

Partner Stewart Free – comics, cufflinks and the Kokoda Trail

Stewart in 2016....

One conversation with [Jirsch Sutherland Partner Stewart Free](#) and you can literally feel your heart rate lowering. He has this incredible ability to leave you feeling as if nothing is an obstacle and everything is possible. This is a man, after all, who lost 55kgs after “waking up one morning knowing I needed to make a few changes in my life” and more-or-less adopting multiple Pacific Island communities after going there on a family holiday.

Born and raised in the Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla, Stewart and his family moved to Newcastle on the NSW mid North Coast 13 years ago. Boasting some of the state’s best surf beaches and the largest coal exporting harbour in the world, Stewart says Newcastle has been the perfect place to bring up his family.



..... and tackling Kokoda

“I have been married to an amazing woman, Bronwyn, for 20 years, and we have one daughter, Emily, 17, and one adopted son, Kodi, 6, who came into our life as a foster child when he was four months old,” Stewart explains. “Kodi is autistic with numerous health and personality issues but is my inspiration every single day.”

While he has capped his collecting quota for comics (8,500) and cufflinks (350 pairs), there is one pastime Stewart continues to revel in: playing Lego with his son. "It is a form of therapy for him, but I really enjoy it!"

When he's not raising money for [Operation Do Something](#) (\$150,000 to date), Stewart says you can usually find him out in the surf or at the gym: "My personal motto is, 'if the sun is out, the guns are out'."

The light at the end of the insolvency tunnel



Stewart Free hiding his guns

Stewart says he "fell into the industry, like everybody" after he was offered a position with Jirsch Sutherland in 1998 by a mate who was an insolvency practitioner. "It paid more than the accounting job I had at the time, so I took it like the immature fool I was back then," he jests.

However, three years into the position he was made redundant. "I think the managing partner got fed up with catching me doing my university assignments during work hours," he recalls. "Fast forward 15+ years later and I came to the realisation that I didn't want to be in a large multidisciplinary firm, so I approached Jirsch again and the rest, as they say, is history."

No two days are the same in the life of an insolvency practitioner but as Stewart explains, providing financial solutions during periods of intense stress comes with myriad personal and professional rewards.

"Two to three times a month I get to sit in the loungeroom of a prospective client and, after a couple of hours and starting with a blank piece of paper, we set a strategy that delivers the best outcome for stakeholders," he says. "I get to see the physical weight come off someone's shoulders when they realise that it isn't all doom and gloom and that there is light at the end of the tunnel. These are the moments that keep me engaged in the profession."

While many would think an insolvency revolves around spreadsheets and tax forms, Stewart says he's most moved by the humane aspect of the job. "I focus more on the impact that it has on people's health, mental wellbeing and general emotional state," he explains. "I don't think of each typical engagement as a job. I don't think in terms of assets and liabilities. I think in



terms of mortgage payments, grocery bills, ongoing employment, children's bedrooms, and the like. My decisions directly impact the lives of people in very simple, tangible ways."