

Fighters for the cause

At great cost to themselves, Ken Marslew, Howard Brown and Peter Rolfe tirelessly care for those left devastated by violent crime, **John Kidman** writes.

EVEN as text messages go, it was radically understated: "G'day mate. Hit a bit of a rough spot. In Royal North Shore [Hospital] after a heart attack Saturday morning. Give me a call, Rolfey"

As a friend would, I responded straight away. But not fast enough.

Before I could punch in his number and hit dial, Peter Rolfe, 64, small-business man, good bloke and tireless volunteer president of victim care group Homicide Survivors Support After Murder, was . . . otherwise engaged.

In the few seconds it took me to phone, he was on another call – not to just anyone, though. Rolfe was talking to someone else he figured needed help more than he did: the grieving relative of someone lost to murder.

Under the circumstances he had good reason to be anxious about his own welfare or even just frustrated at being confined to a hospital bed. But no, reaching for the phone he was on for more than a chat or a distraction to break the tedium; Rolfe was at work again.

He may have been laid up in emergency but he wasn't going to let it slow him up.

Ditto the fact that he has since been diagnosed with bowel cancer.

Amazingly, it's a scenario not uncommon among the dedicated few who are singularly devoted to bringing help, hope and healing to those whose lives have been devastated by criminal violence.

Enough is Enough founder and Order of Australia recipient Ken Marslew has survived four heart attacks and returned to work each time. He also battles diabetes.

Victims of Crime Assistance League (VOCAL) stalwart Howard Brown, meanwhile, dismisses his current fight with tetanus paralysis as a minor setback. (Especially considering the fact that he was forced to sell his house six years ago in order to finance his advocacy.)

Together, the three men are responsible for the majority of victim counselling and court-support services across NSW.

Their organisations advocate on behalf of victims before the State Parole Board, the Mental Health Review Tribunal and various other law and order panels.

They help prepare and present victim-impact statements, give talks, run education programs, hold group meetings and, most importantly, are available when their members need to talk to someone who knows what they're going through.

"You're mostly talking about people who have lost a loved one to murder," Rolfe says. "They're some of the most vulnerable people about. I can't very well say to them I can't help them any more because I've had a heart attack. They become totally dependent on you."

He should know; he once counted himself among those most vulnerable and in some ways he probably still is.

In 1994, his best mate, Stephen Dempsey, was murdered by a psychopath who shot an arrow through his heart, cut up his body and stored it in a freezer.

Three years ago, Rolfe formed the Homicide Survivors Association, which more recently amalgamated with another Sydney-based group, Support After Murder, and together they now have 130 members across NSW, interstate and in New Zealand and the UK.

For Rolfe, who convenes the merged outfit with little more at his fingertips than his trusty mobile and a clunky PC, it's become the most important thing in his life.

But at what cost? At \$50,000 a year just in uncovered expenses, there's the financial strain. At up to 50 hours a week on top of his day job as a property manager, there's the time drain.

And then, of course, there's his health.

Brown says he has no doubt his mate's illness and obsession with victim support are connected. "I'm quite certain that with both his heart and now the bloody bowel cancer, it's been a factor," he says.

"I actually speak to Pete every morning around 8.30am. The second reason for doing so is so we can brief each other and keep up with what's going on."

