**Ralph**

**Port Hills red zone**

**Area 8: Port Hills**

**Zoned white, orange and then red in August 2012 due to rock roll risk**

**Section 124 notice**

**Ralph’s story**

My name is Ralph and we − me, my wife Brigid and my two boys − live in Avoca Valley, which is part of Heathcote Valley, almost the epicentre of the February 22nd earthquake. Brigid and I are 50 and 48 years old, Marek is 15 and Quin is just about to turn 14. They’re good boys. They moved from Heathcote Primary School to Shirley Boys’ High School over the last few years. Both of those schools were severely affected by the earthquake. Brigid works at Lyttelton Port Company as their environmental person, so she makes sure they stay on the straight and narrow when they’re doing their reclamation work. She was the environmental person at the airport when they were doing their carbon neutral stuff.

**Ralph’s business**

Our family business is Three Boys Brewery, which is in Woolston. Everything seems quick when you’re looking back, but we did open really quickly after the earthquake. Our site on Garlands Road was very badly affected. It’s just the worst combination, because you’ve got heavy liquids high up in tanks, and when the earth moves and they don’t want to it’s a bit of a disaster. So we were very lucky that nobody was killed by things falling in the brewery. Nobody got injured and we all got out.

The ground around the building was very badly damaged − a lot of liquefaction − and the floor was out of shape and things like that, not ideal things for a brewery where you’ve got to have good drainage and all those bits and pieces. But the landlord was very good to us, and the engineers and people fixed our stuff up so quickly. It was an amazing time in many respects. So we were brewing again within two-and-a-half weeks, and that’s considering burst tanks, broken tanks, crushed boilers and all of those things. We had people come in, like our engineers, and take away our boiler in the afternoon and work through the night and bring it back in the morning, fixed. Just incredible stuff, done so quickly! It may be because we make beer. That helps. That keeps people enthusiastic. It’s one of those staples of the world, I guess. It was incredible they did that. And likewise for the landlord. He came and did what he could and sent his men around to do what they could as quickly as possible. We had family arrive, cleaning up and doing their bit as well.

So it was good. An incredible social spirit comes through in that situation. I think that’s not unusual in this society, and it’s certainly not unusual in business because, as I say, you have to keep everybody working. And probably for me that’s the realisation of the difference between what a lot of people were capable of doing in private business and what happens if that control and urgency are taken away from the situation. And lack of urgency and lack of focus are what Government and bureaucracy are about. That’s what defines a bureaucracy.

We had all the difficulties to do with the earthquake, but in retrospect the earthquake itself was miniscule compared with the trauma that happened after that. Not that the earthquake wasn’t bad—it was horrendous, and there’s no doubt about that. But I think as humans we’re capable of coping with trauma or blanking out trauma events—that’s what we do—but there’s a difference between trauma and torture. It’s an interesting difference between immediately during and after the earthquake and what happened after that.

The business was fine because we had all these people whose role was to get us working again. And the insurance company was incredibly good. We had people come in and assess the damage. We said, there’s the damage, these are the things and this is the value of them, and we were paid out within a couple of months. So we could get things done, and that was the difference between being at home and being in business. With business we had a direct contact with our insurers, so that was very, very simple and very, very good. Whereas at home we had our insurance company separated from us by the Government and EQC [Earthquake Commission], and that was the worst thing that could have ever happened. Because the contract was broken.

**Ralph’s property**

Home is a totally different story because we had − not the worst of all, but a big combination of things that happened in the city happened to us. The fact that we were close to the earthquake centre, our house was damaged, we had the insurance company involved, EQC involved, we had arguments about whether it was overcap or undercap, and on top of that we also had the red stickering by the City Council, which was a section 124 for buildings deemed to be dangerous. And then we had the residential zoning from white, orange to red[[1]](#footnote-1), and all those things in between and back and forth. We had all the scenarios.

Where we are now is a good space. It’s a very good space because, unlike our neighbours, who all largely disappeared and their houses have been pulled down, we have had rock protection put in funded by the City Council. The Port Hills area is different from the flat zones. The City Council were up for 50 percent of the red zone buyout offer, whereas for the flat zone it was all Government. I think I’ve got that right. So after a long, long time we managed to get the City Council to agree to pay for the rock-roll protection if we could show that we could do it cheaper than their 50 percent of the buyout offer − which we could do easily. It was great that they had a reasonable organisation, one that you could reason with. They said, “If you can do it and it’s cheaper, then go ahead and do it.” And so we had this rock-roll bund put in at the back of our property. It’s on our land.

That in itself is a story. With our neighbours being the same as us − red zoned on either side − we as a community put a proposal that we took to CERA [Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority] and [later] the City Council saying, “Look, we can protect these houses at a tiny cost compared with the buyout offer of the Government. It will allow people to stay in their houses and could be done quickly and effectively.” In fact, out of anywhere in the Port Hills it was probably the easiest remediation site. I think that was because Avoca Valley was used as a case study for rock-roll remediation. All the engineers said yeah this is easily doable, this is the cost it would be, plus allowance for things going a bit haywire. The rock source was on City Council land, then there’s private non-residential land for quite a large area before it hits our houses down the bottom, so there’s heaps of space up the back to put in lots of remediation and rock-roll stuff.

