guess I was being brazen. He said "hang on, do you know where I was when I was 14?" I said "how would I know what you were doing when you were 14?" He said "unfortunately I was killing people in a war when you were 14". I said that I was sorry, I was brought up to have respect for returned people, I hoped he would accept my apologies.

10 mins

He asked me how I worked out the quote. I told him that it cost me a lot of money to work out the quote. How could it cost you money to work out a quote. I told him that nobody told me anything. Lanock Motors was a big firm so I rang them and asked them how much to replace a bumper bar. So it cost me about ten phone calls ringing people to find out the cost of replacing the different parts. He said OK how did you work out the repair costs. I told him that I was lucky to work for Mr Baker for six weeks. He put things in hours and then converted it to money. He said OK I live in Ingleburn when the car is finished bring it down to me. He said that I did a fantastic job and one day Campbelltown is going to need a panel beater and I might be it. He gave me his card and said that anything that I wanted to know to ring him and he would give me the replacement price. He was probably a man of 55 or more. He said that I couldn't tell anyone and if I did he would get sacked. His boss was named Lance Taylor. He wasn't allowed to do this but for some reason he liked me. I thought that I was very professional, everything that I wanted to know I would ring him up. I was 17 then and I was 25 with five kids before I had a beer with him at the Ingleburn RSL and said thank you to him.

They eventually stopped the panel beaters mixing with the assessors and he was retiring. NRMA was a very good company then, it's not now. Nick Whitlam changed all that, he's not a very nice person. He made it a public company and if you got sued back luck, couldn't care less. The people owned it back then. They put a do on for him and they said no panel beaters allowed. He said that if Ken Shafer can't come to my send off, I don't want one. So I am skiting when I say that out of 300 people, I was the only panel beater.

AA So Ken after Tripp's where did you go?

KS It wasn't good in the back yard. Where McDonalds is in Queen Street was Fisher's Ghost garage and a Shell garage was on the corner and a BP garage on the other corner. So I leased the back half of the Fisher's Ghost garage. The guy there was Bob Harrison, a nice person who has now passed on. I thought I was pretty big time then. Then a firm called CC Tyre Service came and rented the whole lot. They put me in a small place out the back. The son was jealous of me because I was doing reasonably well and he was a bit of a spoilt brat. He's alright now. I left there then and that is when I rented the house at the back of Ralph's Pharmacy which was owned by Tripp's. I decided to make extra money so I took a night job at Cable Makers as a core printer from 10 at night until 6 in the morning. At the back of the garage there was a bit of a space with a skillion roof. In the day time I would run my business.

15 mins

Across the road from Ralph's Pharmacy was Warby's Bakery. There was a pharmacy opposite. There was a massive drain running there about two metres wide and two metres deep down the bottom end of Dumaresq Street. After the bakery was a couple of houses and then nothing much and then on probably about a quarter of an acre was Llewellyn's plumbing place and next door to that was a little welding shop owned by Frank Brewer who was a famous racing driver over in the States. Next door to that was Longhursts transport, the first transport company in Campbelltown and behind that where The Mall is now was Harris Timber. I think I paid thirteen quid a week for that little shop. Then I employed Kenny Davies and Beau Murphy, I got big time then. That was in the early 1960s.

Then the Council wanted people to go over to Blaxland Road, so I purchased a block of land there but I didn't have the money to build on it, I had five kids by then. Because I had never really worked for anyone it was hard to get finance. I paid 750 quid for the half acre; it was a thousand quid for an acre. Anyway I paid it off and an Alderman Archie Walker helped me. He was a beautiful man; he was Mayor a few times. He was very interested in helping people. He lived on a farm up on the top of Kenny Hill. His daughter and son-in-law still live there. They are both teachers, lovely people. When you bought the land you had to build on it in 12 months. He would see me at the Good Intent when I would be having a beer. I didn't realise it but he was giving extensions from the Council for 12 months. There was an architect here called Murray Haywood. From when you were doing repairs here you got to meet a lot of people. I got some plans done and he said they were hopeless, you don't use Bessemer blocks and I said anyway I can't get the money. There weren't many finance companies here then. He said don't worry about it, I know what we'll do, we'll build it in nice brick with a house on the top, he said it was simple, we could live there. You get helped in life like that assessor Mr Bentley. He could get three months credit, so he ordered all the stuff and got a bill. When it was finished it

