

Footballer, STARie, cancer survivor – and now union MLO

by Brett Williams



He has charged into the houses of armed criminals, gone on dangerous search-and-rescue missions in helicopters, and body-guarded Scandinavian royalty. But former STAR Group sergeant Darren Cornell has left his beloved specialist policing behind to take on the new Police Association role of member liaison officer.

Although the 39-year-old concedes that the job is vastly different from the one he came from, he insists that similarities between the two do exist. "Within STAR Group," he explains, "a lot of it is incident management: a problem arises and we need to deal with it – now.

"So I think the similarity is in the incident management: a member has a problem, notifies me of what it is and, then, it's my job to interpret that.

"With feedback from association staff, I then try to resolve it in the best way possible for the member. So, in that way, there is a lot of similarity."

For association members, with either industrial or legal issues, Cornell will be their first point of contact. He will also support and help train delegates, and move as necessary among members in their workplaces.

He came to his new job with a long-standing interest in politics, and the same enthusiasm he applied to the STAR Group

delegate role he occupied over the past five years.

Not even a life-threatening bout of leukaemia was enough to disconnect him from that commitment. Hospital-bound, after the deadly disease had struck him down back in 2007, the then STARie "still fielded phone calls" from association members.

It was one of a few things he was not supposed to do, but did anyway, as he faced up to the fight of his life. To escape the boredom of the hospital environment, he took walks around the River Torrens and, at other times, ventured into a nearby café – all against doctors' orders.

So, despite his own suffering, Cornell was never about to cut himself off from colleagues whom he felt he could help with advice or support. Their interests were, after all, what had drawn him to police unionism in the first place.

"I go back to when I felt vulnerable myself, during one of the Baxter (detention centre) operations," he says. "There were, what I call, some significant breaches of the award occurring.

"It made me think that we're so vulnerable in that type of environment and that somebody needed to stand up and do something about it.

"From that point on, I really developed a stronger passion, or hunger, for the role of delegate. And, as I grew to know more

about it, it was of more and more interest to me."

Cornell acted on his increasing interest by running for, and winning, the office of STAR Group delegate in 2004. The then new union rep realized he had much to learn, and so went on to read and research all he could on police industrial relations.

He grew to relish his delegate work and even came to think about one day taking on a greater role for the association. And that was yet another interest he acted on, just six weeks ago, when he became the successful candidate for the MLO job.

Since he began, he has set about learning the ropes under association veterans Mark Carroll (president), Andy Dunn (secretary) and Tom Scheffler (assistant secretary).

"It's an excellent opportunity for me in this ground-level position," he says. "I have what I term a good knowledge of unions, but with more time on the ground I can learn more.

"These positions are rare so, when you get one, you've got to make the most of it. In time, I want to be part of the lobbying, part of the decision-making process as it relates to enterprise agreements.

"I don't expect to come here and work 8:30 to 5:00 and go home. I've come here to do a job, and I want to do it right."

Mark Carroll explains that the association employed an MLO because



Cornell in the Barossa Valley with wife Karla and children Bella and Logan

At the office in his new job

member numbers had grown significantly over the past seven years and placed greater demand on union services.

He describes Cornell as personable and good-humoured but also “extremely determined”, a fighter with a winning mentality. “Darren is very passionate about members receiving a fair go,” he says.

“He also has a real decency about him, in terms of giving something back to the job and to the membership.”

Born into a working-class family as the youngest of three brothers, Cornell grew up in the often derided outer northern suburbs of Adelaide. He remembers chronic unemployment and some areas of Elizabeth, where he lived and went to high school, as pretty tough.

Indeed, when he passed Year 12, he was one of only two students who did.

But he loved football and enjoyed a strong connection to the Central District footy club, which he credits with keeping him a safe distance from potential trouble. Cornell captained successive junior sides, won selection in an under-17 state team, and eventually played for the Bulldogs at league level.

With his schooling complete, he spent a few years in the finance industry, before joining SAPOL as a 22-year-old in 1992. His first post was Elizabeth, where he worked on the front line, as he later did in Gawler.

In 1999, Cornell undertook the punishing four-day selection course for STAR Group – and passed. The following year, he joined the elite squad, which he only left after nine years to take up the MLO job.

Among his most memorable experiences as a STARie is body-guarding seven-time Tour de France winner and fellow cancer survivor Lance Armstrong in Adelaide last January. Other memorable jobs he had were protecting prime ministers, the King and Queen of Sweden and Premier Mike Rann.

His toughest year came in 2007, when he found out that he was suffering from acute myeloid leukaemia. The condition was so serious that, had he not consulted a doctor when he did about fatigue he was suffering, he would have died within weeks.

Of two treatment options offered to him, Cornell and his wife, Karla, chose one based only on clinical trials. It came with no guarantees, and would take months to administer.

“We just made the decision that it was only going to be positive,” he says, “and that we were just never, never going to give up. And that’s the way it went.”

In hospital over the next 16 weeks, Cornell underwent six rounds of chemotherapy and 50-plus blood transfusions. And, spending his first

30 days in isolation, he could not always have visits from his young children, Logan and Bella.

“The kids couldn’t visit you if they had a cough or a runny nose,” he says. “But we worked around that – they would stand in the car park and wave. And, every night, before they went to bed, I read them a story from hospital by mobile phone.”

For Cornell, the possibility of leaving his children fatherless was his greatest fear. He had, after all, “sorted out” his finances after the diagnosis.

But his treatment worked, and he is now in remission. He continues to undergo bone-marrow biopsies and blood tests but has regained all of the strength and most of the fitness he enjoyed before his illness.

Cornell had endured not only that illness in 2007 but also the death of his labourer father, Peter. The one high point was the birth of his daughter.

Important to him now is others’ perception of him. He knows that some, who wrongly think of STARies as unthinking and gung-ho, will expect him to play the brainless head-kicker in his association role.

“Most people who know me know that I’m not that type of person,” he says.

“However, if someone is doing the wrong thing by members, I’ll have no hesitation in quite clearly pointing that out, and indicating that we won’t tolerate it for very long.” **PJ**