



The defender

Peter Ward has a speech impediment, is legally blind and stands only 161cm tall. Having met the man, **Russell Robinson** now understands why he's one of Victoria's most sought-after lawyers

▲ **High profile:** Peter Ward's cases have dominated the media headlines.

► **Proud:** the lawyer has a working-class background and lives in Blackburn.

Pictures: WAYNE LUDBEY

VISITORS to lawyer Peter Ward's office almost immediately experience a stark reality check of sorts.

There in the waiting room, bolted to the wall, is a heavy wood and iron door once used in the cell blocks of the notorious Pentridge Prison.

"It's a symbol of the work we do," Ward says.

"Some people laugh, some often get scared and ask: 'Is that where we're going?' It's certainly a subject of much comment."

For most people who venture into Ward's basement offices, incarceration is indeed a reality.

His clients over the years have ranged from high-profile murderers to suburban mothers on careless-driving charges.

He's been doing it for more than 30 years, and has long been one of Victoria's "go-to" lawyers who have made crime their professional beat.

Ward is often seen in newspaper and television news reports. He's the short bloke with the beard, standing close to

the nervous client who's facing murder or serious sexual-assault charges.

Usually, they're on the court steps or outside police headquarters, with a media scrum in tow.

There's only 161cm of Peter Ward, but he stands out from the pack.

He has a distinctive speech impediment — a type of lisp — yet this didn't stop him becoming one of Melbourne's most skilled advocates.

And his poor eyesight — he has less than 10 per cent vision in each eye — has not prevented him from developing an extraordinary insight into the human condition.

"I haven't got much going for me," Ward says, joking.

His legal peers and most of his clients would disagree. Ward's story is an inspiration to anyone who starts life with a handicap to overcome afflictions by sheer determination.

"He's a special character, an amazing guy," says his brother, Graeme Ward, a former Telstra executive.

Graeme recalls how his brother refused to go to the school for the blind,



insisting he attend a conventional school instead.

"When he was in primary school, Mum took him along to the Royal Victorian School for the Blind for advice on career opportunities," he says.

"They suggested he could be a gardener and that he could water the lawns at the Burwood school.

"Peter wouldn't have it; he just stormed out in disgust."

Ward is a partner with Galbally and O'Bryan, a long-established William St law firm, less than a minute's dash from Melbourne's three main courts.

The cases he's been involved in have dominated newspaper headlines over the years. They've included the Painters and Dockers Royal Commission, Joe Korp, the Walsh St police killings, the Russell St bombing, Maritza Wales King, Cardinal George Pell, Sheree Beasley, Elizabeth Membrey (still missing), and Miss Australia, Gloria Kroke.

Most of his celebrated cases have been fought in the superior courts, but his greatest buzz is around the magistrates' courts.



“It’s in the magistrates’ courts where real justice is dispensed,” he says.

“I adore roughing it in the lower courts. Though I’m involved in some big cases, my passion is in the magistrates’ courts. Even a murder trial starts off in the magistrates’ courts.

“It’s grassroots justice and it’s akin to my background.”

Ward, 55, remains proud of his working-class upbringing, of the daily struggles trying to make ends meet.

“Dad was a grocer’s assistant and was on the basic wage,” he says.

“We lived in the shadows of Glenferrie Oval in Hawthorn (which explains his undying devotion to the Hawks) before moving out to Blackburn.

“Their small house was directly opposite the railway line.”

His father, Bernard, died at 51 when Ward was 15. His mother was left to cope on a widow’s pension, during which she “lived hand to mouth” but managed to educate her two sons.

Mary Ward continued as the bedrock of the family until her death in 1994. Ward had maintained daily contact with his mother, a “real battler”, who lived around the corner from his family home.

“I still miss my mum very much,” he says.

As a successful lawyer, Ward could have retraced his steps and moved back into more affluent areas of Hawthorn, but he chose not to.

With his wife of 32 years, Libby, and two of their four children, he remains in Blackburn — only this time he looks out on to a tranquil lake and not a railway line.

The Wards are active members of their local community and the Catholic Church. Ward does considerable pro bono and legal-aid work, which is reflective of his blue-collar origins.

