

**PART I**  
**MY STORY**

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**IF YOU CAN  
FALL IN LOVE WITH  
THE THRILL OF NERVES**

**IF YOU CAN FALL IN  
LOVE WITH BEING  
OUTSIDE OF YOUR  
COMFORT ZONE**

**YOU CAN DO  
ANYTHING**



## CHAPTER 1

# *CONQUERING CHALLENGES FROM AN EARLY AGE*

I was born with significant short-sightedness. I couldn't see anything for the first six months of my life, though it wasn't until several instances of bumping into walls, corners and terracotta pots that my parents realised something was definitely not right. I was diagnosed with short-sighted eyesight at -17, two points away from being completely blind.

I needed coke-bottle-thick glasses, and to bullies at school I was an easy target. When I was in Grade 3 my family moved from the suburbs to the inner city of Canberra, which meant I had to change schools. I was short and fat as a kid, nervously pushing my thick glasses up to keep them on my nose. I quickly became 'four eyes fatty'. I felt alone and scared, rejected by society and rejected by myself. I only had one friend, Tom, who knew me from my previous school. He was a cool kid and his acceptance of me helped. However, the kids in the years above still threw things at me as I walked home. And at lunchtime they always chose me to knock over on the oval; one would kneel down behind me and another would shove

me so I would trip backwards and fall over his friend. I was the laughing-stock. I tried to act like it was funny and like it didn't get to me.

From early on I realised that school wasn't a place where I would succeed. My -17 eyesight meant I struggled to see the board, and I had problems concentrating and difficulty reading. Dyslexia and a big dose of ADHD provided a difficult learning curve.

What I did learn from school was to distrust details, and the system: the educational system, the lessons, the standardisation, even some of my teachers. I felt boxed in, asked to conform to something I knew I could never live up to. School was teaching me to see the world from inside a box—a box that everything had to fit in. But the real world isn't like that. Everybody is an individual. Everyone has interests and intellect and motivations, yet we're taught by a system that tries to jam us into its box.

Come high school I had to catch the public bus, and the public school kids spat on me and threw rubbish at me. Every day I would cop it, occasionally bursting into tears once I was home. I tried a lot of things, like keeping to myself and trying to blend in, but I didn't have much luck. My confidence was destroyed, and it tore up my parents. Dad always said: 'Be the bigger man; it's all part of the journey. Remember, Mick: every dog has its day'. However, it reached a point that made Dad change tack. 'It's time you turned around and insulted them back. Let them know they can't go on saying and doing these things.' I agreed. I was so fed up. The next time they picked on me I fired a highly insulting remark at the biggest bully on the bus, and he never had a go at me again. However, my confidence was still totally knocked.

## Life outside of my comfort zone

By the age of 12 I wouldn't go out on weekends at all, not even to see friends at their houses. I was too frightened. It was safe inside the house, and there was no way I was going to venture out. Thankfully, my parents' mission was to have their kid change his attitude, and they wouldn't take no for an answer. On one particular Saturday they gave me \$50 and said, 'We know it's scary for you, and we know what's going on, but you can't continue thinking the entire world is a scary place'. I was told to get on a bus, go to new places, and use the money I was given to explore and discover. I didn't even have a mobile! I was scared, of course, and didn't want to go. 'You're going,' Dad said, 'and I don't want to see you back here until after 5 pm tonight.'

I was petrified. I had never felt more out of my comfort zone. I gingerly got on the bus and began exploring different areas in Canberra. Even though I felt scared, there was something else—it was thrilling! I loved it! That day is responsible for my constant addiction to adventure, to finding new things and to operating outside of my comfort zone. That butterfly feeling you get...I love it. It's where life starts. That day taught me the importance of starting before you're ready. How often do we stay where we're comfortable, too fearful to venture out? We're lulled into comfort because it's nice. It's the café we're familiar with, the friends we've had for years, the job we're used to. But staying in our comfort zone cuts us off from finding new amazing cafés, from expanding our network with new awesome friends, from having a career we really love that reaches its potential. When we're