We took that to CERA, and basically they said they weren’t interested in remediation because in their opinion − I don’t know where that opinion came from, but I think it was from pretty high up − it was just too complicated. And that’s exactly what happened with CERA. Everything became too complicated, so nobody could make a decision and get things rolling. Unlike the opposite example I gave of dealing individually in a business environment: how quickly you can achieve things and how effectively the system works because you can’t have inefficiency in any business for very long. Moving out of that into dealing with the Government was just unbelievable. Nobody could make a decision − nobody was willing to make a decision − and so no decision was made, except the simplest one of saying we’re not going to do anything to remediate your properties. The simplest solution for them was just to red zone it, pull the houses down and hope the problem disappeared − which it effectively has after five years. But it didn’t take into account the trauma and the fact that these were people’s homes and communities, and all of those things that go along with your house. It’s not just a building on a piece of land, which is what they were looking at.

On top of that − this is some of the most irritating bits for us − we did this financial analysis to show how cheap it was, and we’ve proved that because we’ve actually remediated our house for under half the value of what the buyout was of the property. And this was cheaper even though we did remediation on a small site, fitting in and doing all the engineering work, so it was more expensive than it would have been if we were remediating several properties in one go. Of the 20 to 30 houses on our side of the valley, everyone has moved out apart from one, potentially two others.

Of those people that were zoned there were some proactive ones, including us and some of our neighbours, that were really proactive in getting that proposal together and taking it to the City. That was at a time when the whole area was up in the air, so this was actually pre-complete red zoning. Some people in the valley were very, very supportive, but they had other things to deal with in their life at the time. There were probably three or four people who just got out of there and wanted to stay out because they were too freaked out by the earthquakes. And there were a few who were supportive but didn’t engage too much for whatever reason. They had other things.

**Reasons for staying**

It’s a beautiful community. It’s just a lot smaller than it was! It *was* a great place. We lived in Heathcote Valley prior to that, around Port Hills Road, and we love Heathcote. Heathcote and Lyttelton are two of those unique little communities you can get within a city sometimes. You see the same people all the time. It is a genuine little community. It has all those things that make a community, like a sports cricket club that we’re heavily involved in, and it has a school, and it had a swimming pool. And it had history, in that because of it being an old horticultural area some of the families had lived there for generations and grown up as kids there, and their kids had grown up there.

So unlike some of the newer suburbs in the city it had history and it had community. It had all of those things. And coming from a small-town background, both Brigid and I, it was perfect in a way because you had that whole small-town community feel but in the modern world. Life carries on in cities − you can’t all be working in small-town New Zealand − so it was perfect for us and perfect for our kids, again for the community feel and spirit.

We loved it there, and it’s beautiful as well, because you’re up against the Port Hills so you have access to the Port Hills, and five minutes down the track you’ve got access to the central city. It’s also relatively underdeveloped and cheap compared to some hill suburbs in Christchurch. It was a place where we could buy our first house, and with that came a nice community mix because it had that great mix of relatively cheap housing and more expensive housing rather than being more of a monoculture.

We had this little house, which was great, but it was just too tiny when we had two kids so we moved. Finally this place came up in Avoca Valley and we bought it the July before the September earthquake. You know how when you move into someone’s house, you move into someone else’s décor? So we were thinking about doing some redecoration and bits and pieces when the September earthquake happened. We’ve just started doing it now, five years later. Bit delayed!

Why bother battling to stay there? I think a lot of it is probably belligerence more than anything else. That’s the bottom line: being very, very stubborn, not wanting to be told what we have to do. It’s not your decision to make for us, it’s our decision to make. But underlying all of that, our house was relatively undamaged by the earthquake − apart from a bit of cracking and plaster and this and that − so we could live in it. So we were lucky in the sense that we continued to live in our house even if it was red stickered, even though that was illegal and we knew it was illegal, but again it was belligerence, saying, “Well you do something about it. If you think this is illegal then come and challenge us on it.”

We had the house checked structurally. We had EQC through prior to that, and they said, “Well you’ve got about $30,000 to $60,000 worth of damage,” I think the price was. And we thought that’s probably about right. So that shows, I guess, how little damage there was to the property. It’s a wooden, single-level dwelling. We weren’t frightened about the roof falling in on us. It wasn’t a structurally dangerous, two-storey building where we’re putting our lives at risk.

**EQC and insurance issues**

We’re undercap.[[2]](#footnote-2) The overall damage was $60,000: paint inside and out, fix that and pull the chimney down or whatever. After we got red zoned completely and our property valuation went from $640,000 to $50,000, and we were red stickered and red zoned, I went back to EQC and said, “We’re obviously not undercap anymore, because the insurance company are saying our house is written off because it’s in the red zone. We have to rebuild our house or protect our house in the current environment, which is going to cost us more than $60,000. Either way you look at it, it’s going to cost us a shitload of money.” And they said, “No you’re still undercap.” I went back and forth for months writing letters to these people, saying, “How can you say it’s undercap when our insurance company are paying us out as a *rebuild* because they realise they can’t fix it? If *they’re* agreeing to it, then surely you’re up for the $100,000?” And they said, “No, don’t think so.” So we went to the Insurance Ombudsman and went through the whole process. It takes months − it’s been over a good year-and-a-half by the time we went through all of this − and the Insurance Ombudsman said no you’re not allowed the money. Even though we had all this evidence. There’s no way we can fix our property.

I even tried to force EQC into a corner: “OK, I’m happy with the $60,000, we’re not taking the buyout anymore, come and fix it please.” And they go, “Oh well we can’t.” “Why can’t you?” “Because you’re red zoned.” And I say, “*That’s* my point: you can’t fix it, so it’s not $60,000 anymore, is it?” It’s this comedy stuff that goes on. The Insurance Ombudsman’s reasoning was that the zoning was not a direct result of the earthquakes. The zoning was a government-imposed decision which wasn’t related to the earthquake, and EQC only pay out for things as a result of direct earthquake damage.