BUT there was a time when Ward seriously doubted he would ever get to first base as a lawyer.

That was in the early 1970s. He’d completed his law studies at Monash University and was desperately seeking a law firm where he could complete his Articles, a legal apprenticeship. The newly married graduate had unsuccessfully applied to more than 40 law practices.

“I have an eyesight issue,” he says. “I was born with a congenital eye defect. I’m very short-sighted.”

Ward says that in his applications he’d been straightforward, telling law

The murderer

ROBERT Arthur Selby Lowe will die in prison.

Convicted of the 1991 abduction, rape and murder of Sheree Beasley, Lowe is one of a handful of notorious criminals who have been condemned to life imprisonment without parole.

Sheree, a bright and bubbly six-year-old, had been riding her bike to a local milk bar in Rosebud.

After an exhaustive police investigation, Lowe was arrested and questioned by homicide detectives.

Lowe refused to answer their questions, instead asking if he could ring his lawyer, Peter Ward.

It wasn’t the first time Ward had acted for Lowe, who is now 69 and still maintains he’s innocent.

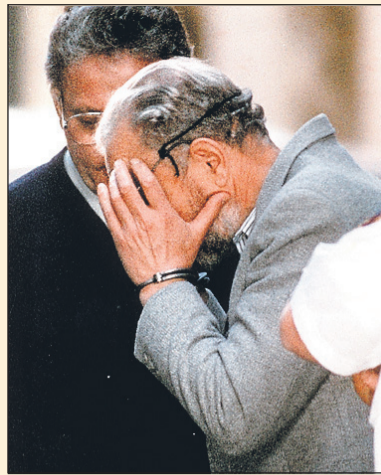
“I’d acted for him several years earlier on petty offences, such as flashing,” Ward says.

“I knew him pretty well. I knew him intimately but not socially. I also knew how his mind worked.”

Ward described the Beasley case as “very interesting”, but also “a very sad case, and a tragedy for the girl and her family”.

Lowe, a Presbyterian, was “a fascinating person”, Ward says.

“He always came to see me in a suit. He had his kids in private



school and was hung up on religion, very involved in his church.”

Ward says religion in a person’s life is usually seen as a positive influence, but “religion in Lowe’s life and that of his family was a negative thing”.

He says he was never judgmental of Lowe, but he did pity him.

“He had a very troubled background. He was conflicted by his strict, unbending religion and his own life. He always had a veneer of respectability.”

Lowe has told writers over the years that Ward had never asked if he had killed Sheree.

So does Ward now believe Lowe is guilty of the murder?

“I won’t answer that.”

► When he was in primary school, Mum took him along to the Royal Victorian School for the Blind for advice on career opportunities . . . they suggested he could be a gardener and water the lawns at Burwood school

firms he had a “serious eyesight defect”, but “it hasn’t stopped me from getting through university”.

“I wanted to be upfront. I didn’t disclose it as a sympathy vote — I just wanted a chance.”

That opportunity eventually arrived when Monash classmate David Galbally (now a QC) suggested he get some advice from his father, Frank.

Recalling the day he had to face the great Frank Galbally, a leading criminal barrister, Ward says he was so nervous he broke into a cold sweat.

“But from the moment I met Frank Galbally there was chemistry. We just clicked. He said he’d employ me for a year and see how I went. I had a great love for Frank and he gave me every opportunity. I even remember the day he asked me to stay on.

“It was November 4, 1974, and we were in a car returning from court. I was humbled and very emotional.”

Graeme Ward says Frank Galbally immediately saw “something unique” in his brother, which started a special relationship.

Peter Ward never left Galbally’s side, working with the man he described as a pillar of the legal community.

He believes Galbally, who died last October, is looking down on him.

“When you look at it, I’ve been married for 32 years, been in the one job for 32 years and lived in Blackburn for 48 years,” Ward says. “I suppose you could say I don’t tread very far.”

Ward’s poor eyesight, caused by his mother contracting German measles during pregnancy, remained stable in his early years as a lawyer.

But by the time he’d turned 43, his eyesight was worsening by the week.

“I thought I wouldn’t be able to go on. I was starting not to cope,” he says.

