



## 2006 GOLD RHINO WINNER Western Plains Automotive



**One of the most successful businessmen of his time, Howard Laughton describes his 30-year 'stay' in Dubbo as 'clearly the best years of my life.' The retired businessman who left school at 15, fondly recalls his arrival in Dubbo in April 1982 through the eyes of a then 35-year-old from Sydney.**

"I saw great opportunity in buying a car dealership from Frank Usback, but it wasn't long before I realised there would be a lifetime of work in Dubbo," he said. "My initial intention was to stay for five years but I ended up staying for 30!"

Mr Laughton's time in Dubbo commenced during one of Australia's worst droughts. "I left Sydney with some trepidation. I had borrowed a lot of money and my family was very sceptical but I really wanted to make it work," he said.

"The region was in severe drought, the worst I've ever seen it. I remember wide cracks in the roads and signs giving away free sheep," he recalls.

"I hadn't been in Dubbo long, and a huge dust storm hit. Then there was the mouse plague. I remember wondering 'what have I let myself in for?'"

To top it all off, Mr Laughton's first day in business was 1 April 1982 – April Fool's Day.

**"Despite the challenges, it was my employees, my customers and the country spirit that led to my longer than planned stay in Dubbo," he said. "I learnt very quickly that a handshake is a handshake. Country people are just so wonderful to deal with."**

Mr Laughton's Dubbo business venture began as a small Nissan franchise located on rented premises in West Dubbo, employing just eight staff.

He then bought and developed a block of land at 59-71 Victoria St which eventually became Western Plains Automotive. By 1991 the business included Mazda and Mercedes Benz and the premises continued to expand and grow. By the time Mr Laughton sold Western Plains Automotive five years ago, it employed 54 staff and was turning over a significantly large volume of cars.

Among his many achievements, the 2006 Gold Rhino winner also joins a long list of prominent business people on the City's Emile Serisier Roll of Honour.



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During his reign, Western Plains also won several prestigious industry awards including Mercedes Benz Dealer of the Year twice, Nissan Dealer of the Year three times and Time Magazine Dealer of the Year for NSW.

Mr Laughton firmly believes business is a team effort.

"Everyone strives together," he said. "I'd like to recognise my former employees and customers that stayed with us over the years. You're only one person, but it takes a team," Mr Laughton said.

"It was a real family business and I made sure my staff felt part of the business. Without their commitment and doing their job diligently – from the cleaners to the mechanics and the sales people – the business would not have been as successful as it was."

**Mr Laughton said his philosophy had always been about doing business with honesty and integrity. "It's about doing the right thing by people; being able to look back proudly so there are no skeletons in the cupboard," he said. "Even if it costs you money."**

Mr Laughton said one of the keys to his success was having a great rapport and understanding with his staff. "Know what they're doing, where they are going...the new babies. You've got to be connected and understand their issues; sometimes they need a helping hand – someone to talk to," he said. "Having an open mind and being an understanding boss will repay itself through staff loyalty and support."

Mr Laughton said Dubbo was a 'fantastic' place to do business and a City that had everything you needed. "From the day I arrived in Dubbo it was fantastic. People take you for who you are, it's not a clique City," he said. "I loved my time doing business in Dubbo." He said he particularly loved the attitude of the people who live and work in the City. "It's a 'can do' attitude...even in tough times like drought," he said.

"And the people of Dubbo seem to have an open mind about other people coming to town...it's always been a good mix of people, with a transient population. "There are so many stories like mine; people coming to Dubbo for a short time who end up staying so much longer."