comfortable in a routine, in doing what we know, we don't get to have the empowering experience of learning, and of surprising ourselves. Remember, humans have successfully built cities; we expanded from Africa to every inhabitable landmass; we invented the wheel and electricity; we harnessed oil to be fuel. We have smartphones in our pockets, medicines that save lives. And all of this was created by people who stepped out of what they knew into the unknown. At times it was dangerous, or scary. It was always uncertain. But that's where we grow! We felt the fear, and did it anyway. We started *before* we were ready. Sometimes it's our parents who will give us a kick to get going, and sometimes it's our partner, or our boss—but sometimes we need to give *ourselves* a great big kick and get moving. If you can fall in love with the thrill of nerves—if you can fall in love with being outside of your comfort zone—you can do anything.

That's the gift my parents gave me that day.

I changed from my coke-bottle-thick glasses to contacts, which meant I could finally play contact sports. I joined rugby and absolutely loved it! It quickly became my passion. Growth spurts and exercise meant I lost the fat, and the team camaraderie built a lot of confidence in me. Life was starting to be really great.

Then, one day when I was 13, I was on the rugby pitch and I felt my heart beat rapidly. It felt like a butterfly on steroids was flapping in my chest. It was weird. I felt short of breath and thought it best to leave the rugby pitch. A parent of one of the players was a doctor, and she counted my heartbeat, which should have been sitting at between 80 and 120 beats per minute. Mine was at 300 beats per minute. After 10 minutes, my heart flicked back into its normal rhythm, but my body was exhausted and I was in shock. Mum took me straight to the

doctor, and he was perplexed that a 13-year-old, fit, healthy boy could have his heart beat at 300 beats per minute for 10 minutes. He told me to go straight to hospital for cardiac programming done to see what was going on. ‘Shit, have I got something life-threatening?’ I thought. I was scared.

Mum and Dad drove me the three-hour journey to Westmead Hospital in Sydney, where I was given a false heart attack to see what my heart would do, through which it was discovered I have a condition called supraventricular tachycardia (SVT). Ventricular tachycardia (VT) can kill you, so I was very lucky that I only had *supraventricular* tachycardia. SVT essentially means that I have an extra pathway in my heart which misses the normal rhythm of the beat under stress. Imagine an electrical system with a fault so that rather than beating steadily, it shoots off into the extra pathway, sending it to beat at 250 to 300 beats per minute.

It’s very rare for young people to get SVT, plus I was fit and healthy, which made it even more peculiar. They also discovered I have a weird heart in that it’s very big, with a very low resting heart rate of 40 (most people have a resting heart rate of 60 to 100).

The specialists weren’t 100 per cent sure it *was* SVT, so we were left in the unknown: could it be life threatening? It was scary for my family and for me. I had to see a cardiologist in Canberra every three months for them to monitor me, and I had to sleep and shower with a Holter monitor for three days to make sure my rhythms were monitored while I slept. It wasn’t fun. It wasn’t so much that I was afraid of dying, it was more the fact of being young and having to go to the eye doctor, and then having to see the cardiologist every three months. I just wanted to be a normal, healthy 13-year-old who didn’t have to have regular check-ups. I hate hospitals, and to this day

I have a fear of sickness. And I wanted to know where I stood with my condition. I was living life out of my comfort zone every day to just get by. Nothing was easy. I had to quickly learn patience, perseverance and determination.

Whenever I tried to exercise, my heartbeat would become erratic and I was forced to stop playing rugby. I could no longer take part in my new-found passion. I wasn't passionate about anything they were teaching us at school—it was my love of sport that had kept me on the straight and narrow. Now that I had to stop rugby and be careful when exercising, what was I going to do?

## **From one passion to another**

I turned my focus to earning money. I loved that having money allowed me to do some really cool things I had always wanted to do. The legal age to work in Australia was 14 years and 9 months, and my sister (who is five years older than me) worked at McDonald's as a shift manager and was able to get me a job working under her there. I loved every minute of it. My glasses continually fogged up from the kitchen's steam, but it was great working with people older than me and I loved the sense of belonging I felt. Working in a team gave me that sense of camaraderie that sport had. A sense I had been longing for. And I had money! Working there taught me so many lessons about management and business, and propelled me to appreciate work and how people come together to accomplish something.