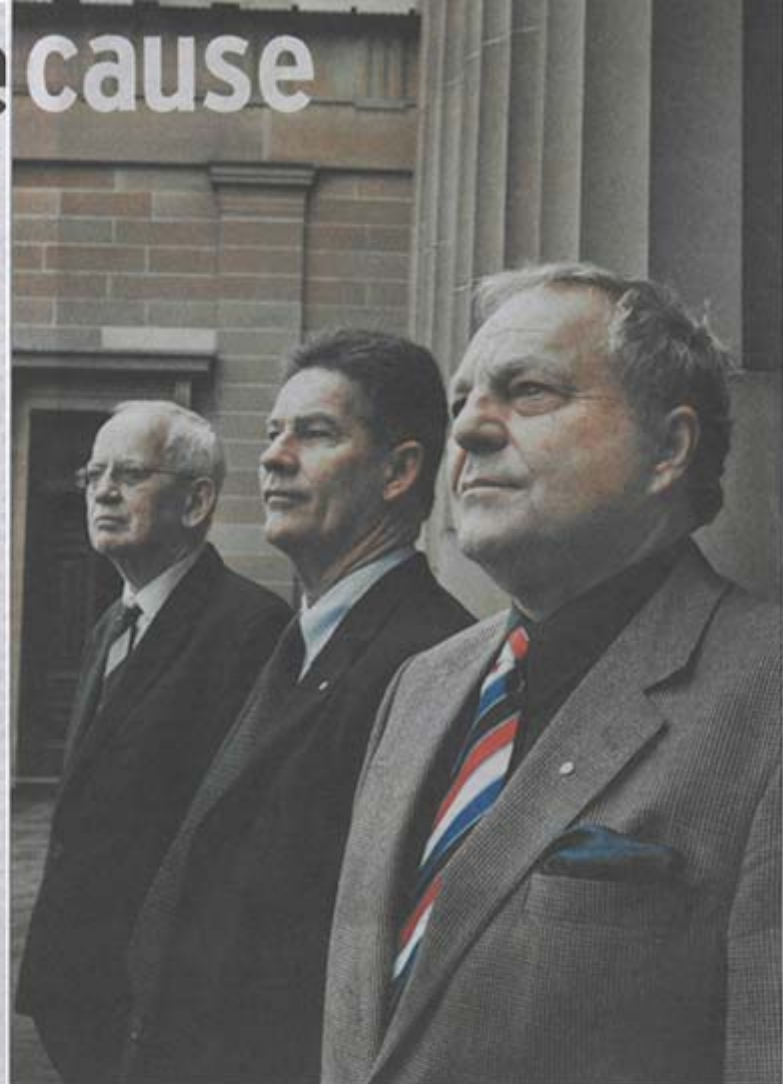
"But the first is to make sure he's still alive." Brown himself has spent the past 17 years helping drive VOCAL in Sydney and the Hunter Valley.

Colleagues say he probably knows more about every aspect of life and process as it affects victims of crime than any other person in NSW.

Yet he is also unpaid and unfunded. "Financially, my current situation is very dire," he concedes.

"It's one of those things where you never know where your next dollar's coming from and you've just got to learn to put up with it,

'Maybe we're silly old blokes fooling ourselves we've made an impact'



STANDING UP FOR VICTIMS: From left, Peter Rolfe, Howard Brown and Ken Marslew.

Picture: FIONA-LEE QUIMBY

I'm afraid. Fortunately, there's a limit to the number of times you can sell up or I'd be trying to run victim support meetings from a public phone box. If I keep going, though, it's probably where I'll end up."

To make a little extra if he can find the time, he serves subpoenas and repossesses cars. But being unable to feel anything down his left side at the moment makes physically chasing miscreants just that bit harder.

"It'll eventually fix itself up," Brown says of the debilitating condition. "I'm just glad I haven't got rabies, although it is true Pete and I are both that crazy kind of person that our organisations need, albeit in small numbers."

Marslew, who launched Enough is Enough

after the 1994 murder of his son, Michael, says he simply couldn't survive without having a black sense of humour.

"Here I am, four heart attacks down the track, but at least it proves I do have a heart," he laughs.

"I'm not saying they're all related to my work but there are weeks when you'll do seven days easy and then take phone calls late at night on top of the overwhelming administrative crap that you have to do beyond your core business."

"Maybe we're three silly old blokes fooling ourselves that we've made an impact," he says of himself, Rolfe and Brown.

"Or is it a case of actually helping? But how many people, we'll never know."