cost \$25,000, which was in about 1966. The Banks still wouldn't lend me any money because I hadn't worked for anyone. I went to a Solicitor who was going to give me the money and then he would only give me \$15,000. Thanks to Murray Haywood who passed on many years ago, you get a break in life. So I moved in there in 1967 with five kids upstairs and they had a playroom downstairs and I never looked back. In no time I had 28 people working there at one stage. I would pay \$100 a week more than anyone else did, but I got good tradespeople.

20 mins

AA Did you ever work at Pope's?

KS Where Tripps garage was on the opposite corner where Ralph's Pharmacy is now was an Atlantic garage and the fellow's name was Sid Pope and he actually had the NRMA. When I used to come here on holiday, because my sister came in 1953, I got to know them and would go out in the tow truck. He had an old Chevy Blitz. That was in the early days and they were going to indenture me and then they changed their mind. Wally Sheehy was the panel beater there, a lovely fellow. He drove an Austin Shereline. I got this other job anyway. So, I never worked for Popes. I went from the bottom of Dumaresq Street over to Blaxland Road and I was there until roughly about 16 years ago.

Where the shop is now on the two acres with 3,000 square metre work shop was where Downs Engineering a big engineering firm was. I could see changes coming and the insurance companies were hard to work for. I thought we had to do something to stand out. Not that I wanted to do anything really prestigious. My two boys were working for me and I took them to places like in Germany to Mechanica which is on every two years and tells you the latest that is on. My two boys were there for a while and they were disagreeing a bit. Bryson is probably forceful, very deep and wants to get things done. He is running it now and is doing a great job.

I'm very proud of him; he is the recommended repairer for Range Rover, they can run to \$235,000 would you believe and he has Volvo and Mercedes. I don't care what your car is you shouldn't put aftermarket parts in it. If you want to do that OK but you shouldn't do it. If we put aftermarket lights in your car and they go out and you run into another car they will sue me. The insurance company says he put them in not me, so they don't really like us.

AA You were saying before you got on really well with your father. Did he have much of an influence on you when you were a kid?

25 mins

KS I loved my dad, he was like a brother not my father. He liked politics and he influenced me. I helped Russell Matheson get elected and Pat Farmer. I upset

people really because I supported Greg Warren and not Bryan Doyle. I get on well with nearly all Police but I couldn't understand why the Liberal Party would put up someone who would retire on at least \$150,000 a year to be their candidate. People would call on Police if they were in trouble but as for voting for them probably about 75% of people would not vote for a policeman. That's what I think anyway.

Probably because I have been a bit eccentric and generous and have done a lot of fund raisers, if I was supporting someone running for Council I could probably pull in another 1,000 votes. I would go around and say he is a good person, got a couple of kids, good family person, look after him. Greg Warren won by about 5,500 votes, Bryan Doyle doesn't talk to me anymore.

AA What was your most successful fundraiser Ken? Was there one that stood out?

KS /////////////// That was great to have my five beautiful daughters helping, selling tickets. That was the photo with John Peard, Artie Beetson and Tommy Raudonikis. Unfortunately Artie got on his bike and rode off. I've been a bit tied up but I'm working on a project at the moment, and it's going to take a couple of months.

