

UPFRONT

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Ages ago, I asked my mum why she had five kids. At first she smiled. "I love having five children!" she said. But then she began to stare into the middle distance, as though reliving a vivid trauma. "Actually, your father and I never had that discussion," she said, before describing in graphic detail how painful each of our births was.

As the middle child, I'm flanked by eldest sister Candy, elder brother Andrew, younger sister Tammy and youngest sister Michelle (Little Law). Let's not romanticise, though. Siblings don't always get along. As kids, we literally scraped off each other's skin - either through accidents or diabolical, coordinated attacks. As teenagers, we argued non-stop. As adults, though, we've seen each other at our best and worst, celebrated each other's wins and nursed each other through illness and grief.

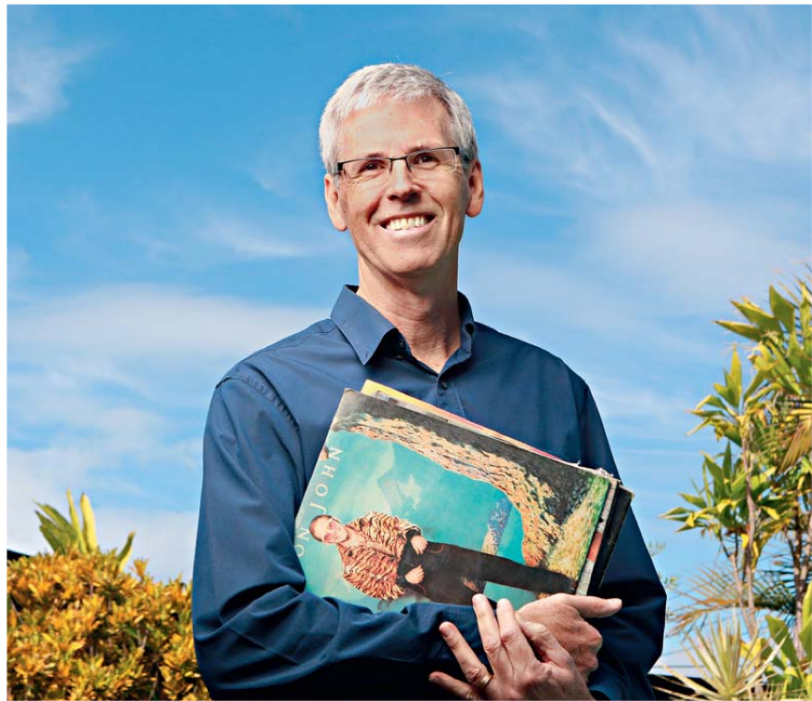
It's funny; siblings are the only people you can brutally tease, but the moment anyone else threatens to hurt them, the reaction is like a reflex - you'll happily tear out the culprit's throat. They also know you the best. They were with you before your kids were born; they knew you before your partner did. Mine have seen every embarrassing incarnation of me, from orthodontic-clad, clarinet-playing nerd to attention-seeking, writerly homosexual. And they still seem to like me. It's reassuring.

In her 2005 novel *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith describes a lovely moment when three siblings all accidentally run into each other in the city, completely unplanned. Anyone who has siblings will understand the magic of this. "He did not consider if or how or why he loved them," Smith writes of one of the siblings. "They were just love: they were the first evidence he ever had of love, and they would be the last confirmation of love when everything else fell away."

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SIBLINGS ARE THE ONLY PEOPLE YOU CAN BRUTALLY TEASE.



PHOTOGRAPHY: RUSSELL SHAWESSE/AFE

# ordinary people

PETER GIESEMANN, 57, MUSIC CLUB FOUNDER, MT GRAVATT

Life without music is something I couldn't imagine. I don't play an instrument but I play a CD player really well. I like smooth music: jazz, rock ballads, world music, classical - music that's good for the soul. But if my wife, Robbie, is out of the house, I can crank up the stereo with Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Santana, classic bands from the '70s.

Robbie and I started a music club, Musically Speaking, two years ago. We have about 30 members - everyday people from all walks of life. We meet twice a month and we aim to have fun. We have themed meetings such as world music, soundtracks, country and western, surf's up, all that jazz or early endings, with segments such as "on this day", music news, concert reviews, games and trivia. It's a good way to expand your music knowledge and share the music you're passionate about. It's bringing a lot of joy to those who attend.

My mother [Marie] was fond of classical music but it was really Robbie, a former music teacher, who introduced me to it properly. We've been married 17 years and my life has changed dramatically since meeting her 20 years ago. She has brought refinement into my life.

I've got several businesses and projects on the go - for example, I do portable displays for events and email newsletters for businesses. Robbie has always called me an ideas man.

I was born in Brisbane but my parents moved to Papua New Guinea when I was three months old. My father [Roy, 83] was an engineer with Mobil Oil. My siblings Colleen and Richard were born there. When I was five, we moved to Bundaberg, then Townsville, and when I was 10 to Adelaide where I lived for 20 years. I first married at 18 after my girlfriend, also 18, got pregnant. But she felt trapped at home with a young baby and left when we were 20. I was a single dad with our son Simon (now 38), which was pretty unusual in those days.

In 1986, I moved to Brisbane for work selling industrial packaging with Simon [then 12], my [new] partner and her two daughters. We married in 1987 but split up a few years later.

I met Robbie in a computer store where she was part-owner. I took a printer in to be repaired and when I picked it up I asked her out. I'll never retire. I've got lots of ideas and I'd like to keep expanding our music club. As Paul Kelly sings: "From little things, big things grow."

ELISSA LAWRENCE