Basically you get these bureaucracies against each other, and the only person who loses out is us. In the end it didn’t matter because we got insurance money, we got our rock-roll protection paid by the City Council, so now we can fix our house with our insurance money, which does cover it, so we can do it. But we’re lucky that we managed to battle through the insurance company as well to get that money. Now we’re managing our own repairs because that was the only way through − because of course we were red stickered and red zoned. This has only come off in the last two months. Nothing would have happened, so we had to take the cash buyout.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I was dealing with [my insurer] at one stage. The same thing, you know? Trying to get through these loop holes. And they just won’t let you. There’s no point being on the phone to these people because nothing is recorded. You can’t go back and say, “I talked to John on Friday”, because you’re relying on them writing down their side of the conversation. So you get nowhere. I learnt very quickly, as we all did: put things in an email, send it off and get a response, and then you can come back and say …

**Valuation**

It is going to be our home forever, so the monetary value is irrelevant. In that sense the $640,000 actually didn’t mean anything to us because we were effectively buying that house. So for us, the loss of value didn’t mean anything. But of course it does mean something for a lot of other people who are stepping through houses or whatever, when you go to sell your house. They couldn’t have done what we’ve done. As I say, now it’s worth $50,000.

We’ve managed to protect our house for half the buyout value of what was offered by the government, so half the RV [rateable value], which shows you how cheaply the rock-roll protection could have been done. It could have been done cheaper because engineering and structural stuff is very, very difficult on our property. The number of times we tried to approach CERA and said, “Can we please use this little bit of land behind our house, which is red zoned, which would make it so much easier for us to build some rock-roll protection?” And getting the answer, “No, we don’t know what we’re doing with that land yet and you can’t use it.”

One edge of our section is cut off on an angle, so it would have been nice if we could have squared that off. It would make the engineering easier, because the bund would have been just a straight line. We were talking through this with the reasonable people at the City Council, and they said, “Why don’t you just do a boundary adjustment? You simply resurvey it. It costs a few hundred dollars. It’s just a boundary adjustment. It’s a really simple thing that’s designed for squaring up sections and making things easy.” So we thought that’s great, and they said all you need to do is write to CERA and see if you can do a boundary adjustment and we’ll help you through the rest of it, quickly and for $300. Great! Wrote to CERA: “No, can’t do that.” And you just go, “Argh!” They didn’t have a plan for the Crown-owned red zone residential properties. But we’re only asking to take a small piece of land to square off the corner of our section.

We would have bought the land. We said we were happy to buy it at the valuation, because even at the 2007 valuation it was probably worth $1,000. And the current valuation is probably $50. Then if you take into account that you have to maintain it, to the City or CERA it’s probably worth a significant negative number. But the answer was no. And it was just the whole thing that they couldn’t make a decision, nobody could actually *do* anything. So we’ve built the bund around the dogleg, and it comes very close to our house when it could have been much further away. It could have been right at the back of the valley, to be honest, and we wouldn’t have known it was there, and it would have protected six houses in a row.

We are still red zoned and we were affected by the revaluation. That’s again where we were incredibly lucky, because we didn’t have a substantial mortgage on our house. People not only had CERA telling them they couldn’t be there, EQC telling them that they weren’t going to fix their house, and insurance companies saying they weren’t going to pay for it, they also had the banks going, “Your house is worth nothing and you owe us $400,000. Please can we have it today.” We did have a mortgage, but we paid it off very quickly before we dealt with the insurance company because we could see that was going to be a thing.

**Trying to get the red sticker removed**

We tried to get the sticker removed. We did a heap of work on that because you could do a determination. We never got to the stage of doing a determination because originally the red stickers were applied by the City Council, and it took some time before that was taken over by the Department of Building and Housing, or whatever they’re called now, so there was a gap where nobody had real ownership of the red stickers. Again that was a bureaucratic thing: the City Council slapped them on and we asked them, “How do we remove this?” and they said, “Actually we don’t know, we haven’t thought that far through.” They said, “We’ve got to get processes in to get it removed,” and the process was pushing that red sticker onto MBIE [Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment], and it took them a long time, of course, because this is a new process for them.

And so you just never got anywhere. We put appeals in to the City Council. We said, “Look, this is our situation, this is what we have behind us, these are the rocks that came down, this is where they landed in the valley, this is how low risk our house was, this is the state of the damage of our house …” We can’t say we didn’t get a *no* decision because we didn’t get *any* decision, which is typical of dealing with those bureaucratic things. People just say, “Well we haven’t a process in place to deal with this.” Funnily enough the process was quick enough to slap the sticker on, but nobody thought too far through the implications of that.

So we lived there illegally, and it was a bizarre situation. You just wonder in retrospect what it was about. At one stage they had private investigators parking in the valley, seeing who was staying in their red-stickered houses. It’s a little valley, so you’d come home and there’d be this car parked there. One of them was hilarious, because it was a relatively old car, but its personalised number plate was “IWATCH”, or something ridiculous like that. Somebody phoned me up and said, “Have you seen that car parked in the valley? I think there’s somebody seeing who is coming home!” By this stage many people had moved out to temporary accommodation and there were only a few of us breaking the law. So he just went out and knocked on the window and said, “What are you doing here?” and they pretty much said, “Oh, it’s our job to see who is breaking the law.”

So that feeling of belligerence kicked in again: what are you going to do about it? Are you going to bring the police around to evict us, because that’ll be quite nice if we get the paper involved. You’re evicting us from our house. Do what you want to do! And of course nothing happened, because who was going to send the police around to evict a family from their relatively undamaged home at that time when the reality would have been how low risk we were? I don’t know who was paying for these people to note down who was staying and who wasn’t. But we were just going to say, “Well, do your worst because you can’t do any worse than you’re doing now!” And we had faith that nothing would happen, because we knew every time we tried to get something to happen nothing would happen and nobody could make a decision.