I'm starting up a company called Silk Limousines. It's only really for weddings. I think I'm an ideas man; you have to come up with something to make people laugh or cry, one of the two. You need a smart looking lady probably 45 to 50, slim and smiles all the time turns up to Giuseppe, Arthur or Fred. Having five daughters get married I know what it is like. On the day it is like a pantomime. She goes up to the guy and asks him if he wants a scotch or cold water and he tells her that he wants both. You need someone who has been in fashion and they can always suggest things. A bridesmaid dress might need a pin in it. You have a printer in the car and take a photo of the page boy and flower boy, go back and print it out and give it to them. Today you don't have full Nuptial Masses anymore even in the Catholic Church and the whole thing is over in 35 or 40 minutes. They then have a chat and go out for a two hour photo shoot. In that time they take the bride and groom away for the first half hour. If you have a lady saying "Hey boys you can't have a beer but there are soft drinks there. You can only have a beer when the bride and groom tell us it's OK." Then when they come back you go away for another hour and a half. The co-ordinator has a table out for them with a snack of ham and cheeses. By this time about three hours has gone by since they started. They can have a beer then if the bride and groom says they can. You have to control the alcohol because if you give people two Crown Lagers whether they are 22 or 28 they could be drunk in the middle of the day. That's what I'm working on at the moment.

30 mins

When I have that working then I will get Tom on board who will do anything I ask him and Daryl Brohman who is a fantastic person. Unfortunately our government doesn't do anything for our homeless people. They should be able to go somewhere in the morning and have a tea or coffee and baked beans or spaghetti on toast. It would be nice to have facilities where there is a shower and a toilet. It would be good to have a couple of policemen there having a coffee. The problem with social things these days is ice and the people who are deranged and knock themselves. That's the biggest worry. I have got a couple of things in mind. I enjoy doing something where you can help people. You don't want to get too much on your plate or you fall over and skin your knees.

AA Did you have any particular pub where you drank when you were young?

KS Yes, when I was at Fisher's Ghost Garage I went to the Good Intent because the people in there were 40 and 45 and I wanted to learn things and the only way that you learn things is to go and talk to people. That's where I met Murray Haywood the Architect. He was running Stuart Homes at the time for Ron Harris who had the timber mill. I got involved with Barry Clinton who owned Clinton Motors. He was a very kind and beautiful man. I did a job for him in the early 60s and I kept wanting to see him and they said he was too busy. I waited for about three weeks. I quoted on a car for 13 quid and when I got the car up it had been filled up with cement. Finally this guy turned up in a pin striped suit and said he was Barry Clinton. I told him that whoever had traded that car in had filled it with cement. I said that I would still do it for 13 quid but it was worth 80 quid what I had to do. He said that that person was supposed to be a very good friend of his and he said that he could assure me that it wouldn't do him any good. He said whatever it cost to give him the bill and he would pay it. I told him no, it would be a good learning experience for me. So I did it for the 13 quid. We had a great friendship.

At Lack's Hotel in those days was what was called the silvertails. There was Mr Bagley from the paper shop and Ron Harris from the timber mill and different ones there.

AA So were they divided, where the richer ones went to one pub?

35 mins

KS They all had suits on. Barry would tell me to have a drink with him and I didn't think that I could go in there. I remember Ron Harris saying that I hadn't even combed my hair and he gave me a comb and told me to comb my hair if I was having a drink with them. I finished up being close to Ron Harris. He started the Daihatsu chip mill down the south coast. Unfortunately he had a stroke. I used to go and visit him. When people were ill and even if I wasn't that close to them I would go and visit to see if I could do anything for them. When he was down and couldn't talk, his brother did him out of a lot of money. He lived in Ruzac

Street and I used to visit him a lot. I actually didn't even like the taste of beer but I went there because I wanted to learn something.

I'm proud of what I achieved and I am proud of my son today because insurance companies like to stand over you. But he's managed to obtain Jaguar, Range Rover, Volvo and a lot of Mercedes work. It doesn't matter if it is a worn out car or what you have to have people on side

AA Did you know many more prominent people in town? You mentioned Gordon Fetterplace before.