With my growing confidence I became more talkative at school, cracking jokes in class to make everyone laugh and to stir things up. I think this came from wanting to be the centre of attention and because of the big insecurities I had about



myself. I was known for asking my teachers silly questions, which most of them didn't appreciate. But I thought many of my questions were relevant, like when I would ask how certain maths and English problems could be applied to the real world. A few teachers saw through my act and appreciated my unorthodox thinking (and my jokes), but overall I felt school was only a place to have fun and build relationships. For me, it wasn't a place to study. I never got great marks. In fact, the only good marks I received were in PE, health and, funnily enough, business.

Soon after I began working at McDonald's with my sister, I started washing the windows of local shops and of the cars parked outside. I was on the pavement with the street kids and the homeless, asking people how their day was and if I could help them with their groceries—and, 'Oh, by the way, do you need your car windows washed?' I became quite successful at it. One time, a professional basketballer, Lauren Jackson (of Olympic, WNBL, WNBA and WBC fame), gave me \$20 to wash the windows of her Mercedes, and when other people coming out of the shops saw this, they of course also wanted their car windows washed by...yours truly. Lauren became a weekly customer and the power of her influence taught me that if you're endorsed by someone who is well known and respected, you can capture a lot of sales.

As my window-washing reputation grew, I needed help. So I recruited three other kids to work for me. During the holidays we ramped it up, earning about \$20 an hour. I loved buying the supplies and making sure 'my staff' were treated well and had something to drink.

I was also learning the value of a dollar, and I was drawn to garage sales. The commerce of used goods fascinated me. I'd get the newspaper on a Saturday and highlight all the garage

sales I wanted to go to, and then I'd take some of the money I earned at work—say \$50—and go buy up all the things I thought I could clean up and resell. I bought things like almost-new foxy boots for \$5 that I knew I could sell for \$50, or a pack of CDs and DVDs for \$10 that I knew I could sell separately for \$10 each. I usually spent between \$10 and \$20 on an item and, after fixing it up, I'd resell it for anything up to \$99. I was making good money for a teen. There were two channels for me to resell through: eBay was just coming online, and the classifieds section in the local newspaper. Every Tuesday you could post a free ad for items under \$99, and on average I'd place anywhere from two to 10 classifieds, and then I'd wait for a call or email.

Mum and Dad thought I was crazy. Here were all these adults coming to the house on Tuesday evenings to give me money for second-hand goods. It humorously looked like I was running some sort of drug ring from the back shed. I would text and email potential buyers throughout the day, negotiating hard. I preferred written communication because I sounded very young on the phone. They were always surprised when a young kid answered the door saying, 'I'm Mick Spencer, your local classifieds expert'.

Once I was in the swing of it I made good money through eBay, even grossing \$500 in one week at 13. It helped me buy an electric guitar in cash, which was a great moment. I'd planned for it, worked hard for it and eventually bought it. (I'd stopped receiving pocket money from my parents at 12 because I was making my own.) When I was 14, I found an MP3 player on eBay that I loved, and I knew it was best to put your bid on the items at the last minute. I would often set up three screens at once, set the highest amount I was willing to spend (a tip

from Dad) and get ready for that last minute. This MP3 player was a beautiful, sleek, white-and-blue one that would fit in my pocket. I would be the cool kid. At the last minute I won it for \$250! It was expensive, but I'd earned it. I contacted the seller, but there was no response. So I contacted them again, and again. Still no answer. Could this be real? I'd been hoaxed. (This was before eBay's strong seller security.) Someone had gotten an edge over me and taken my money. I was crushed, though it did teach me a valuable lesson: do your due diligence. It made me hungry, and prepared me emotionally for future failures. It didn't stop my love for the internet. My parents still call me the computer kid of the family. While I loved being outdoors and fit, I also loved connecting to people all around the world. Chatrooms, Bebo, MySpace—I loved anything internet based. I tried my hand at coding at a young age, building websites and profiles, and loved that too.

