

# Maurice

by Carrie Bickmore

*Sometimes you meet people in life who leave you gobsmacked. Maurice is one of those people. The almost unbelievable details of his life say it all.*

*Maurice Gleeson has just arrived back from the trip of a lifetime – a trip on The Ghan from Adelaide to Darwin. He didn't see a thing. His friend described to him the vastness of the desert, how the sunset appeared each day. Maurice loved every moment of it.*

*"You might say it's a long way to go for someone who can't see," Maurice says, with a giggle in his voice.*

Maurice is blind. "It's not black. It's hard to describe. There is what I call little floaty-bits or colours. But there is no natural light. It doesn't matter if it's bright sunshine or night-time. It looks the same to me," says Maurice.

Maurice was 12 years when old he collided with another child in the schoolyard and suffered a double retinal detachment. After surgery, the doctors managed to repair the tissue and his sight returned.

However, two days later, while still recovering, he got out of bed and tore the retina away from behind his eyes. He would never see again.

But Maurice's bad luck had only started. 18 months after his own accident, his younger brother Nick was struck by a door at a supermarket. He, too, suffered a double-retinal detachment and was struck blind.

Maurice had another brother, Russell, but he only lived to the age of 22. Russell was at a party and he and his friends were using a hunting gun as a prop during a game of charades. It was Russell's turn and he was acting out 'John Wayne' for his audience. Assured the gun was not loaded, he pulled the trigger and shot himself.

By 27, Maurice had also lost his mother to emphysema and his father to a heart attack. As if the details of his life could not be more tragic, he never met his sister, who had died of cot death before he was born.

That is a heart-rending life story. Most of us cannot imagine a world without sight. And losing a loved one is what we all fear most. Maurice told me that he didn't mind so much being a blind person, but it was the isolation and the loss of identity that hurt most. "People say you're still the same person when you go blind, but you're not," says Maurice.

He said that getting used to relying on a cane was difficult but what he found more difficult was that his old friends deserted him and new people he met didn't invite him to parties. He found social situations very difficult.

"I never contemplated suicide but I did take lots of sleeping tablets. I just wanted to sleep, to escape my world," says Maurice.

*Sometimes, it's a simple act of kindness that can turn things around for any of us when we are struggling. For Maurice, it was a hug and a kiss.*

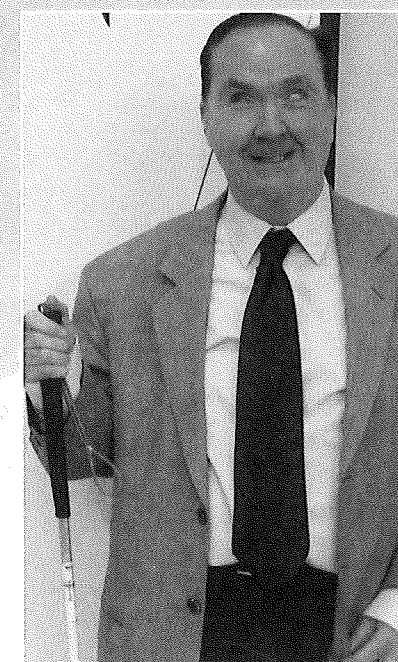


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"A friend of mine, Margaret, was the best person to help me. She hugged me and kissed me and said to me one day: "Maurice, you have had a very difficult life. I don't know how you are doing it." That helped me a lot."

Maurice decided then that he would either "get mentally strong," or end up in a psychiatric institution. He decided he was going to survive and that he, and other people, would have to accept he was blind and that he could do nothing to change that. He realised that he needed to start believing that he was okay just the way he was.

Putting a premium on education, Maurice became a social worker in the early '80s. He has been the president of Blind Sports & Recreation Victoria for over 20 years and in 2002 he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia.

I came to know Maurice through the 'Blind Tennis' programme. On Friday nights at Melbourne Park, people with sight team up with vision impaired players and have a hit. The ball is bigger than a standard tennis ball and has a bell in it so the vision impaired player can hear it. Volunteers learn how to guide their opponent through each play by calling out 'forehand' or 'backhand' depending on the shot they need to play. The challenges for both able-sighted and blind players make the experience all the more rewarding.

Maurice brings a very simple philosophy to his work: Everyone deserves a chance to have a go. Over the past 40 years, Maurice has taken his own mantra to heart. He admits to not being particularly good at sport but that hasn't stopped him skydiving, scuba-diving, skateboarding (most people able to read this probably struggle on a skateboard), playing tennis and, in 2002, carrying the torch for a leg at the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne.

But Maurice is at his most contented encouraging others. When he was just 30 years old, he accompanied an 87-year old blind woman overseas because it was her life-long dream to travel abroad. "It was a real case of the blind leading the blind," laughed Maurice. "We went to Ireland and England. It was hard work but she loved it."

I haven't told you about Maurice to get you to donate money or support his cause (although it's worth having a crack at playing blind tennis if you haven't already), but sometimes you just meet people whose stories you know will stay with you for years. People whose attitude to life makes you question why you ever complain about anything.

And to put a full stop on his ability to make you appreciate some perspective, he says "I have had a wonderful life." And despite everything I've just told you, I believe him.

Carrie B