

yin&  
yang

## Bill Kirby & Karl Paganin

A poolside chat between Bill (right), 41, and Karl, 54, saw these two high achievers join forces for a special cause.

### Bill

I was always wanting to race people in backyard pools. When I went to school, I was probably talking up about what an awesome swimmer I was — the Dianella backyard pool champion — when a girl called Marnie said “I’ll race ya”. So the word got around and most of the class came to watch this race between Billy and Marnie. Well, she beat me by a body length and a half! I think I cried.

That event motivated me to do some proper swimming and I found a really awesome swimming coach in Graeme Williams. I don’t think anyone thought I had any exceptional ability, and I certainly wasn’t a big kid, but by the time I started to train hard I knew I was a little bit different in that I actually liked the suffering. I always pushed myself harder.

Winning the 100m relay at the Sydney Olympics was a career highlight but even more memorable was being at the Opening Ceremony. When Cathy Freeman went to light the torch and the whole crowd went completely still, I thought: “I’m here.”

I got married a few months after the Olympics. I’d met Saskia when we were studying physio together. We were in the surface anatomy lab and you had to strip down to your underwear and I just happened to be standing next to her when they assigned partners, so that worked out well.

I got a call from my old school, Christ Church, asking me if I wanted to run a program out of their pool. The timing was ridiculous — it was exactly what I was looking for. That got Saskia and I started in our business, Kirby Swim, which now has five locations.

One of the first programs I ran was an adult squad. Karl joined up and soon after a couple of his kids were in my learn-to-swim program, so I got to know Karl and his family really well.

I was standing next to him one morning and said I’d been chatting to some friends on the east coast who run charity swimming events and that I wanted to do something like it here. Karl said “It’s funny you should say that”, because he’d been looking to

re-establish this thing called Autism West and needed a fundraiser.

We were hoping to get a couple of hundred people along to the first Team Sprint Cup, and more than a thousand turned up. We raised something like \$90,000 — every cent for Autism West. Karl is a great people person and had pulled together an amazing list of sponsors. He looked after the dollars and I looked after the swimming. We couldn’t have done it without each other.

I remember being so exhausted at the end of that day. I’d been trying to look like a swan but sweating bullets the whole time. At 9pm when we’d finally finished packing up, Karl turns to me and says “OK, so next year ...” and I thought “Oh bugger — we’ve started something”.

### Karl

I was born in Perth and grew up in Floreat Park, one of three boys. My older brother had done law at uni and so that became a natural progression for me, too.

I decided I didn’t want to be a litigator after I got smashed up in court one day as an articulated clerk. I always liked the commercial and corporate sides of law and got my start with a big firm, before being recruited to be in-house counsel for Robert Holmes a Court before he died, and then for (Robert’s widow) Janet. Robert was an intriguing character and Janet is a terrifically astute lady and the 12 years I spent in that role gave me enormous experience and exposure to national and international transactions.

Ange and I have three boys. Our eldest, Charlie, was diagnosed with autism when he was two. As a dietitian, Ange is a science-based person and picked up on things pretty early. In those days there was still a stigma around an autism diagnosis but we knew there was no point going down the road of denial. Once you have a diagnosis, you can have a plan and access all the available support.



PICTURE IAIN GILLESPIE

Photo available at  
westpbx.com.au



You used to hear all these stories about parents mortgaging their houses to fund ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis) therapy for their autistic children but we found that even when you had the funds, finding services was really hard. There were only three service providers back then.

I looked at setting up Autism West back in 2005 — Charlie was about five or six — in order to provide extra services, as well as to provide an independent voice for parents and a place to share information and to empathise. Parents and families can be under enormous pressure when they’re going through this.

I was one of the earliest starters in Bill’s adult squad and my kids went into his swim schools, so I was down at the pool with him all the time. He’s such a personable guy — he’s not your coach, he’s your mate.

When I said to him we needed a solid fundraiser for Autism West, he said his mate Duncan Armstrong had done a charity swimming event in Sydney and he’d find out how it was done. Duncan came over for the first event and has been a couple of times since. Lawrie Lawrence has probably done five of them.

I don’t know if Bill couldn’t do it without me but I definitely couldn’t do it without him. Here’s a bloke who doesn’t have a child with autism but he’s the guy calling me every September to get the ball rolling again. I have enormous respect for Bill — he’s understated but also very determined and focused. One of the gifts of having a child with special needs is that you meet so many saints on the way through.

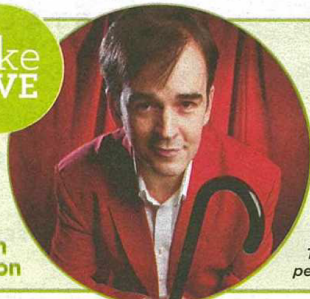
Carrie Cox

The Team Sprint Cup has raised more than \$1 million for Autism West in the past 10 years. Autism West is also hosting An Evening with Kathy Lette on May 9, see [autismwest.org.au](http://autismwest.org.au).

‘He’s not  
your  
coach,  
he’s your  
mate.’

take  
FIVE

with  
comedian  
Tim  
Ferguson



*I love ... pronouncing “quinoa” phonetically. Drives hipster waiters berserk.*

*I loathe ... Northbridge vegans working on their first album.*

*I will ... come to your house, naked.*

*I won’t ... come to your house (it’s a metaphor). But I will be naked.*

*I wish ... hipsters weren’t fast enough to evade the hunting hounds.*

The Doug Anthony All Stars perform *Near Death Experience*, State Theatre Centre, May 18-20, as part of Perth Comedy Festival, see [perthcomedyfest.com.au](http://perthcomedyfest.com.au).