Another side hustle was at my school's swimming and athletic carnivals. I would bring a big esky of soft drinks and sell them, undercutting the canteen. It was completely illegal to do at school events, but the students loved the cheap drinks. There was an evident monopoly, and a disrupter was required! I happily stepped up to the plate.

In my teens, I always had two to three jobs at any point, and they were fantastic for developing the skills I would need later to build my own businesses. I worked at a grocery store, the post office, a local restaurant, on the floor of a chemist store, and later, delivering prescriptions to the elderly when I got my licence. My mum used to joke about how it always took me all day to do my prescription delivery rounds because I loved to stay and chat with the elderly people, who I knew didn't have many visitors.

Eventually I landed my dream job at a sports store. At each job I learned something new: how to interact with customers, how to place products, how the back office ran efficiently, and, most importantly, how to work with a team and collaborate.

At 14 I got into golf and by the time I was 18 I was playing off a handicap of five, which was nearing a potential career in the sport. I would be at the golf course from 5.30 to 8.30 every morning before school, then work from 4 to 6 after school, and then go back to the golf course after work to train. While training, I used to fish balls out of the lake and clean them to sell to golf clubs.

At the golf course some kids would pick on me. I'd be practising on the golf range and they would blatantly hit balls at me, and do stupid things like hide my golf clubs. It was petty—in fact it makes me laugh now—but at the time it knocked my confidence. Ultimately, I decided to give up the sport at 18 because I didn't think I was quite good enough to make a career out of it, and I was getting bored. I wanted new adventures and challenges.

In Grade 10, I completed my Personal Trainer Certificate at the gym, working there from 5.30 to 8.30 every morning as a personal trainer to do it. Everyone else going for a certificate was in their 20s or 30s. I was super passionate about health and wanted to know everything about it, so I wasted no time.

## **My moment of truth**

Eventually the doctors confirmed that I definitely had SVT. It isn't life threatening, and would be more of a nuisance than anything else. That was a relief. However, they said that if I went into a 300 beats per minute rhythm and couldn't get out

of it within 15 minutes I would have to rush to hospital so they could give me cardioversion (that's when they give your heart an electric shock).

One Thursday night when I was 17 I'd gone out with some mates, and the next day I went for a 5-kilometre run to shake off the hangover and to enjoy the beautiful day. My heart went into SVT. I walked straight home, counting my beats per minute: 240. I was totally exhausted. When your heart races at super speed, it circulates the blood around your body unnaturally fast. It takes everything out of you.

I did the exercises I'd been taught, but I couldn't get my heart out of the ultra rhythm. My Mum, Cathy, had worked as an emergency nurse for over 10 years, then as a clinical nurse and then a midwife. She's seen everything. When she says something, we all listen. 'You really need to be careful, Mick. We've got to go to hospital right now. This ultra rhythm can't last. We've got to get your heart cardioverted.'

Luckily, when you're in SVT you're rushed straight through emergency. They had to restart my heart by putting patches on my chest and giving my heart a brief electrical shock to bring it back to normal. It knocked me out. I woke up a few hours later and was discharged later that day.

My heart got stuck in ultra rhythm again when I was 19, and again I was rushed through and they shocked me into a normal rhythm. Both times it was scary. It made me less of a party animal, and much more conscious of my health.

Having my heart restarted actually boosted my confidence in general because it brought home the fact that life is too short to live in fear. I thought, 'Grow up, Mick. Make the most of life!' It just clicked. I started hustling more, forging my own life.

## Moving on from school

After graduating from high school, I worked as a labourer for a year to save money for a gap year overseas. I worked at my dad's successful building company alongside my brother, Nathan, who is seven years older than me. While the work was tough and not much fun, I learned some great life lessons working with my brother. He taught me about organisation, money and focus. We had a lot of fun together.

Even though I could have continued in my dad's business and built a career there, I had a burning desire to live my own life. I wanted to prove myself and build my own future.

At this time all my school mates were saving to travel around Europe, but I wanted to do my own thing. I decided I wanted to intern at a sports camp in Hawaii: I love sports, I love the beach and I wanted time for myself to reflect on what I wanted to do. The sports camp said it didn't take interns, so I called the program coordinator.