Ward was referred to eminent Melbourne eye surgeon Julian Rait, who performed what the lawyer describes as a “miracle operation”.

“He got me back to where I was, but I still have very poor eyesight,” he says.

His vision is extremely limited to the point where he cannot legally drive a car: “I just take public transport.”

AWARE of his own limitations, Ward will rarely knock back a case.

“Even if you are the worst and most evil person, you are entitled to justice.

“But interestingly, there are very few evil people. There have been a few, maybe two or three, that I’ve so far met during my time.

“But usually, if you look hard enough, you can see some good in people.

“When you look into their backgrounds, you will often find drugs, pedophilia, alcohol abuse and other shocking things. They’re all human beings who are deserving of help, and most are crying out for it.

“But there’s one thing I’ve learned about my job, and that is you don’t sit in judgment of people. If you’re judgmental, you shouldn’t be a criminal lawyer.

“And the day we sit in judgment and say people are too evil to have representation, that is the day we debase our legal system.”

But Ward remembers the time when a client cynically tried to use him to intimidate a woman he’d been accused of raping.

“I was very young and naive, and he asked me to take a letter to her family,” he says.

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◀ No parole:
Robert Arthur Selby
Lowe is now serving
life in prison.



▲ **Symbolic:** Peter Ward in his office. Behind him is the door that was once part of Pentridge Prison.

▼ **Close call:** (below right) the lawyer with one of his four children, Prue, who was seriously injured in a car accident in December. She was in a coma for five days and came home only last month.

The Church

PETER Ward wears his Catholic faith on his sleeve, yet there was a time when it was put to the test.

But no matter how divisive the issue was to his Church community, Ward remained focused on his role as a lawyer.

The dilemma concerned an accusation by a former altar boy that Archbishop (now Cardinal) George Pell had sexually molested him at a church camp in the early 1960s, when he was 11 and Pell was a priest.

Pell had vigorously denied the claims, which in 2002 were heard at an open inquiry before former Supreme Court judge Justice Alec Southwell. Ward had been representing his client, the former altar boy, pro bono. The official proceedings lasted five days and were widely publicised.

It proved to be an emotional and heart-rending time for many Catholics. Opinions were divided.

Sitting with his wife in church during that time, Ward listened as his parish priest told the congregation the complaint against Pell was unfounded and that they should all pray for their Church's leader.

"Here I am sitting in the pew and I'm the one representing the accuser," Ward recalls. "Everybody knew he was my client. (The priest's message) made me feel quite embarrassed, but I felt no guilt or pangs of conscience."

Ward says some people wrongly thought that in taking Pell's accuser as a client, he was believing his word over the archbishop's.

"And they said I was declaring Pell to be a pedophile. That's just ridiculous," he says.

Ward says it would have been hypocritical for him to have refused the case on the basis of his religion.

"For me to reject representing that fellow would be to throw away the principles I've been brought up with," he says.

"But I knew some in my Church community were appalled. We did the Pell case pro bono because if he (the client) had pulled out because of lack of funding, it would have done the archbishop a great injustice.

"It was in the interests of both Pell and my client to have an open hearing.

"I have great respect for my Catholicity and its hierarchy — but it was difficult."

In the end, Justice Southwell ruled that he was not satisfied the complaint against the archbishop had been established.

Both sides were satisfied with the decision and the proceedings, which Ward says had been fairly handled.

He says Justice Southwell had found his client to be truthful, who in evidence had given the impression that he was "speaking honestly from an actual recollection".

Justice Southwell said the archbishop had also given him the impression "he was speaking the truth".

He says the key factors in the inquiry's conclusion were the absence of forensic evidence, the accuser's credibility, the lack of corroborative evidence and Pell's sworn denial of the accusations.

The defender

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It was in a sealed envelope and the young lawyer had been told it was an apology. But the letter was never delivered. Instead, Ward opened the envelope to find a blank sheet of paper bearing his client's signature.

"It was a device to terrorise the woman," Ward says. "That was an evil thing to do. Not to suck me in, but to use someone else to get at another person. I can still recall his name."

Ward is often asked if he ever thinks of the victim while performing his role as a defence lawyer.

"I do, but I don't think of them enough. And that's a criticism of myself," he says.

