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Rotten bad luck that hatched a global success

Saturday Interview
Nathan Cross

A CALLOUS robbery 16 years ago put Bryan Stokes on the path to business success on a worldwide scale.

The Adelaide businessman was running two thriving dry-cleaning shops – at Collinswood and Clearview – when fate struck in May, 1988.

“I had a bloke walk in one night, hit me over the head with an iron bar and burn the business down,” Mr Stokes says.

“All of a sudden, I went from a business that was doing pretty well to no business.”

Mr Stokes, a self-employed entrepreneur since he was 22, says the incident bankrupted him.

The bad luck proved to be a blessing in disguise.

Nowadays he co-owns ink-and-toner cartridge refiller Cartridge World, a franchise chain that has expanded to hundreds of stores worldwide and annual turnover of \$300 million.

Mr Stokes, 56, describes the period following his dry-cleaning business collapse as “an interesting chapter in my life”.

“I then saw an advertisement from Melbourne in *The Advertiser* that said ‘Make \$75 every 15 minutes refilling laser car-

tridges,’” he says.

“The reality was I didn’t know what a laser cartridge was, and I went to Melbourne, and for two days they trained me how to do the laser cartridges.”

Thus began a new career, refilling laser-printer cartridges, sowing the seeds for the creation of Cartridge World.

During this time, he suffered another life-changing incident.

In April, 1992, working in his shed at home, Mr Stokes’s right hand slipped under the guard of a circular saw. He lost one finger and most use of that hand.

It was two years and 10 operations later before any function was restored to the hand but, by then, his big plan had emerged.

“The two years in which my hand injury was being repaired created somewhat of a problem,” he says. “I had great difficulty in trying to refill cartridges, and in fact it was almost impossible.

“At this time, I learnt the most important factor in my life: I could teach. Not only could I teach, but by sharing my knowledge with other people who wanted to learn how to fill cartridges, I could make money.

“That was really, I guess, when I became successful. It became a watershed in my life, I had to

do something different and rather than use my hands, I had to use my brains.”

In 1996, he decided to franchise the business idea and sought the help of consulting firm Complete Franchising. There he met Paul Wheeler, who became a partner and director in the Cartridge World business.

The pair have since used their fields of expertise to take the company to the global stage.

Cartridge World has more than 535 stores in 23 countries and grows by almost eight stores each week.

Mr Stokes’s two sons also work in the business, the elder running a Cartridge World store in Tasmania while the other helps establish new stores in the US.

Mr Stokes says one of the big challenges in running a rapidly growing business has been finding premises that can cope with fast-paced expansion.

The head office is at Norwood, a warehouse and packaging facility is at Stepney and 19 staff are employed directly.

There is also a 7000 sq m US headquarters in San Francisco employing 15 staff.

“We keep out-growing the existing premises and this is the third



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one we have been in," Mr Stokes says. "It takes us about 18 months to outgrow a premises."

He has big plans for the company in the next 12 months: Cartridge World is about to expand into China, South America and Africa and has received interest from the Middle East.

The expansion plans should see company turnover grow by about 20 per cent each year.

"By this time next year, we will have 1000 stores open," Mr Stokes says.

"Our aim at the moment is for 5000 stores and we believe that can happen within four years.

"At the moment, we have 15 master franchisors in America.

"We have 33 masters around the world and by this time next year we will probably have 50 or 60 masters around the world."

In the next 12 months, the company will also focus on building its presence in the US and Europe and will exhibit at the Global Franchising Expo in Singapore in September to investigate opportunities in China, India and Japan.

Mr Stokes says growth is also possible in ink refilling, with the advent of digital cameras causing ink usage to rise as people begin to print their own photos at home.

"Ink is gold," he says.

"The more ink that is used, we make more gold.

"The consumers have a real hate of paying the high prices they do for brand-new cartridges.

"It still surprises me quite a lot where the business is but, knowing how good it is, I am not surprised that people can be very

successful if they follow the model that we developed.

"It gets back to that philosophy I have: by sharing something you get a lot more in return."

Mr Stokes relaxes by taking to the skies in his Jabiru J-200 recreational aircraft.

"To get up early and go for a fly on a nice calm, crisp morning and you sit still and the world revolves below you. It is almost like that, it is so peaceful and quiet," he says.

"These hobbies give you a chance to unwind the pressure you get when you are actually running a business.

"That is really what a hobby should be doing for you. Recovering from those times.

"You need the break and a change of environment."