



# FROM ADVERSITY TO INNOVATION

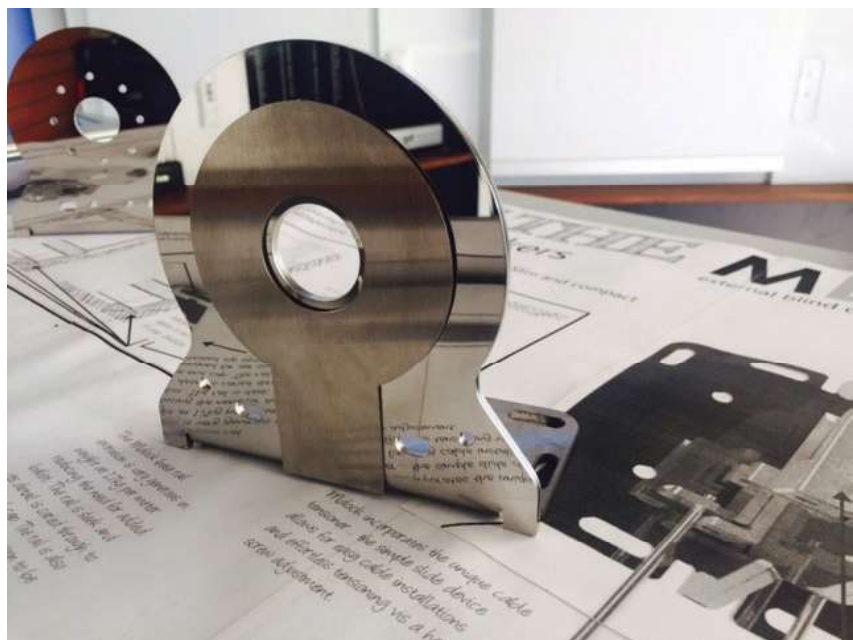
**A chronic health condition that threatened brutal endings has proven the spur for new beginnings, including a ground-breaking start-up bringing revolutionary products to market. Belinda Smart reports**

Some years ago, Tony Hopkins first experienced the signs of a debilitating condition that was to change his life irrevocably, as well as the lives of his family and circle.

That condition was eventually diagnosed as vestibular migraine, a rare disorder affecting the vision and balance. Overall, says Tony, the sensation it produces is one of severe imbalance and vertigo. For a man who had lived and breathed the window furnishings industry since childhood, this presented serious business challenges as well as personal ones. "On more than one occasion

the vertigo was so bad I've had to crawl along scaffolding to measure jobs both internally and externally. If you're hands on in your own business in this industry you don't have much choice." At the same time however, Tony's journey in dealing with his condition has a silver lining. It's opened the door to new opportunities he could never have imagined. Tony's industry roots go back to the early '70s when his parents

Patrick and Hilary Hopkins opened window furnishings business Hilary's Soft Furnishings, (which later morphed into Sahara Blinds to reflect a move into blind manufacturing.) "I basically grew up under the workroom table along with my brothers, from around kinder age" Later on in adult life Tony and his wife Debbie broke away from the family firm to start retail business Lusso Fashions for Windows.



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While I was dealing with my condition, I also taught myself to use industrial design 3D software and bought my first 3D printer. I had to do something; I couldn't just sit around all day watching 'Oprah'!

Tony Hopkins  
Silent Shade

Established in 2004, Lusso was performing strongly when in 2010 Tony's health issue rapidly remerged.

"I started to notice that my balance was going, and things deteriorated from there."

If dealing with an unnerving and undiagnosed health condition wasn't hard enough, Tony also learned that the income protection policy he had in place was worthless due to an undetected error made by an insurance broker.

"From operating a successful business and being in a commanding position, I found myself unable to work for six straight months. We had to wind the business down; we lost staff and had to move the business to home, later selling it to make ends meet. By 2011 the wheels had pretty much fallen off." Many might have been stymied by this turn of events, but over time Tony and Debbie succeeded in turning a seemingly insurmountable obstacle into an opportunity.

"Deb and I looked long and hard at our situation. We'd been positioned at the top end of the market, and one of the reasons

for that was that we were forward thinkers. We'd worked for many years in the industry and we'd always customised products to solve problems for clients. We realised we could commercialise some of these solutions."

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Products emerging from that period are now recognised as leading edge solutions. They include The Force, which started out as a repelling magnetic device to stop base rails banging and was even featured on the Shark Tank TV show. The next step of its development saw the product evolve into an integrated base rail of the blind itself. This updated version was released at the 2016 Super Expo and is performing well.

Other key products are Mdok, an external blinds system featuring unique hardware to tension cables, guide and secure the outdoor roller blind, and the Hero child safety device for blinds, first prototyped back in

The Hero Render



2012 - a universal fix chain and cord tension device offering face fit and recess fixing options as well as base fitting capabilities. Tony's good friend Andrew Scott of ScottFree Australia has been distributing the Hero since its inception.

A new entity, Silent Shade, was established to produce new products to market. Operating from 2012, Silent Shade is essentially a research and innovation window furnishings componentry company. Abra Aluminium, which has a long association with Hopkins in terms

of assisting the development of new products, has partnered with Silent Shade.

"Don and James Allen are Abra's father and son team. Don has a strong engineering background and with James oversees all aspects of the evolving products. It's also a huge benefit to have Matt Doney, Abra's National Sales Manager, on board. He basically put us all together and now drives local and international sales."

Tony continues to focus on the development and prototyping of products. "Having access to

3D printing technology is critical to developing, refining and prototyping products. I couldn't have done this without it."

The future is looking bright for the company, Tony says.

"We now have a full R+D development capability, in house engineers as well as production and sales teams. In addition to focusing on our own developments, we're also developing product for clients."

"Matt and I are going to South Africa in March following a meeting at the 2016 Super Expo, where a South African manufacturer signalled interest in producing The Force and Mdok under licence."

"We also have a new product set to be released in April, which is an enclosed external blind system called Widescreen and sits in the same suite as

Mdok. Both the Mdok and the Widescreen are feature packed and set to turn heads. We have put a lot of development into these external products, focusing on faster and simplified manufacture, easier installation as well as aesthetics. And there are a number of prototypes for other products ready to go, including a range of smaller products to simplify the installation of blinds."

"It took a long time, literally years of tests and scans, until eventually I was diagnosed with vestibular migraine. It's a condition that won't go away, but I know how to manage it now," says Tony.

"It's been a long road to where we are now, and it would not have been possible without Deb, who worked tirelessly at Lusso to support the establishment of Silent Shade."

"If there's a message I'd like to



Tony and Debbie Hopkins at the Silent Shade stand during the 2016 BMAA Super Expo.

get out to the industry, apart from promoting our work at Silent Shade, it's this: check your insurance policy yourself!"

From a business perspective, Tony says he's motivated by a genuine drive "to make improvements in our industry".

"It annoys me to see people

simply copying product and then dropping prices to gain market share, so it's great to be at the leading edge, creating unique solutions. I've got ideas lined up ready to prototype. I get up every morning and I can't wait to get to work."

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- Leanne Hurford, Curtains and Blinds



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