



# Edge of darkness

*A former WA cabinet minister has thrown himself heart and soul into improving lives of the mentally ill. Keith Wilson, at 79, might seem an unlikely ambassador – but the issue is one that strikes too close to home for him to ignore.*

Story **Connie Clarke** Photography **Richard Hatherly**





**K** eith Wilson doesn't remember much about the Labor Party fundraising dinner at a Chinese restaurant just hours before it turned into the worst night of his life.

But the image of arriving home to find Daniel, his youngest son, barely conscious and frothing at the mouth will never leave him. Beside him was Martin, his eldest son, just 16, who found Daniel.

It was November 1986, nine months after Brian Burke's government was returned to office. Wilson, a cabinet minister juggling five portfolios, and his then wife, Angela, were confronted with every parent's worst nightmare.

Daniel, 14, had swallowed herbicide in a bid to end his life.

As Keith Wilson recalls that moment, he clenches his hands together and takes a deep breath. His eyes well with tears, and his face flushes red, but he talks in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone.

"Not many people survive after drinking herbicide," he says.

"They say once you've ingested it, you're pretty much gone.

"We thought we'd lost him. But somehow Martin had managed to call an ambulance and we got Dan to intensive care in time to save his life."

By day, Wilson was managing high-profile government issues, including five years running the all-important health portfolio.

By night, he would be called often to the scene of Daniel's psychotic episodes. Sometimes, he would excuse himself from parliamentary sittings to be at his son's side.

"There were times when Dan said he was going to climb to the top of a building or he was going to lie down on railway tracks," Wilson says. "When he was in hospital (after the suicide attempt) I remember him saying he just wanted something that would turn the disturbing thoughts off."

After a stint at a youth mental health facility, Daniel returned home but became increasingly violent through his teens. He

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would smash chairs and doors, and pick up knives, threatening his family.

Now aged 44, he finished Year 10 but has never been able to hold down a job.

"When he was about 18, Dan was seeing a psychologist who was a bit alternative in his methods," Wilson says. "He got Dan to a point where he bought a car and learnt to drive.

"But he wasn't a safe driver. He would take off and you would get a call from the Nullarbor, where he was stranded with no money.

"One time he drove to Cairns in a couple of days, until his car broke down. Then he broke down (himself) and we were contacted by mental health services in Queensland."

He moved in and out of private accommodation and sometimes would end up on the street. At one time, a restraining order had to be taken out against him.

"That, along with the suicide attempt, was the worst moment of my life," Wilson says. "We had to go before a magistrate to apply for the order. He was violent and angry and not sleeping at night. There were times when we didn't know where he was.

"One time I saw him in the street, he was extremely thin, and he was sleeping rough. He was about 19."

A year later, he found Daniel lying on the floor of his new flat, saying there was a sniper in the flat opposite who was trying to shoot him.

"That's when he was sectioned to Graylands the first time," Wilson says. "They tried different medications, but nothing ever worked for Daniel for very long. Sometimes medications made him worse."

He ended up at a halfway house for homeless men and later became a patient at Fremantle's Alma Street Clinic. Visiting hospital psychiatrists finally diagnosed paranoid schizophrenia and later prescribed clozapine. Wilson credits the drug with giving Daniel, then 20, his life back.

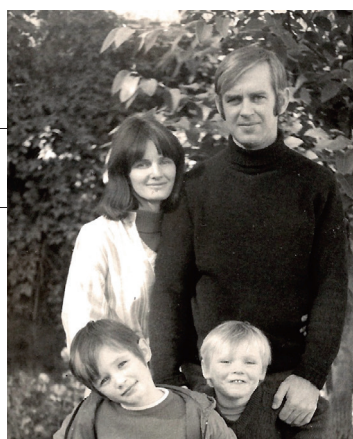
"It's meant the difference between Dan having a reasonable life and a dreadful life, or worse, ending his life," Wilson says. "There are serious side-effects – diabetes, weight gain and hyper-salivation. It's not much of a choice: It's either the devil or the deep blue sea."

Daniel has recovered enough to manage his own medication and has rediscovered his love of classical music and sport. He's given up his heavy smoking habit and no longer drinks.

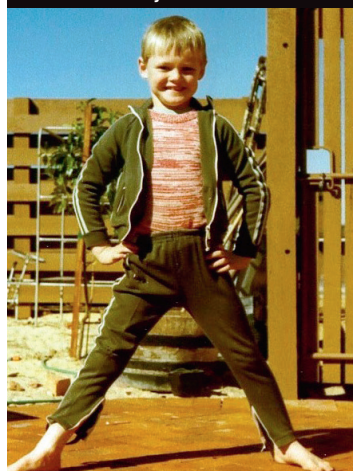
Wilson, who turns 80 tomorrow, became his son's sole carer when his marriage ended several years ago. "I hate labels," he says. "I don't like the use of the words 'carer' or 'consumer' – I think they're demeaning terms. I'm Dan's father, and that's part of being a father. Once people start using labels, they become after a while, banal and meaningless."

He is the kind of man who doesn't mince words, a sucker for anything that reeks of injustice. After resigning from Cabinet in November 1992 – he felt the Labor Party had lost its way – he threw himself into the role of mental health advocate.

"Injustice is most pronounced for people with mental illness," he says. "They and their families suffer great injustices and stigma. The sense of



The Wilson family in 1976.

