

A life less extraordinary

By Ruth Ostrow

"I JUST feel so extraordinarily lucky. One of God's blessed people," says Brett Nielsen, sitting in his 4ha garden with the sun beaming through the trees. Good looking, with a lovely partner and beautiful children, he strikes one as very lucky indeed. As he speaks he is smoking, drinking coffee, continually playing with his long hair, and patting his dog Tara. But there is one discrepancy. He is doing it all with his feet.

Born Australia's first thalidomide child, he has no arms. Everything he does is done with his toes, feet and legs. And what he does would push any human being to the edge.

By day he drives an earth-moving machine with his feet. It is one of his many businesses. By night he cooks, writes and helps bathe and play with his partner's boy of seven and, on weekends, his own daughter of five.

But it is his musical skills that are so extraordinary. He is a successful composer, recording artist and film-maker. His recording company, Big Toe Productions, is one of the most respected in the country.

With his feet he plays piano and does all the technical production. He has sold 120,000 of his own CDs and recorded music for other well-known artists. And now he's developed a new string to his bow: public speaking, touring around the country for such companies as Westpac, Amway, Western Mining, and motivating up to 1000 staff at a time.

"It's amazing to me that people get motivated and inspired just watching me drinking a cup of tea," he says, bringing the mug to his mouth in a yogic pose. But more amazing is watching him shop, which is where I first caught sight of Nielsen about a year ago. He was in the supermarket hopping on one leg, taking things off the shelf with the other. I watched him load up his car, get in, and with his feet on the wheel, drive off in his 20-year-old Ford truck, cigarette in mouth.

Then last week he turned up at our school barn dance, getting into the music and making his little girl proud.

"I reckon human beings can do anything at all, anything they want to do," he says, smiling mysteriously. "There are no limits," he says. His next challenge is riding a motorcycle but, with all the trouble he went through to get his driving licence, he knows it isn't going to be easy.

"I go through a lot of hassles that other people don't. Trying to fly is a nightmare. One airline wanted me to sign a disclaimer that I didn't have any arms when I got on the plane, in case I lost them along the way, and claimed that it was their fault they were gone when I landed.

"Another airline wanted me to fly with someone else, so they could undo the seatbelt in case we had a crash!"

He laughs heartily as he speaks. "I feel like I'm in some Monty Python skit. My life is so bizarre."

But his antics with the airlines didn't stop him flying all over the world alone many times in the 1970s, well before political correctness made life easier. And the disdain and difficulty he confronted when trying to get a licence didn't stop him driving a backhoe and making a living behind the wheel.

He says his success is about luck, because people who are born with a positive disposition are the luckiest people. He believes some people spend a lifetime making good situations bad, others make bad situations good. "I hate victims. I find them obscene."

And having a sense of humour helps. I heard from a friend that Nielsen recently went to his little girl's kindergarten to read the children a story. He was very engrossed in the story, turning the pages with his toes, and when he finally looked up the whole class had their arms tucked into their school jumpers.

The teachers were very embarrassed. "I just said, `So you all want to be Brett now?'" and they started laughing. I have a pretty thick skin. But when you can see that people are coming from a kind and honest place, the mistakes they make don't hurt you."

He then breaks out the old Fawlty Towers "Don't mention the war!" routine, and has me in stitches.

Nielsen's philosophy is simple. "It doesn't matter what happens to you, it's how you deal with it that counts. That's the message I give when I am speaking." He has certainly dealt with his uniqueness by not letting anything stop him. He lives a rugged rural life on a large property.

He has been parenting for 18 years, with a step-daughter from another relationship, and says his aim with his children is to teach them to be well-rounded human beings. "Also that anyone is capable of anything they set their minds to."

Born the youngest of three sons, his parents taught him to "just go for it", which helped him greet every challenge, including living on his own for many years and cooking for himself. "My parents taught me: If the wheels have fallen off then put them back on."

As a result he did all the normal things children do. A mutual friend described him tearing around on a bike in the 1960s, terrorising all the other neighbourhood children.

His first job was in 1976 as a commercial radio panel-operator in Bathurst, before joining the ABC in Sydney as an operational engineer.

Although he has been the subject of countless documentaries since he featured in the first British documentary on thalidomide babies many decades ago, One of them is Brett, he is a modest man, continuing to work hard and keep his head low until contacted.

"One journalist once described me as an extraordinary ordinary man. I like that description. The gods have smiled on me. I have a great life. I really enjoy it."

If there is something extraordinary about Nielsen, it's about what he opens up in others. "My being is confronting to people. I force them to be real. The layers of bullshit come off. It's delightful to see."

He thinks his destiny to inspire is more to do with his birthdate. He recently turned 40, on the last day of the last millennium. "It must be in the stars," he laughs.

When I get home I notice he has scribbled something on my notepad. "Life is beautiful," it says. And after an hour with him, I had to agree.

www.ruthostrow.com

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