The issue was brought home to him last December when his daughter was seriously injured in a car crash. She had collided with a speeding car that had run a red light.

PRUE Ward was in a coma for five days and her recovery was seriously in doubt.

"During that time, people had asked me what I wanted done with the driver," Ward says. "I told them she should be charged.

"Maybe it's my view of life, but I just didn't spend time being vengeful because I was only interested in getting my daughter better. Fortunately, she made a miraculous recovery.

"I guess my experience taught me that victims do suffer. My family suffered a lot and I think it was a bit of a reminder that we ought to have real empathy with the victims.

"I wanted my family to concentrate on rehabilitation for our daughter rather than walk around saying, 'let's hang the offender'."

Prue Ward was discharged from hospital last month.

Ward's legal team operates under a strict set of rules, one of which is to not socialise with clients.

"I never go out to drinks with clients, not because I'm better than them, but because you can't cross the line," he says. "You have to keep that professional distance.

"Some lawyers go out drinking with clients and attend birthday parties. They're even photographed with them. That's crazy, just ridiculous."

Did he go out for celebratory drinks with his client Peter McEvoy, who was acquitted of the Walsh St police killings 18 years ago?

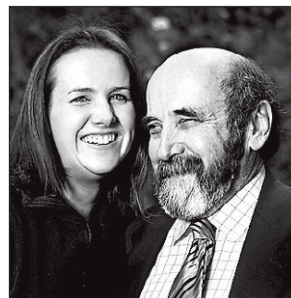
"Absolutely not. I would never have considered it," he says. "Our job was done and that was it."

Occasionally he might have a coffee with a "non-criminal" client.

"I've had a relatively charmed existence because I don't mix with the people who are charged," he says.

"But there's no doubt I miss out on clients. And there's a certain type of client who wouldn't come within a bull's roar of me."

He names several underworld figures whom he says would try to run the cases their way.



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"I just wouldn't toe their line. I will never allow a client to run the race. I'll follow instructions, but I'll never be compromised. You know, it takes 30 years to build up your trust and reputation in this job, yet only five minutes to destroy it."

Then there is the thorny question of how a God-fearing family man could represent a cold-blooded and violent murderer or rapist.

He is often confronted with this issue, particularly at church functions.

"I tell them that my opinion (of the client) doesn't matter. My job is to conduct the case with honesty, integrity and the best of my ability," he says.

"Then if the evidence isn't there, they should go free. That's the fundamental basis of our legal structure. It is not my role to investigate whether they did the crime or not. But I won't be a party to fabricating evidence."

Ward cites the example of an accused armed robber who tells him he did it, but has three mates who will give sworn evidence that at the time he was with them at the beach.

"That's a no-no. It's clear that you cannot be part of fabrication, and you can't call that evidence," Ward says.

So, would he still represent them?

"No, not in that situation."

At the same time, he would never impose his view on a client about their guilt or innocence, he says.

Because "if I think they're guilty, then I'm imposing a grave injustice if I impose my opinions on them".

The obverse scenario is the accused armed robber who tells Ward he was at the beach at the time of a heist.

"I'm allowed to question him, but if the client persists with his story, I can't impose my judgment," he says.

"I can't say: 'Look, you've come to me and you say you were at the beach, but I think that's bulls---'. I'm obliged to defend him.

"What I can say to him is that I think a court would be unlikely to believe his story. But I can't refuse to defend him."

WARD has a simple view of the often-maligned justice system.

"It normally gets it right — but not always," he says. "There's no doubt that guilty people get acquitted and innocent people get convicted."

Ward's most recent celebrated case involved Maria Korp, who was viciously assaulted and stuffed into her car boot. Her husband's lover, Tania Herman, pleaded guilty to attempted murder.

Ward's client was Joe Korp, the husband accused of masterminding the attack on Maria. Korp committed suicide on the day of his wife's funeral.

A movie based on the Korp saga is being planned.

"The other week, the office was going through a list of the actors they reckon should be in the film," Ward says.

"Everyone suggested I should be played by Danny De Vito."

The prison door on Ward's office wall was bought at auction to help raise funds for the Jesuit Social Services group, an organisation the law firm actively supports.