A 70s WILD CHILD TURNED OUTBACK COSMETICS ENTREPRENEUR, STEPHEN BIRKBECK HAS FOUND COMMERCIAL INSPIRATION IN THE UNLIKELIEST IDEAS, FROM EMU FAT TO PEARL PERFUME.

DESERT GEM

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alive. He was arrested and spent the night in jail. "That night I decided I was leaving university, I needed to get away, it was the first long journey I had ever taken. I was really keen to look at some much higher level [trade] issues that will help my company and Australia." E3

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He was fascinated by this unique Australian art form and he asked Birkbeck to show him how to do it. They then decided to go into business together. "In those days an emu egg shell basically sold for $500 ... at five-star hotels," he says. "I found a dentist drill and thought we could commercialise this and make a fortune. We scaled our small business up and I bought my first house with that." Birkbeck had nervous breakdown at 27 (he describes this as "hard work because it "striped back" his ego) and he retreated from the world, buying a cattle farm in Albany. But he did not truly hit rock bottom until his wife suffered the humiliation of a cheque bounces during the weekly grocery shop. The local branch manager berated an embarrassed and angry Birkbeck: "Steve, you have to get a life, you have to realise you are going backwards". So he went back to what he knew best: emus. He and Karen started experimenting with emu oil (after seeing indigenous friends use it) as body care products and were soon making half a million dollars a year and travelling to France to do more research on its cosmetic application. "I got my mojo back," he says of this time of his life. "I decided I was going to sell emus fast." The next step was upselling operations from the kitchen table (where Karen was doing it with a saucepan and a jug) so Birkbeck bought an essential oils factory that was in financial strife. In the fire sale, he also got stocks of sandalwood. "That stood out to me," he says. "What I saw was an industry that had been going since the mid-19th century, it was the first export out of Western Australia." And so Mount Romance skincare was born in 1990 and Birkbeck formed friendships and later business partnerships with the Rocher family (of the Yves Saint Laurent's Opium). It also spurred a connection with France, as Birkbeck formed friendships and later business partnerships with the Rocher family (of the Yves Saint Laurent's Opium) and became a key player in the push for ethics and sustainability in cosmetics.

By 2005, he sold his company for $5.1 million (he later bought it back off its new owners when it was on the verge of collapse, and sold it again for $7.5 million in 2007). But when Birkbeck finally got his first "big cheque", he also found out he was sick: he was diagnosed with leukaemia and given 90 days to live. He spent four months in intensive care, but doesn't look back at that time negatively, instead seeing "opportunity out of adversity". And Birkbeck is still here, albeit with less hair (his words, not ours). "He gets up off the floor and he tries and tries again until he succeeds," says Fischer. "Steve is a determined, dynamic colourful Australian who has had his bumps along the way but he has bounced back." Birkbeck says he will give another two years to "the commercial world" before withdrawing to his farm (he has already stepped down as CEO of Atlas Pearls but remains executive chairman). When pressed on what this actually means, he says he plans to write a book, spend time with his daughters and do some "really creative thinking". Sounds like ordinary retirement fare. But in the last seconds of the conversation, Birkbeck drops that he met French President Francois Hollande and Prime Minister Tony Abbott recently at trade functions and one suspects Birkbeck will not be slowing down any time soon. I had a fascinating couple of days and now I am really keen to look at some much higher level [trade] issues that will help my company and Australia."