The red sticker was removed about three months ago after we finished our rock-roll protection, and then we could go for a determination. The process occurred once we’d shown the engineering reports. But that’s also a very funny thing: when we asked for our red sticker to be removed, after several emails and nobody doing anything they sent these two guys up from MBIE or City Council who looked at the rock-roll protection, went, “Oh yeah OK,” and removed the red sticker. There was no checking of the engineering or building consents or resource consents and all of those things that we had piled up which we had to get done to get funding through the City Council. They asked for the sticker to be returned but we didn’t have it. Some of our neighbours did, and they still have them framed!

**Avoca Valley red sticker campaign and media**

We did a campaign about the red stickering. We made our red stickers as flags. It was a great campaign − we got on the news, which was our intention at the time to get things moving. We had a sign outside the front counting the days off, like “386 days since we’ve been out of our house.” In our naivety we only put three figures on the board, so once we got to 999 we realised it was time for the board to come down. We weren’t going to put up another digit.

You know what people are like. Some people are very conservative and like to keep their heads down. Some people said, “If you highlight us, we’ll be in trouble.” So to keep everybody in the valley happy we said we won’t say we want to be green zoned − there’s some people already not wanting to live in their houses anymore because they were so damaged − we’ll say we just want a *decision*, how’s that? People were in agreement with that. So all the protest was about was saying give the people in this valley some kind of certainty, some kind of decision about where they are heading. A lot of the heartache and torture were due to not knowing what was happening for so long.

We did that [had the sign counting days] to deliberately engage with the media, just to try and get things moving, to see if that would help in any way. If we could get some kind of focus on the plight of people in these houses here, highlighting how long nothing had happened, it might prompt something. In our naivety we thought it might prompt action. The media loved it because we set it up for them to love it. The fact that we had a sign, we had a little protest, we had all those people honking horns and so on − it was ideal for them. It’s easy to get the media to buy into things if you’re clever enough about it. I don’t think it had a great influence − or any influence, for that matter − except it kept us entertained and kept the neighbourhood entertained.

The media − unless it’s *Campbell Live* − don’t have the stickability, and they don’t have the people, and resources to actually do investigative stuff. What would be really good is for somebody to do some genuine investigative journalism, to say let’s take one case, and the case might be the actual cost of the demolition and red zoning of an individual house in Avoca Valley, and go through and get all of that stuff from CERA, and say, “Actually, when we’ve tallied up all of these things, all these contracts you’ve signed and done all these things it’s actually a million dollars for this one house when you refused to help these people out.”

But it’s so complicated, and you need someone who is entrenched in it to be able to do that, and the people that are entrenched in it − the likes of us − usually want to move on, or have businesses and other things that take up their lives. But it’s something that’s always been in the back of my mind, that I would like to one day take a case and prepare it as a little story. But would the media be interested in it in five years’ time? Probably not. That’s the other problem: everything is done in retrospect. If you wrote that little story and it says, “Actually you wasted a shitload of money,” the ultimate answer is, too late, it’s gone, what are we going to do about it now? So what’s the point in reading and worrying about this now?

Certainly we’ve got a greater understanding of how the City Council works and that’s how we managed to get this funding [for rock fall protection] approved and that was an amazing feat for a little community. And it was largely driven by Avoca Valley; we had people that went to the City Council and they said, “We’re going to do this presentation to you and we want a decision out of you” - so being able to force processes like that by ticking their boxes and not just ours was a great set of… Not a learning thing but a great process to be able to go through.

Anyway that’s our thumbs up to the City Council, the fact that they did have a process we could reason with. That’s one of the positives of a bureaucracy - if you know how it works, you can achieve something. The unfortunate thing was CERA, being this young virgin bureaucracy, is the processes weren’t in place. It had all the bad aspects of a bureaucracy and none of the good aspects where if you knew what you were doing, you could negotiate the hallways and corridors and get things done

**Other challenges**

And there are other challenges. Just last week or two weeks ago we had CERA come up to say they’re going to fence off our boundary because they’re going to finally graze the area in the valley. So these guys they turn up − and as soon as I see somebody in a high-viz vest with ‘CERA’ on, the hackles on my neck just go up something terrible − and so they said, “Oh we’ve come to fence off the property because we’re going to graze it.” Finally! We’ve had two years of our neighbours, who have some stock, writing to CERA saying can we graze this stuff before it gets out of control and becomes a fire hazard? And of course CERA, being CERA, nobody can make a decision. They write back saying, “No we don’t know what we’re doing with that land yet, you can’t graze it.” So now, five years later, they decided they need to graze it now that it’s all overgrown and weedy.

Anyway, our house is a little anomaly in amongst all the red-zoned properties, so that creates a little problem because they have to fence around it. And so they came up to talk about this fencing, and they say we’re going to fence up here and we’re going to do this and this, and I say, “Well, actually no, this is the boundary of our property according to the 1972 or 1973 Fencing Act. You don’t do anything on this boundary unless we agree to it, and you’re not just going to bang up one of these shit-arse fences that you’ve banged up down the road here that are not going to keep stock out of our property.” I showed them examples of some of the fencing that had already been done, where there’s just three wires or four wires, and where there’s a big mound there’s a big gap between the ground and the wires. You’re not going to bang one of those up and expect to keep stock out. Plus, you’re not putting that fence on our boundary anyway because this is a residential property, and that’s a stock fence and we might want something a bit more attractive. Anyway, I had a huge barney with them for about an hour and then showed them other stuff in the valley they could focus on.

