

# FROM LITTLE THINGS

*By staying true to their country roots, John Wagner and his brothers have built their Toowoomba business into a national success story.*

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER

The roar of a Cathay Pacific jumbo fills the terminal at Toowoomba's Brisbane West Wellcamp Airport and John Wagner has a grin on his face. "I still get excited every time it lands," says the 57-year-old businessman and pilot as the nose of the Boeing 747-800 swings towards the floor-to-ceiling glass in the \$200 million airport built by the Wagner family.

Beyond the tarmac perimeter, cement trucks, bulldozers and dump trucks thunder by, all with the black and yellow Wagner logo on their side. "We'll be building here for the next 30 years," says John, pointing out various aspects of the ongoing construction. "It's a long-term project." It's also one of the country's most impressive. The first major commercial airport built since Melbourne's Tullamarine opened in 1970, Wellcamp is the centrepiece of the construction and mining services company run by John and his brothers Denis, Neill and Joe.

It's also a shining example of the power of regional businesses investing in their own backyard. "What the four of us brothers didn't realise when we announced the construction of the airport is how much confidence it would give other people in this region to invest," John says. "It's taken Toowoomba and the Darling Downs to a totally different level." Announced in 2012 and completed in 2014, Wellcamp now handles more than 75 scheduled flights a week, as well as fly-in fly-out mining services and private aviation. Cathay Pacific flies weekly from Toowoomba to Hong Kong, exporting fresh Darling Downs produce direct to booming Asian food markets.

The airport is a culmination of the teamwork that has driven John and his brothers for the past three decades. "We couldn't have built this airport without the support of all four of us," he says. "And it wouldn't have happened as a public company, it wouldn't even have been a talking point."

John grew up as the second eldest of eight children, with their father Henry – a third-generation stonemason – driving trucks and mother Mary working night duty as a nurse. John says the Wagner siblings learnt from a young age the value of working together. "Mum and Dad both worked hard, but we had a very good childhood," says John, recalling his formative years spent playing rugby and cleaning the local bingo hall on Saturday mornings for pocket money.

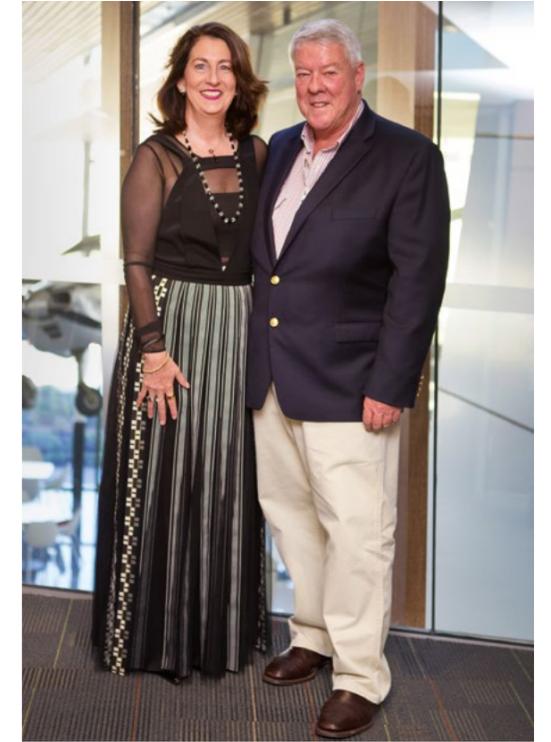
After finishing school in Toowoomba, he moved to Brisbane to study civil engineering. It didn't work out. "Attendance was a major issue, passing exams was another major issue, and girls and alcohol was another major issue," he says, grinning. University was followed by 18 months operating a D9 bulldozer at the Tarong Power Station, then a move to the United States, where he used work to see the country. "I got a job with Allied Van Lines, a furniture removal company, so I was driving an 18-wheeler and I'd shift people out of Florida and put them into Seattle, then go down to LA and across to New York."

Returning home for his 21st birthday, John joined the concrete and quarry business started by his father and two uncles. "I started working for the old man as a truck driver and worked my way through the system and ended up running the concrete business and Denis

*John Wagner stands in front of a Cathay Pacific 747-800 on the tarmac of Toowoomba's Brisbane West Wellcamp Airport.*



*CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: The terminal building at Brisbane West Wellcamp Airport; Liz and John Wagner; John Wagner talks with dump truck driver Des Nikora on a construction site near the airport.*



was running the quarry business, and then Dad and his brothers sold out in 1985," John says.