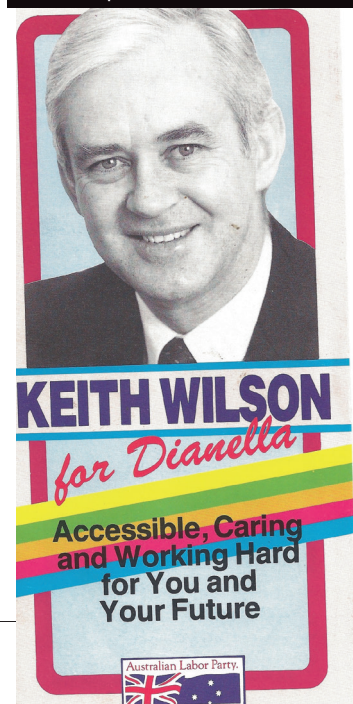


Daniel Wilson, aged 6.



Keith Wilson meets the Pope in 1986.

Wilson the politician.



righting something that is so unjust, and my commitment to Daniel, is what keeps me going."

Ian Taylor, deputy premier in the Carmen Lawrence government, says Wilson was a very effective politician, with a caring nature.

"I remember, when he was housing minister, seeing him one evening in the corridors of Parliament House responding to complaints from state housing tenants. He was dealing with each one personally, that's was how conscientious he was."

Before turning to politics in 1977, Wilson was an Anglican minister at a parish in Balga. He contested the new seat of Dianella after an amendment was drafted to allow clergymen to run for Parliament.

"The law followed the old English law which meant members of the clergy – along with people in prison and the insane – weren't allowed to stand," he says, with a laugh. "When I was elected, I cut my ties with the church, and I never went back."

Former premier Geoff Gallop, whose own public battle with depression led him to resign in January 2006, counts Wilson as a leading player in developing national mental health policies that treat people with dignity and respect.

"What Keith brings to mental health advocacy is the concept that people with mental illness are still people," Gallop says. "They are not just patients who are told by the system how they will be treated.

"Since he left politics, he's become a very effective advocate for mental health because he has lived it with his son and knows how to navigate the system."

In 2013, at age 75, Wilson ran as an independent for the Upper House. He called for a royal commission into WA's mental health sector after a spate of suicides at the Alma Street Clinic in Fremantle, which led to a coronial inquiry. "I just wanted to make a point," he says. "I got about 2500 votes." Again he laughs. "On that basis I think I would have made it into the Federal Senate at the last election." Then he adds: "I don't have any more political aspirations."

He is a former WA mental health commissioner and chairman of the Mental Health Council of Australia, but it's as director of Meeting for Minds that he believes he can have the biggest impact.

The brainchild of Perth-born French philanthropist Maria Halphen, Meeting for Minds was born after Halphen met up with an old friend, Susie Hincks, who lost most of her 20s to schizophrenia.

Hincks says having Wilson on board brings a sense of calm and rationale to the national discourse about mental health policy and research.

"Keith is regarded as one of the good guys," she says. "He's genuine and he's been waking every day for 40 years living something that is very real, so he brings passion and deep knowledge to everything we do."

Hincks was diagnosed with a mild form of schizophrenia at 28. Alone in her flat, she rarely cooked or showered. Cigarettes were her best friends.

"I was convinced I was being watched, that there was a camera in my bathroom filming me, and that people were sending threatening messages through television and radio," she says. "I was afraid to go outside during the day and effectively cut myself off from the world." Like many people with





Daniel Wilson in 1992.

schizophrenia, she was in denial about her condition and medication.

“Eventually, it led to my involuntary commitment to Graylands Hospital under police escort,” she says.

The medication Graylands prescribed worked, and Hincks’s recovery is the type of story that people with severe and chronic mental illness cling to, but Wilson says the three per cent of Australians with chronic schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression are still no better off than they would have been 40 years ago.

“More than 50 per cent of people with mental illness won’t seek treatment because of the stigma,” Wilson says. “Despite all the best efforts of psychiatry, for those three per cent of people with severe mental illness, it’s still a huge struggle.”

He takes crisis calls from families day and night, and has played a role in preventing some people

from taking their own lives.

“Those calls take a long time and usually there’s nothing I can do except listen and talk to people,” he says. “Their problems have no answers. Some have suffered a lot of injustice, disregard, stigmatised treatment and attitudes that still exist, even within the mental health system. I learn a lot more from them.

“It’s the same with Daniel – I’ve learnt more from him than I’ve ever given him. For people with these chronic disorders, it’s an effort just to get up in the morning. There’s almost no room for anything else.”

He says families face a massive burden, and should be more involved in research and policy making.

“Those who stand to gain the most from new treatments should be involved in researching them,” he says.

“They have real expertise, they’re not scientists, they’re not researchers, but they are people

with special knowledge about what it’s like to live with these disorders.

“Siblings, in particular, have a very tough time, and are subjected to the worst of the anger and violence that comes with chronic schizophrenia. But they are also the ones who are always there to help pick up the pieces.”

Martin Wilson says his childhood was a happy one, even during the most difficult and terrifying parts of his younger brother’s illness. He says the relationship between the three of them is the best it’s ever been.

“Dad has a big heart and a big social conscience,” Martin says. “He’s a kind, caring man and he went into politics to help people, not for personal adulation or financial gain. I always remember Dad rejecting a pay rise early in his political career.

“He was always there for me and Dan. Mum and Dad were very supportive, which really helped. Being a parent myself now, I feel for them and the pain they would have gone through.

“The positive is how well Dan is doing now and how we are all so proud of him. We are great mates – I couldn’t have hoped for a more loving and supportive brother.”

On the eve of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, Wilson has just one wish: “My aim is to live to 100. I don’t want Martin to take on a great burden because he’s got his own son to care for. I just want to be around to watch Dan and make sure he’s OK.”

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