Another thing that really got me: I had these two guys saying there’s something on *our* land, and I said, “It’s not *your* land, I want you to stop saying *our* land. That’s not your land. That is owned by CERA, and so please refer to it as being owned by CERA or owned by the Government,” because they were getting to, “This is personal”. It’s those tiny things where it just sets you off, which wouldn’t have happened pre-earthquake but now I’ve just got no tolerance.

What really annoys me about CERA and the Government is the fact that we’re really lucky in the sense that we’re white, we’re middle class, we’re well educated, relatively articulate, a business owner who can just stop and say, “No”. But if you’re poor, uneducated, only by your chance of birth, then you have absolutely zero chance. That sort of goes against what New Zealand culture and society are supposed to be about. I think that’s forced most people into that belligerence in dealing with government, because it’s almost compensation for those who can’t say what they need to say or do what they need to have done. Oh God, you just feel for them so much because of how lucky we are.

**The effects of uncertainty**

The uncertainty was unbelievable. You can deal with things: once you have a target then you’re fine, you can make a decision, you can make your list and say this is good, this is bad, how are we going to move forward? But without that, it’s just absolute torture.

It was the worst combination of things, because this incredibly large bureaucracy was created. Bureaucracies are bad enough when they’re established, but at least you can get things done, they’ll have processes and there will at least be some kind of bureaucratic links between them. Like when you get a building consent − it’s a nightmare, and you have to fill in a million forms, but at least the process is there to get all those done. The bureaucracy of the City Council, the bureaucracy of the Government. But to generate a new bureaucracy is just incredibly bad. The bureaucracy couldn’t get its *own* processes in order, let alone other people’s! That’s pretty obvious from the way CERA has gone over the years. They don’t even have their own house in order, let alone our houses. It’s just this terrible, terrible thing.

The experiences have affected my sense of civic engagement in two ways. They have polarised it: it’s hardened my resolve for good things in the city and supporting people who are doing things outside of the government, and it’s incredibly hardened my distrust and dislike of government. In terms of civic duty, I have really become incredibly anti anything to do with government and government interference, which is, I know, not unusual for a business person, but I’ve not always been a business person and I never used to be anti-government intervention and anti-government. And I’m still not in many ways. But it’s also helped us to be much more focused on what we do in terms of our business. Like supporting community things. We do things with the Art Gallery − I know that’s tied up with the City, but it’s the Art Gallery, and it’s for everybody, and they have their own management and they’re not a bureaucracy. We do things with the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra, school projects around the place, school fairs and donations to cricket clubs, all sorts of other little projects.

So you’ve got this incredible length of time where people are just going, “What is happening?” And what was worse was the Government stepping in there. Everybody is banging on about how bad the insurance companies are − and they are horrendous − but they’re only horrendous when they’ve got an excuse to be horrendous. This was the perfect excuse, because they couldn’t make a decision. They’re saying, “What are we supposed to do? Are you red zoned? Are you white zoned? Are you rebuilding a house? Are you repairing a house?” They just stepped back, because they had no option. And for these people, absolutely nothing happened in their lives. As I said, we were lucky, we could live in our house. Some people weren’t that lucky and they couldn’t live in their house.

A good example of the negative effects of stress was a big increase in graffiti. There was a period where you couldn’t have anything anywhere without somebody destroying it or scrawling shit on it, and I think a lot of that was driven by people’s frustration about where they lived and what was going on, and they lacked civic duty and love of the place, and that’s what I think is disappearing.

I wrote a letter to *The Press* about the destruction of social spirit that went on. The crux of the letter was saying we lived in Sheffield in the north of England for about five years, and it’s a typical northern England town. It’s really grimy and dirty, and if people walk down the street and are having an ice-cream or drink out of a cup, they just throw their shit on the ground so there’s litter everywhere. I asked one of my friends one day, “Why do you think people do that, up here in the north in particular?” And their explanation was, basically, that for a town like Sheffield, a run-down city where the mines have been closed during Thatcher and things, they’ve been shat on by government and shat on by organisations and shat on by the city council, and so they think, fuck it, if someone wants to take over our lives and tell us what to do then fucking clean that up at the same time.

In much more polite and articulate language the story was about that. I changed it around to say how when I’m driving around Christchurch now I have this real urge to throw my shit out the window, because if you want to get involved in my life and want to tell me what to do and want to get all of these things in place on my behalf, which you’re not any good at, then clean this shit up as well while you’re at it.

**Effects on Ralph and his family**

There was not so much suffering for me, I don’t think, but Brigid … I just think in the nature of being a mother and being a female, you tend to be more sensitive to what’s going on around your home. So in terms of suffering, I think it depends who you are. I wouldn’t say mine was suffering. I would say mine was anger more than anything else, but certainly, yes, you saw a lot of suffering, whether it’s in our neighbours or Brigid, who is now so much happier because we’re settled and we’re back in our house and everything is sorted out.

But to have those five years of not having that, that moderate level of constant not knowing what’s going on and not having that settledness in your life does become suffering, and it takes a toll at any stage in your life. For us, we can say it was a bad stage in our life because we were establishing a business and we had two boys. It’s the freedom of your life that you don’t get back if you’re not at your happiest. It should be the sweet spot of your life. You have young growing kids, they’re not babies anymore, they’re old enough not to drown in the fish pond and not old enough to be out drinking and driving, so it’s a perfect stage in life. And yet that’s destroyed by this overhanging thing that goes on in everybody’s life. So although time means nothing to a giant bureaucracy or to government, it means a whole lot on a personal scale, when you take out five years of someone’s life and say this bit of your life is going to be shit. That’s terrible.