Four years later, Henry, John and Denis, along with their brother Neill, started Wagners Concrete. "We started out with one concrete plant; I was on the loader, Denis was on the truck, Neill was on the weighbridge, and Dad used to get in and help as well, and we all pretty much worked our arses off," John says. It was to be a baptism of fire. "The day we started in concrete the price of concrete dropped about \$45 a metre and the price of aggregate went up 77 percent the same day," says John, recalling the tactics used by the big boys in an attempt to run them out of business. While the corporates were ultimately fined \$20 million for collusion, the Wagners' resolve was cemented. "It just made us more determined to be in charge of our own destiny," John says.

Fast forward three decades and Wagners is one of regional Australia's largest businesses, turning over \$200m annually. The company employs more than 750 people, with operations covering manufacturing, construction and mining services. Assets include the Brisbane West Wellcamp Airport and Wellcamp Business Park, quarries, a Brisbane concrete grinding plant, a cargo wharf catering for 40,000-tonne vessels, and offices in Russia, Mongolia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and Africa.

Behind the scenes, the Wagners remain true to their family values. "Mum and Dad taught us to work hard, be careful with your pennies, deal with integrity, and

be honest," John says. "And if we live by our guiding principles of being a family company, and being a fair company, then that solves most issues."

John says clear communication between the four brothers has been crucial to success. "The key is honest and open communication between the shareholders, challenging each other, but being respectful of everyone's opinion," he says. "And if one person is vehemently opposed to something, then we sit back and have another look at it – that's worked well for us for 27 years."

The company's managing director and chairman, Denis, says his parents' work ethic, his father's entrepreneurship, and the teamwork that comes with growing up in a large family have all played into their success. "As brothers, we can all put a deal together, generally in different ways because we've got vastly different management styles, and there's absolutely no doubt that one of our strengths is that we can work very well together," Denis says. Brother Joe, the youngest of the eight Wagner siblings, says his parents' selflessness is something deeply respected by the brothers. "Quite often Dad would go to Brisbane late in the afternoon to get a load of cement and he would come home and walk in the door and Mum would head out the door," he says. "Mum would work all day looking after us and head off to night shift at 9:30pm, and if there were any issues Dad was left to deal with it while mum was at work. The sacrifices they made were huge."





*John, Denis and Joe Wagner stand on the tarmac at Toowoomba's Brisbane West Wellcamp Airport.  
OPPOSITE: John, Neill, Joe, Denis and Henry Wagner discuss business in the early days of Wagner Concrete.*



John's wife Liz, who was a midwife working in outback Queensland when she met him at the Miles B&S in 1982, says hard work has remained a constant throughout her husband's life as the couple have raised their four children. "We had four under four, and John was doing long hours, five days a week in the office and then every weekend driving trucks," Liz says. "They were big hours, but that's what you do when it's your own business to get ahead, and we have no complaints at all. I feel really proud that it's been a team effort, and that behind the scenes I've kept the family and the home front going, so there's a real sense of satisfaction."

John says his parents' community spirit – with his mum involved in various church and community groups and his father a councillor for more than a decade – has also played a big role in how the family members go about their lives. Although they prefer to keep their community involvement low-key, recent health issues have seen John and Liz take a more public approach to their philanthropy.

"I was perfectly healthy and turning 50 and Liz badgered me to go and get a colonoscopy and an endoscopy," says John, recalling the lead-up to his prostate cancer diagnosis in 2010. "When I woke, the doctor said, 'Your endoscopy is fine, your colonoscopy is fine, but I felt something in your prostate and you need to get that checked.'" The lump turned out to be an aggressive tumour. Although John recovered after treatment, two years later the cancer was back, this time as a tumour on the outside of the bladder. He's now cancer free and determined to raise awareness of the disease, which kills more than 3000 Australians each year.

The experience led John and Liz to team up with three mates and their wives to start fundraising for prostate cancer research. Since their first It's A Bloke Thing Prostate Cancer Luncheon in 2011, the group has raised \$5.8m. The luncheon is now Queensland's largest daytime fundraising event. Liz says its success reflects the family's strong links to the local community. "Whatever you do in life you get out of it what you put in," she says. "And in a community like Toowoomba you feel like you can really put in and achieve things."

After more than 150 years in the Darling Downs – John's great-grandfather arrived in Toowoomba in the 1860s – the family remains deeply rooted in regional Queensland. "Toowoomba is where we started, where we were brought up, it's Australia's second largest inland city after Canberra, and it's a great place to bring up kids and do business," John says. And although the brothers see succession as the company's number one challenge, it appears the family legacy is in good hands.

John and Liz's eldest son Jack is Wagner's group transport manager, while Neill's son Harry, Denis's son Kenneth and Joe's daughter Leticia all attend board meetings when they can. "Ultimately they'll end up owning or running the business," John says. "And that's really part of our long-term evolution – to hand the business from one generation to the next." But for now the brothers will continue to do what they do best: work hard and work together. "We all have different expertise in different parts of the business," John says. "When you bring all that together, you've got something pretty special."