



STORY BY Rosamund Burton | PHOTOGRAPH BY James Brickwood

Media personality Ita Buttrose, 75, is patron of the Macular Disease Foundation. Having seen her father lose his vision due to macular degeneration, she was determined to ensure her uncle, Gerald Buttrose, 93, did not suffer the same fate.

GERALD: I was an 18-year-old army corporal when I first met the delightful, gurgling five-month-old Ita. Returning to Adelaide by troop train in 1942, I was off-loaded in Sydney and billeted in a pen at the showgrounds. I hadn't had my clothes off for 10 days, and couldn't find an ablution block, but I found my brother Charlie's address in the phone book. "I need a bloody bath," I said when he opened the door. "You're telling me," he sniffed. Only after a shower was I allowed to hold my niece.

She was always a happy child. She lived in a home dominated by three boisterous brothers, and her old man was tough, but she held her own. She has an imperturbability. Over the years I've seen her in many situations annoying enough to make her explode, yet she handles them with dignified composure. I'm envious because I don't share her restraint.

Charlie was a successful journo, and Ita followed in his footsteps. Old Frank Packer gave her that job [in 1972] as founding editor of *Cleo*. And when she later became editor-in-chief of Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Telegraph* and *Daily Telegraph*, she was the first female editor of a major met-

ropolitan newspaper in Australia. Her career has been spectacular and she's still achieving.

We have always been close. I saw her often between 1949, when I came to live in Sydney, and 1963, when I married and had my own family. Then a flurry of family funerals, weddings and christenings in the 1990s connected us again. Ita's the chief of the extended Buttrose family. She shows great love and concern for everyone.

Several years ago I completed a novel and asked Ita to look at it. She rang and said, "I read your book, Uncle. I like it. It's a good yarn." She stuck her neck out for me by taking it to her publishers. They said it needing some re-writing, so Ita and I are now working on that.

Charlie, who was 14 years older than me, had macular degeneration. I called on him one morning, and he was holding up the *Sydney Morning Herald*, trying to read the headlines using his peripheral vision. I always had regular eye check-ups, and had had one just before my wife, Colleen, and I moved to Ballina [in northern NSW] in 2002. Driving along the freeway, I noticed the road markings were wavering. Eight days later I lost vision in my right eye. I

was referred to a specialist, but it was too late.

In 2008 I got macular degeneration in the other eye. I had several appointments, but no treatment. I didn't suspect anything was amiss, but I told Ita. She told Dr Paul Beaumont, then medical director of the Macular Degeneration Foundation [as it was called until 2012], who said I should get a second opinion. He gave her the name of a Sydney specialist, Dr Mark Gorbатов. Within a month he had restored sight to my left eye, and I've had normal vision ever since.

I was recently walking along the beach watching waves break on a distant headland, aware that I would barely be able to see the fingers on my hand if it hadn't been for Ita's intervention. I'm forever grateful to her.

ITA: When I was about 10, and we lived in Sydney's Parsley Bay, Gerald used to come to stay. He was terrified of bees. You only had to say, "Uncle Gerald, I think I see a bee," and he'd be off like the Bondi tram. But he was a lot of fun. We didn't have a car, but Gerald had a Ford Prefect. My brothers and I used to pile into it, and he'd drive us to Rose Bay for ice-creams.

Both my father and Gerald had good tenor voices. There was considerable competition between them. There was only one bathroom at Parsley Bay. In the morning while in the bathroom, Dad would sing his favourite aria. Then Gerald would go in and sing his favourite.

I'm always a bit worried that Gerald might burst into song. He does that when you least expect it, like when we're out having dinner. Dad also used to do it. He gets the same look as Dad, and I know he's going to sing any minute.

He's always been a special uncle, and he continues to call me "a youngster", which I happily take. He's now the family patriarch and usually instigates the family gatherings. There was a get-together after I'd done *Who Do You Think You Are?* on SBS, because everyone became interested in our ancestors. Between us we've straightened out a few family facts and fallacies.

Dad was in his mid-80s when he lost his central vision. I was devastated for him. I couldn't imagine not being able to read. Because of the family history of macular degeneration, I have a 50 per cent chance of getting it, and my children are also at risk. So we all follow the eating program recommended by the foundation, watch our weight and exercise regularly.

I became patron of the Macular Degeneration Foundation in 2005. When Gerald told me he'd received no treatment for the macular degeneration in his second eye I rang Dr Paul Beaumont immediately. He recommended Gerald come to Sydney for a second opinion. I rang Gerald and said, "You've got to see a retina specialist in Sydney." Gerald was down the next day.

He comes to Sydney every six weeks and now has had more than 100 injections. His vision is better than when he began the treatment. He's one of seven siblings. Four of them have had macular degeneration, Dad and two others lost their vision, but Uncle Gerald is okay.

At almost 94, Gerald is as fit as a fiddle. He walks three kilometres along the beach and rides five kilometres on his stationary bicycle every day. He's mentally alert, he's writing another book and his vision has improved. He's the very best news story. ■

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