The stress is 95 percent avoidable. It comes back to we are constantly told that the reason our society is better than everybody else’s is we are a democratic society, and we have a structure and an organisation. Their role is to deal with these things. That is the role of government and the role of society. We have a health system for a reason, because it’s too big a problem for individuals to deal with. We have a government because they deal with the big-picture things. We have a city council to deal with big picture-things. And to see that fail so dramatically is … you just lose faith in it. You say, “Actually, why do we have …?

When we needed you to do something you weren’t capable of doing it. You’re only capable of collecting tax and making roads. If that’s the case, then let’s get a business in, because they’ll do it a lot more efficiently than you will. The reason we put up with all this shit from government − the taxing and the wasting of money and bureaucracies and all of that − is the hope, in the back of our minds, that when something happens, then something will happen for you in return. You’ll get your benefit then. And to see that not happen, and the reverse of that happen, not even ineffectualness but actually physically obstructive rather than even neutral … Neutral would have been fine! If nothing had happened and we’d gone up there and nobody had bothered zoning us, and nobody had bothered telling us, nobody had put a red sticker on our house, we would have fixed everything else up and it would have been done quicker and faster than what happened. So to actually have government that turns into an obstruction to moving on − it just does your head in. And it does make you question what they’re there for.

The kids weren’t too affected by everything, which was really cool. I mean, you never know, but I think we were lucky in that sense. They were in the worst of it at Heathcote School the day of the February 22nd earthquake. It was no doubt horrendous for them because … It’s something that’s burned in my mind. Brigid worked at the airport at that stage, so she couldn’t get home. Luckily we just had enough time to talk on the phone so I knew she was OK, and I was OK, and the boys were OK, which would have been great for her as she didn’t get home until 11 pm or 12 am that night. So anyway, I left a bit of a drama at the brewery but I said, “I’ve actually got to go and get the kids from school and you just stay out here and don’t go in the building. Whatever happens, happens. Don’t worry about all that broken shit in there.”

And driving up those roads and in those aftershocks through the liquefaction and all of those things was just … It’s amazing how your body can deal with those things. But getting to the school, all the kids were out on the grounds. I certainly wasn’t the first parent there, but a long way from the last one. It was amazing what the teachers did, because they were no doubt in the same situation as everybody else − had kids in other schools for example.

We were lucky that we had power and water relatively quickly, but the kids didn’t stress about it one bit. I think a large part of that was we weren’t stressed at that stage. It was just the earthquakes. I can say that now. We’re not panickers, Brigid or I. We weren’t looking panicked and I think our boys didn’t panic either. So they coped incredibly well. And the funny thing is how kids cope incredibly. At the leavers do, all the seniors get together and write a wee thing about their time in Heathcote school − what they loved, what they hated, what they were going to do – for the end-of-year book. Only one of them mentioned the earthquake. The other ones were like, “My worst day was when I dropped my lunch and the seagulls ate it.”

I think the kids have not been too affected partly because we’ve had faith in our ability to win back our property and stay in it. It was such a part of all of our communication, and all our conversations were full of that for four years. So they had a fair idea that things were happening and that we were fighting it. So I don’t think they ever felt like they were going to move. In many ways it was such a slow process. What was worse − probably personally, not for them − was to see the degradation of those properties before they got demolished. They got to a point where you say, pull these things down if you’re going to do it, just get rid of them, because it’s worse now with trees and grass and weeds and birds flying in and out of them, and just sitting there for four years of not doing anything. It didn’t worry the boys, but I don’t think that was the case for all kids. We had a wee girl next door who was a bit younger than our boys and she actually loved moving away when her parents went and worked overseas. I would suspect part of it would be that it was just too difficult.

It might have been just that they were boys, so they weren’t aware − as boys often aren’t at that age − of anything other than food and sport. Also their friends were good. Some were in the same situation and certainly understood about damaged houses and probably had no idea what a house with a red sticker meant. I don’t think their parents would have said, “You can’t go down there because it’s red stickered.” Everybody knew our situation was ridiculous. They knew there was no danger to your life.

That was the stupidest part of the whole red stickering and the whole zoning − I often bring this stat up. I asked those CERA fencing guys the other day, “How many people died in rock-roll incidents in their homes in the February 22ndearthquake?” And they go, “Oh two or three,” and I go, “No. It was zero. One person died in a cliff collapse and one when they were walking in the Port Hills. Nobody died in rock roll in houses.” Houses might have got hit by rocks − and actually, if you list those, there’s not that many of them either. More people have died and more marriages have broken up in the last five years because of what these people have been through, and you’re worried about potentially somebody might die?

**Life risk**

What’s cemented in me is the fact that in Western society we value life too much. We’ve forgotten that people do die, and so this whole risk thing is just out of control. They were talking about a risk of 1 in 10,000. I would debate all of that anyway, based on their model, because they had a point there where nobody died in rock-roll incidents, and they extrapolate that to deaths in rock roll, chances of rocks coming down and being hit. I’d debate the stats on that forever.

I think we just take life too seriously. We’re at a stage in life now with elderly parents and saying, “Why is our hospital doing everything they can to keep these people alive when their quality of life is so poor? Why bother?” They’re going to die without a doubt. We’re all going to die. As a man in his late 40s I’ve got about one chance in 30 to 50 of dying this year, and it gets worse from now on, and then it ends up at one chance in one before I get to about 80. So you’re just thinking, why take five years out of someone’s life, make that miserable, for the sake of one miniscule chance that you might get killed? What would have been better is if they had got our house fixed in the first 18 months or one year, we got back and lived in there with our community, and everybody back happily going on with new houses. You’re worried that somebody might die − *might* die. What is that about?

