



FAMILY TIES

LAWRENCE STOLZ AND STOLZ FURNISHERS

WORDS BY EMMA WESTWOOD PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMIE DURRANT

With corporate signage spelling out the likes of 'Retravision' and 'Telstra' along its street front, the modern appearance of Stolz Furnishers in Benalla belies this store's illustrious history. But look down the side and you'll notice a painted mural of the original shop – way, way back in 1903 – as opened by Chris Stolz, grandfather of the current proprietor, Lawrence Stolz. Immediately you'll start to wonder what these walls would say if they could talk.

As far as Lawrence can cast his mind back, he's yearned to be involved in the business. 'You either love it or you haven't got it,' says Lawrence of his desire to follow family tradition. 'My mother didn't like the idea of me coming into the business. You know, it's pretty hard. "I want you to be a pilot!" she said. But I was asking when I could come in working on Saturday mornings and then I started working during the school holidays... It's always been in my blood, I guess.'

While Chris Stolz would never have imagined selling high tech devices like mobile phones and blenders, his enterprise would have been a one-stop shop, with Lawrence admitting they sold pretty much everything – mattresses, picture framing, ironmongery, the list goes on. Digging into his filing cabinet, Lawrence pulls out a treasure trove of old print advertisements from the Stolz store of yesteryear, including one (that gets the biggest giggle) boldly declaring that the store is still afloat following the 1906 Benalla floods, despite the picture showing Chris standing over ankle-deep in water.

Not one to be sodden by a little bit of wet, Chris was the son of the Stolz family patriarch, Heinrich, the first Stolz to land in Australia – possibly via the US – during the 1850s emigration from the poverty-stricken region of Hesse, located within today's Germany. While Lawrence appears to have committed the family history to memory, he concedes much of his knowledge to a relative, Sylvia Stoltz. 'She's had a passion to track this thing down. She's gone to an enormous effort.'

According to Lawrence, though, Heinrich did not immediately head to Benalla. First stop was Morton Bay, Queensland, where he got caught up with an incident involving the local Indigenous community and, following the burning down of a homestead, moved to Albury, where, employed by a prominent squatter worked, most likely as a Shepherd. He married an English

lass named Sarah Vale, who was approximately 24 years younger than him and bore a mighty brood of 11 children. Coincidentally, he secured a contract to clear Nunn Street, which is where the Stolz Furnishers store still sits today.

'When I say "clear it", I don't know whether that means clear it of trees or actually put the road through,' explains Lawrence. Whatever the details, though, the Stolz family has stayed put for more than a century now, although the store has taken on many guises and even expanded to Mansfield. Sadly, it was the same year Chris launched the Stolz store (1903) that his father Heinrich passed away.

The larrikin in Heinrich has manifested in Lawrence through his passion for the Ned Kelly legend. 'It just developed, I suppose,' says Lawrence of where this interest was sparked. 'Stories from my father. I wouldn't say he was passionate about it but his father, Chris, he reckons he met Ned Kelly. We added up the dates, though and it wasn't possible! Most people around here regard him as a hero. You go to Mansfield – because he shot the police – they don't like him at all. So it changes from area to area. For most people, though, he was obviously a bit of a scoundrel, he was a scallywag...'

The controversy of the Kelly family continues, with Lawrence even hesitant to give a straight answer when prompted – villain or hero? 'I think his family was victimised in the early days. I think Redmond Barry throwing his mother into Beechworth Jail with a baby was the straw that broke the camel's back. He offered to give himself up if they released her. And they were a very close family. He lost his father when he was very young... They were real battlers.'

While Ned Kelly is the source of many tourist dollars in the North East, Lawrence believes there are still greater rewards to be reaped for Benalla. 'It's no one's fault but it's amazing in Benalla that no one's really picked it up. Sure, there was a siege at Glenrowan,' continues Lawrence. 'But they (the Kelly family) really lived closer to Benalla and they did all their shopping in Benalla. His (Ned's) early days, he was always in trouble, skylarking around here as a boy.'

Lawrence proudly points out that Benalla has Ned Kelly's DNA on the bloodied, green cummerbund on display at the Benalla Costume Museum. He also confesses to only visiting



Stringybark Creek recently for the first time, despite considering himself a Kelly aficionado. 'Go on one of Doc Hair's tours,' says Lawrence enthusiastically when asked how tourists can top up their knowledge of the Kelly legend. 'He's an encyclopaedia on Kelly history.' And you can't help but notice a glint in Lawrence's eye. Looks like Heinrich lives on...

Above: The great Benalla flood of 1906 – Stolz Furniture display at the Benalla Show. **Previous page:** The extended family, Stolz Furnishings staff in front of the Benalla store. **Below:** A winning couple, Anne and Lawrence Stolz.

Info: Stolz Furnishers, 70 Nunn Street, Benalla, Vic.
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BEHIND EVERY GOOD MAN... Anne Stolz

After 32 years of marriage to Lawrence Stolz and two children – Richard and Benjamin – Anne Stolz gets to wear the Stolz name like some sort of rite of passage.

Originally harking from Melbourne but relocated to Wangaratta as a child when her physiotherapist father came to perform remedial work during the polio epidemic of the 1950s, Anne says she met Lawrence at a party and, as they say in the classics, the rest is history.

Within 12 months of marriage, Lawrence had well and truly ingratiated her into the family business where she's been working continuously ever since. You could say Anne is as much a part of these foundations as Chris Stolz himself, her responsibilities ranging from the wrangling of advertising through to a large proportion of the stock buying. But, ask anyone in Benalla, and it's the Christmas windows at Stolz Furnishings that Anne derives her fame.

'People seem to love the Christmas windows,' admits Anne, possibly feigning some humility regarding her obvious creative talents. 'I've won many window awards too, not just for Christmas. I try to theme them but I really just want to make them fun with lots of moving objects, lots of lights and Santas.'

When asked for a preview of what we can expect this year, she says: 'It's going to still be fairly traditional. There are a lot of silvers and turquoises and things coming in, but I don't think it's what the country's ready for. Snowmen don't sell here as much as Santas! But we do have reindeers and all those sort of things to create a bit of a wonderland for the kids to look at.'

Anne hides another claim to fame that *Essentials'* investigations have uncovered. When growing up, she lived in the same street as the brooding singer-songwriter Nick Cave. 'He used to come in after school and throw his schoolbag on the floor like the other kids did,' explains Anne of her famous playmate. 'His father, Colin Cave, was principal of the Wangaratta High School at the time.'

But when pushed to dig a little dirt on Cave, Anne remains tight-lipped. 'You could see there was something special about him – or different – even then. He was flamboyant in an interesting way, with the clothing he wore and things like that. And musical then too, playing piano... I could say some things... but I won't!'

You can be sure *Essentials* will be pushing to hear those stories but, as the lady requests, it will all be strictly off the record.



Anne and Lawrence Stolz