KS Gordon said he was smarter than me because I only had eight kids because I was a Protestant and he had ten kids. Someone else I won't mention his name who was a prominent person told me the only reason that I had eight kids was because I was a sloppy Protestant. I said that if he wanted to think that way he can. I told him that I didn't use my religion or politics I did things by myself. But to give you an idea, I could ring Fred Hansen anytime that I wanted, he was the Police Commissioner.

My dad was one of 14 kids and he was a Catholic. He had a motorbike with a belt drive not a chain. When he was in church when he was 18 years old the Priest said that Harry Shafer was three months behind in his pledge and that was unacceptable. My dad was a big man six foot one and probably about 120 to 130 kilos and all muscle said to the Priest that he was disappointed that the people that do the books didn't stay back and told him that maybe he should go back to school and learn to read and he would find that my dad was three months ahead and not behind. He also suggested that the Priest shouldn't drink so much wine at night. He said that the parishioners knew what he did and that he made much more money than anyone. They also didn't know how much wine he had drunk the night before but not to worry as the Priest would never see him again. He said that he shouldn't have to pay for his Christianity anyway. When he had three sisters who were Nuns, he was a pretty tough fellow. He never got grumpy.

40 mins

He used to take people down to the river at times. I thought that was unusual because you don't show anyone your fishing spot, which is a secret in the bush. Being sneaky, I followed him down one day and overheard the conversation. Then I saw that the bloke had probably three broken ribs on one side and a couple on the other side. Then he told the guy that he could come to the pub and buy my dad a beer, he had done him a favour. What it was, in the country there were a lot of fellows that hit their wives. I didn't tell my dad that I knew that for probably 30 years later. We were just like brothers. He said that no one should hit a woman, child or animal. That was him.

When we were on the farm, every cow had a name. He would say c'mon Bidy it's your turn to get in. Bidy had no tail; my brother had pulled it out because she used to flick you all the time. It was great on the farm. We used to average milking 28 cows a day. The other people had 55 to 60 and we had more milk than they did, he cared for his cows. He always used to strip the cows down and he got eczema. Then the milking machines came in and he thought he would give it a go. There was no stripping down the cows so we saved about an hour a day. So up in the Hunter Valley everyone stripped their cows down, but due to Harry Shafer, no one stripped their cows down. At 5 I would ride a horse 5 miles bareback to school every day.

AA It's not that long ago. My father used to ride a horse to school too. He was a little bit older than you, but you tell a kid today that you rode a horse to school, it's hard to believe.

KS That would be 69 years ago. I had a bigger brother and he had a better horse and I had Trixie. He would beat me every day. I never won. The Hunter Valley was a great place but I wanted to be a panel beater. It was hard being my size. When I went to high school I couldn't even get into the 5 stone seven football team. I wasn't going to be a bushman cutting trees down and I didn't want to work on the farm anymore.

AA Did you do boxing when you were younger?

KS That's one thing that I wanted to do. We didn't have the advantage of the facilities that we have today. There wasn't the Police Boys. I would have loved to do it. The local cop Mr McCrowan was a smart sort of guy. He found out that me and my best mate fell in love with the same girl when we were about 11 years old. He came to me and said that if I wanted to impress Sandra Nixon I could have a fight with Brian Smith. We will call it an exhibition match but you could bash him up. He then went to Brian Smith and told him a similar story. We were best mates but when it comes to love and women. He said that it was just an exhibition match but they had to stop it after three rounds there was blood running out of everywhere. No one won and Sandra Nixon was a bit upset with us to think that we would do something like that, so no neither of us got Sandra.

AA You lived in Lindesay Street.

KS That was on the corner of Lindesay and Dumaresq Streets with my parents. My daughter is nearly 54. I was 20 and one day when Debbie arrived. I am on 13 May and she is on 14 May. I have another daughter Lisa who lives down the coast born on 13 May. My mother was born on 17 May, my son Bryson is on 31 May and another one on 9th.