'I know you don't take interns, but I'll tell you what. If you can accommodate me, I'll promise to work my arse off helping you to build the international program. I'll do the marketing and website for you. I know I can teach those kids something: team building, leadership and being the best you can be, no matter the odds. This is in my blood. Let me be your first international intern, please.'

They said yes! That further boosted my confidence—I'd made it happen. I was the master of my own destiny. That feeling was addictive. They would pay for half my flight, give me a shipping container as accommodation, a kitchen with bulk food and an old car for my days off. What more could a 20-year-old guy want?

I worked my arse off at the sports camp, and loved it. I was out of my comfort zone, having an adventure, and I got to have a real impact on some great kids. I loved how sports was bringing them all together. It was there that I realised the power of teams and the power of putting people in circumstances that bring them together towards a common goal. I was amazed at how the kids transformed; it was just awesome.

Hawaii was the place where ONTHEGO® Custom Apparel was truly born. It was there that I got a sense of what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted my work to involve sports, travel, adventure, technology and business. I wanted it to bring people together.

## Every day matters

When I was 22, I suffered a new heart condition. I'd recently arrived home after travelling to China, and I hadn't gotten much sleep on the journey. I'd gone out for a cycle to stretch my legs when my heart started missing beats. I called Mum.

'It sounds like you're having heart palpitations, which are caused by exhaustion and dehydration. Drink fluids and rest, and see if it goes back into normal rhythm. If it doesn't, we'll go to the hospital.'

I went to bed extremely early, slept through the night, and woke up with my heart still missing beats. That's when I knew it was bad. I called Mum immediately.

'It's 7 am and it's still happening.'

'We're going to the hospital', she replied.

She drove me straight to emergency and I was rushed through. They diagnosed that it wasn't ectopic beats, it was atrial

fibrillation (AF). All of the university interns came over to witness someone in their early 20s with AF because it was unheard of. Atrial fibrillation is a rapid, irregular heart rate that's very annoying and very tiring. At least with SVT it's a steady rise from normal to 90 bpm, to 120 bpm, to 140 bpm and then—*bang*—it goes to 250 bpm and you're in SVT. You're looking at your watch and counting, feeling it flutter in your chest. I've learned how to get myself out of SVT, at which point I'm instantly back to my normal rhythm. AF is different. It sticks around and your beats per minute are all over the place. They're irregular, sometimes fast, then slow, then fast. It can kill you. It's painful because you can't do anything except feel every beat and you become very conscious of every irregular heartbeat. And then you miss a beat. And then it goes *boom!* and you feel it up your throat. You're on the couch, unable to focus. You can't think. Blood isn't flowing around your body properly; it's not getting to your brain properly. You miss a beat. You beat in double time. It's the worst.

They gave me a drug to knock me out, and when I woke up I had severe chest pain from the electric shock they'd given me, which thankfully had got my heart back into its normal rhythm. 'You should have come to hospital last night', the doctor said. 'You're lucky to be alive: anything could have happened in your sleep.' He explained that your heart rate can kill you in your sleep. You can easily have a heart attack, or there's a risk of having a stroke with AF because it often creates blood clots.

I was 21 and being told I could have easily died the night before. It was a wake-up call. It made me reassess everything. Life is so short. It's scarily short, each moment insanely precious. Any second, we could be gone. At 17 and 19 I had had experts tell me that SVT wasn't going to kill me. I just had



to be very careful it didn't last longer than 15 minutes. At the time, the experiences were full on because they had to restart my heart, but this was the closest I'd come to death.

The lesson to not take my health for granted hit me hard. I was in hospital among people who were older and sicker than me. Even though my heart wasn't great, I was still lucky. I realised just how *good* it is to breathe normally, to have a normal heart rate, to have all four limbs, to have energy. Being lucky to still be alive made me ask some important questions. What would I love to do with my future? I could die next week, or I could die in 100 years.

**Every day matters, every moment counts**

So what kind of life do I want to live? How do I want my future to look?