Tramping, swimming − we have 400-and-something deaths a year swimming. We don’t fence off the sea. It does my head in! No matter how you look at those stats, it shows you that it’s gone askew. Driving! There’s a benefit to driving, of course, that’s why we’re allowed to drive when we have a chance of dying. But there’s a benefit to living in a house in a community in a stable environment. CERA and their models on paper − when they looked at numbers, they never took into account anything social. Everything was simply a dollar value.

Take our place. We live in this place and last summer there’s this high grass right up to the edge of our property. And that risk is seemingly unimportant, because it’s too much of a difficult problem to deal with for CERA, despite the fact that if there was a fire on a norwesterly day, people would not get out of the way of that fire. There’s probably more chance of dying in that fire than being hit by a rock. So getting tied up in the risk of one thing and not seeing the bigger picture of risk in life … Not that I’m expecting them to come and mow that lawn. Because that’s the nature of life − there is a risk that you’ll get killed if there’s a wildfire in the Port Hills. But when you challenge them on it − the grass is not our problem. But 10 minutes ago it was your problem that we were going to get hit by a rolling rock and die, and now you’re not worried about our life risk. So which one is it? You’re either worried or not worried.

**Skills**

We know a lot about a lot of things since we started, right from technical stuff to actually understanding engineering processes, building consents, resource consents … We’ve had to do all of that, and luckily we’re not unfamiliar with it, but you can understand how people just could not do it − all of those things. You need to have a set of skills to get through all of that, and we are lucky that between us we have.

**Individual people within CERA and the City Council**

It is because of the bureaucracy rather than the individuals involved − except, I think, when it comes to Gerry Brownlee. I think he’s the worst thing that ever happened after the earthquake. We had someone who had a lot of power and basically he yayed or nayed many things with a big stamp, and he just made wrong decisions. There might have been some good people in CERA, including Roger Sutton, but none of them had the balls − excuse my language − to actually stand up to the government and say, “Actually, you’re wrong, Gerry,” and to come out publically and say it.

I have no admiration for Roger Sutton for the fact that he rolled over when he was in a position, as head of CERA, to stand up and say, “You’re wrong, I’m the head of CERA and I’m here for a reason and you are wrong, we need to do this.” He didn’t. He rolled over on so many occasions because of Gerry Brownlee and his advisors saying they weren’t going to do things. That just ruined the whole process, because even if you managed to negotiate your way through CERA and had a reasonable decision, it got rolled over at the top. I think it destroyed him [Roger Sutton], because it wasn’t the job he signed up for. He came in as the great white hope on a shining white horse and he left on a donkey. Not saying it wasn’t any of his own fault, but he did get mauled and spat out by the system.

City Council has been good. There have been particular people who have been extraordinarily good on our behalf, including their engineers and financial people. To build the bund we had to organise, be in control of and liable for everything. The City Council weren’t willing to take on any risk. Luckily we found engineers who were willing to take on that insurance risk. It was kind of weird, because the Council couldn’t pay the contractors directly, so we had these massive amounts of money, up to $300,000, coming through our account to go to contractors. That’s the only way they could do it, because they couldn’t enter into contracts with people in the red zoned area, and all danger, danger, someone might get papercuts. But at least they were willing to do it. They didn’t say, “No we can’t do that,” which was CERA’s response to everything.

In many respects I understand the zoning. It was a good idea. And now it’s gone through into people’s LIMs [Land Information Memoranda] and things, like, you live on a flood plain, you live in a rock-roll area, you live in a swamp. Those things should be on your LIM so that people know what they’re buying. That’s all fine. I understand that. It’s the fact that we didn’t need to have those five years where people’s lives were destroyed. Why didn’t they just come up with that? Why didn’t they just come up with a system saying, “Right, you’re in a really high-risk area so you’ve got to build some protection. We can help you do it because we know it’s going to cost us a shitload if we have to pay for you all to leave. So let’s do it on your behalf, let’s get it sorted, and it’ll go on your LIM. If you want to leave, then leave and we’ll pay you out the red zone offer and we’ll build the protection, and then we’ll resell the section for more than what it was worth anyway, current environment.” If it was a business model, realistically CERA could have made money. They would have zoned all these people, some would have wanted to bugger off, they would have paid them out for RV, fixed their house, and now they’d be selling it for twice the value.

**Media and CERA communications**

Overall the media have been hopeless. Largely I think that’s just simply because of the nature of news these days. Excluding John Campbell. *Campbell Live* did an amazingly phenomenal job for Christchurch, not much about the rock-roll stuff, but he did an amazing job for individuals or flat zone things. Everybody else has been just hopeless. You can understand it. The issues were just too complex for them to understand as media reporters. They haven’t got time to sit around to talk through the issues and get them straight. Media is a double-edged sword: you take the good with the bad. We got good coverage in the valley, and we certainly got good coverage having a brewery, because people like to talk about beer, and beer plus earthquakes was a good combination.

But we had people come up and look at our property and house, talk about the zoning issues, and then when it came to reporting time the first shot would be rocks rolling down the hill. And the story is downhill from then on, because you’re getting people in the comments saying, “Why are all those mad people staying in their houses?” And that’s all sensationalism on the media’s part − the fact that they had to show some rocks rolling down the hill. Those rocks they filmed were the ones rolled down the hill by the remediation people, who did most of the damage in Avoca Valley post-earthquake. I don’t know what they were thinking. It was just crazy stuff: engineering students rolled rocks down with crowbars. Nobody was filming up our valley on 22 February.