Gordon Fetterplace was a bit of a character. Gordon came from nothing. His brother was a Doctor; his other brother who is still alive was a copper. If you saw his brother walk in here now, you would swear it was Gordon, you couldn't tell the difference. My daughter worked for his son in the Pharmacy in Picton and he walked in there one day and she thought that Gordon had come back from the dead. Gordon and his brother worked at the Homebush Abattoir to put themselves through uni. I was privileged to have shoes to wear to school and a lot of kids didn't have shoes. I would rather have not had shoes anyway. You have to remember where you came from.

To look at the place how it has gone now. The mill that was there, there were quite a few people employed there. Where the Post Office is in Dumaresq Street was just a paddock. There was about five acres there. Where the laneway is in front of the Post Office is where the first Hospital in Campbelltown was. Not that there is anything wrong with the Council now, but there were some good Councillors back then, Bill Coogan and Archie Walker and later Greg Percival. There have been some wonderful people.

50 mins

It's funny with me being a Protestant because I have been so involved with St Gregs. It is a great school. There has been trouble in the Catholic Church with paedophilia but not at St Gregs. They have had some great bosses there. One fellow was 28 years a Marist Brother and went overseas and would you believe he married a little Spanish girl named Therese. He came back as the boss of St Gregs. I used to sponsor a lot of things there.

There's a fellow Tony Fitzgerald who runs Mater Dei now. Actually he is in Rome at the moment, I met his wife yesterday. Tony was the guy who would organise the celebrity nights; it was a lot of work. I sponsored their art shows for 23 years and then they stopped having them. One Saturday night I was having a great night with Graham Richardson who was the speaker. He was a great character and Minister for the Arts. He got up and said why shouldn't they make him Minister for Arts. He totally deserved it. He said if you gave him a crayon he couldn't draw with it and you always give someone a Ministry that they know nothing about. He is very ill. He had a brain tumour and is starting to come good, but will be lucky if he lives. Another character I met that night was Ita Buttrose. If you sponsor things they come and talk to you. I said to her that she had been ignoring me and I am rather partial to blondes. She said that her kids were grown up and she wanted to kick heels and make some dust, so we should get together. I said what a ripper. Education is important. I guess you know that my sister was a teacher. Most teachers are left wingers you know. My sister only wanted to teach little kids. The kids came to her like bees to a honey pot, all the little kids, nieces and nephews and grandkids. Unfortunately she has been dead for 15 years now. I've got 18 grandkids and 3 great

grandkids. They are not very good breeders from 8 kids I should have at least 60.

I've been to China a few times with boxing and Seoul and places like that. I took Tommy Brown, he is about 28 now, his brother Davey got killed in the ring a few months ago. He was only 18 and fought the best in the world. The promoter Angelo Hyder said that he would get knocked out in the first round. Tommy went the 12 rounds. The people of Seoul are quite dignified. They didn't go near the champion, they came to Tommy and wanted him to sign autographs and have their photo taken with him. I told Davey that I would see him in a couple of months as I was starting up something new. I was going to let him do the limousines. Boxers need to train five to six hours a day so they don't have time to do a job like bricklaying or fencing or something like that.

I built up a Monaro with a fellow named Peter Crick and another fellow Woods. It revolutionised speedway because they were all pretty chatty then. I did it up as a showroom car. It changed the face a bit at the time. Now the cars are straight up and down in speedway. I like cars to look like cars like the NASCAR thing. I finished in 1982. I've still got a 5th Edition Howe that I'll be doing up. I've got a brand new motor but it is only a 550cc horse power and I need a 750cc. The kids shouted me a trip to the States when I was 70 and I went over to North Carolina to the Coca Cola 600 and the cars have got 950 horsepower. Those motors cost \$120,000.

The main thing is I will get my limousine business going. I used to run at Liverpool when they had a track and then Parramatta which is clay. All you have to have on the clay is the horsepower. The trouble was I had a million things on at that time. If you are going to be successful in speedway you are going to need a very good pit crew. You can't be working until 5pm and then racing to get there.