John Campbell’s tenacity was amazing. His tenacity was probably not to his ultimate benefit. I mean, we were getting bored with reports about earthquakes in Christchurch, so imagine what that was like if you lived in Auckland or Wellington! You know what it’s like: you have an international disaster and it’s interesting for two days, and then you think it’s all over. His ability to do that, knowing that it wasn’t a ratings grabber, was just unbelievable. I got a real feel for that, maybe a year after the earthquakes, and I was in Wellington, staying in a hotel overnight, and I bought a newspaper, *The Dominion*? Flicking through I got to the end of it and I went, “Oh my God, there wasn’t one mention of earthquake!” Just the realisation that actually nobody in Wellington − and therefore nobody in government − gave a fuck! It’s past now, it’s boring, we just want this problem out of our hair, done and dusted. Understandably! Because you couldn’t have it like *The Press*, full every day.

When I get the glossy CERA paper in the letterbox telling us how well we’re doing I just laugh, because there’s always these people smiling up from the pages. It reminds me of Inland Revenue’s website, because they’re always showing people smiling. The propaganda has been an interesting part of the whole process. CERA became an amazing propaganda machine to protect itself and the individuals within it. The information to residents was always listing all the positive things that CERA were going to do for you. Communications and public relations is no doubt their largest department. You’re just going, “If you were doing your job properly you could have a tiny PR department. You wouldn’t need to be covering up the bullshit with smiling faces and press releases that are not really reflective of what’s going on.” I’m not sure who they were aimed at … well that’s not true. I do know who they were aimed at. They were aimed at their funding and job security and all of those things. In a job, when you’re writing a report, you don’t write all the shit things that happened and what went wrong and how it was your fault. You write the good stuff if you want a promotion and you want more money and you want more people employed and you want to be higher up in the organisation.

**What to do differently**

In many ways the only thing that could be done better is for government to stay out of it more. Actually go through the processes that were already in place with insurance and with people. If it’s high risk, then just acknowledge that and go straight into the process of fixing it. That would have been the ideal situation. It was too big a job for a bureaucracy to deal with. A business would have dealt with it a lot more efficiently and better. Individuals would have dealt with it a lot better, knowing their own risk and things.

For the government to put in place a buyout offer was ideal, because it gave people that option: if you’re really uncomfortable about living here, we don’t want the value of your house to destroy your lives, we can give you this money and you can leave. But they didn’t just do that. They put all the other layers on top of it, which ended up doing exactly what they were trying to avoid, which was to destroy your life. They actually put in processes that destroyed people’s lives. They lost their way, I guess. The initial idea was a good one, and then they just couldn’t see the end of it. And again, that is the nature of a young bureaucracy: they didn’t have a process in place to fix the problem.

Thinking back to the remediation model we proposed for fixing up the valley − the number of people who have visited each of those sites at various times to do whatever they *don’t* do! And the cost of demolishing those sites has been astronomical, plus the disposal of demolished materials, which wasn’t taken into account in the buyout offer. This is all on top of the buyout offer that CERA or the City Council is still paying for.

Getting someone to demolish a house − the loss of all that material, like kitchen stuff, just smashed up and on the back of the truck. People have gone to CERA and said, “Look, the current owners of the house have got this kind of kitchen, can we take it out and we’ll pay for it because it would be really good,” and the answer is, “No, you can’t take stuff out of red zoned houses because it’s too dangerous.” Then the demolition crew comes and gets rid of it, and they bring another crew in who flattens it all out, bring in soil and put it on top of where the foundation was, and then they put the erosion protection stuff on there, and then somebody comes along a few days later and sprays the green grassy stuff on. And you’re just going, “Who is paying for all of this? Was this in your budget when you thought about that?” I would, say as a guess, based on the cost of how to get things done in the city these days − it would have cost three times the amount of buyout offer for those properties in the valley by the time they’ve demolished these sites, remediated them, fenced them, mowed them and the ongoing cost from now on. And you’re thinking, “Oh my God, did you not see that coming?” Because we saw it coming.

Our neighbours had copper spouting all around the place. It was worth a mint. To just take that off, chuck it on the back of a truck and put it in the landfill … I can understand the reasoning, because these people were getting paid so much to demolish houses, the more they got demolished the more they got paid. That was the bottom line. There’s no point shagging around taking out a dishwasher worth $200 when that was going to take you an hour, and you’re getting paid $400 an hour to demo the place. The quicker they got to demo it, on the truck and out of there, the quicker they could move onto the next one. It wasn’t their fault, they were just working to a dumb-arse business model where you can make more money the more houses you demolish and the quicker you do it.

The fact that the $200 dishwasher and $1,000 kitchen cabinetry and carpets and drapes and all those things were actually of insignificant value compared with what they were going to make by putting it all on the truck should have been an indication they were being paid too much. That model was run through CERA as well. Considering how long it took them to demo the houses it wasn’t like there was a great rush. They’re still doing it.

**Unanswered questions**

I can’t think of any. I think probably part of that is we were very, very entrenched in what was going on. Also, between Brigid and me, both being scientists, we had a really good technical understanding of what was going on with the engineering and the modelling and all of that stuff. Whether we bought into it or not was a different story.

1. ‘Orange’ zoning indicated the need for further assessment, as did ‘white’ zoning in the Port Hills, which required further assessment in terms of rock fall and land slip risk. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. When damage occurs during a natural disaster event, EQC is liable for insurance claims below $100,000. When damage is within this $100,000 limit, it is ‘under cap.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. People were offered the option of having their repairs managed or managing their repairs themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)