

WHEN THE STARS ALIGN

Doctor, academic, classics student, arts patron and philanthropist Paul Eliadis believes in not only saving lives but culturally enriching them

SUSAN JOHNSON

First, the T-shirt. Black, with white lettering. What does it say? It's Greek, a quote from one of the country's most loved authors, Nikos Kazantzakis, the same words which are carved into the author of *Zorba the Greek's* gravestone on Crete: "I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free".

The wearer of the T-shirt is Dr Paul Eliadis, 64, leading haematologist and oncologist, associate professor at Bond University, creator of a chair of Ancient History and Classics at the University of Queensland, honorary doctorate in philanthropy from Griffith University, recipient of an Honoris Causa bestowed by Greece in recognition of his contribution to Hellenism in Australia and now one of Queensland's greatest philanthropists and patrons of the arts.

He's just donated to the Museum of Brisbane the complete archive of the internationally acclaimed fashion house Easton Pearson, comprising more than 3300 signature garments and memorabilia spanning 27 years from its creation as a label in Brisbane in 1988 until its closure last year. Valued at \$2.7 million, it's the largest gift received by the Museum of Brisbane, and the largest textile donation to any museum in Australia.

As if saving lives wasn't enough, he's also preserving for Australia an important piece of its cultural heritage. Eliadis is one of the founders of Haematology & Oncology Clinics of Australia – now known as Icon Cancer Care. As well as treating cancer patients, Dr Eliadis's practice has supported medical research since he and colleagues Dr Ian Bunce and Dr Trevor Olsen set up the clinic in 1988. Surely such a man can't truly hope for nothing?

It's a warm, cloudless winter's day and out on the balcony of his 44th-floor Brisbane city apartment, the Doors are playing on the sound system behind and, in front, there's an unobstructed view facing due east, out past the mouth of the Brisbane River and into the glistening blue of Moreton Bay. Inside, there's an offer of champagne from a man wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with comfortless words, a man who nonetheless understands Zorba's love of life in its "full catastrophe".

"At the end of the day, we're here for a short time," Eliadis says. "If we can do something that ultimately contributes to the community – no matter who we are – that is worthwhile. As part of the long, ongoing discussions I've



Designers Pam Easton (left) and Lydia Pearson, whose archive was bought by philanthropist Paul Eliadis (opposite page) and donated to the Museum of Brisbane. Pictures: David Kelly



had with Murray Kane, one of my Greek tutors at university (Eliadis is studying Ancient Greek as part of a classics degree), I've sometimes wondered: What is worthwhile? What is good behaviour?

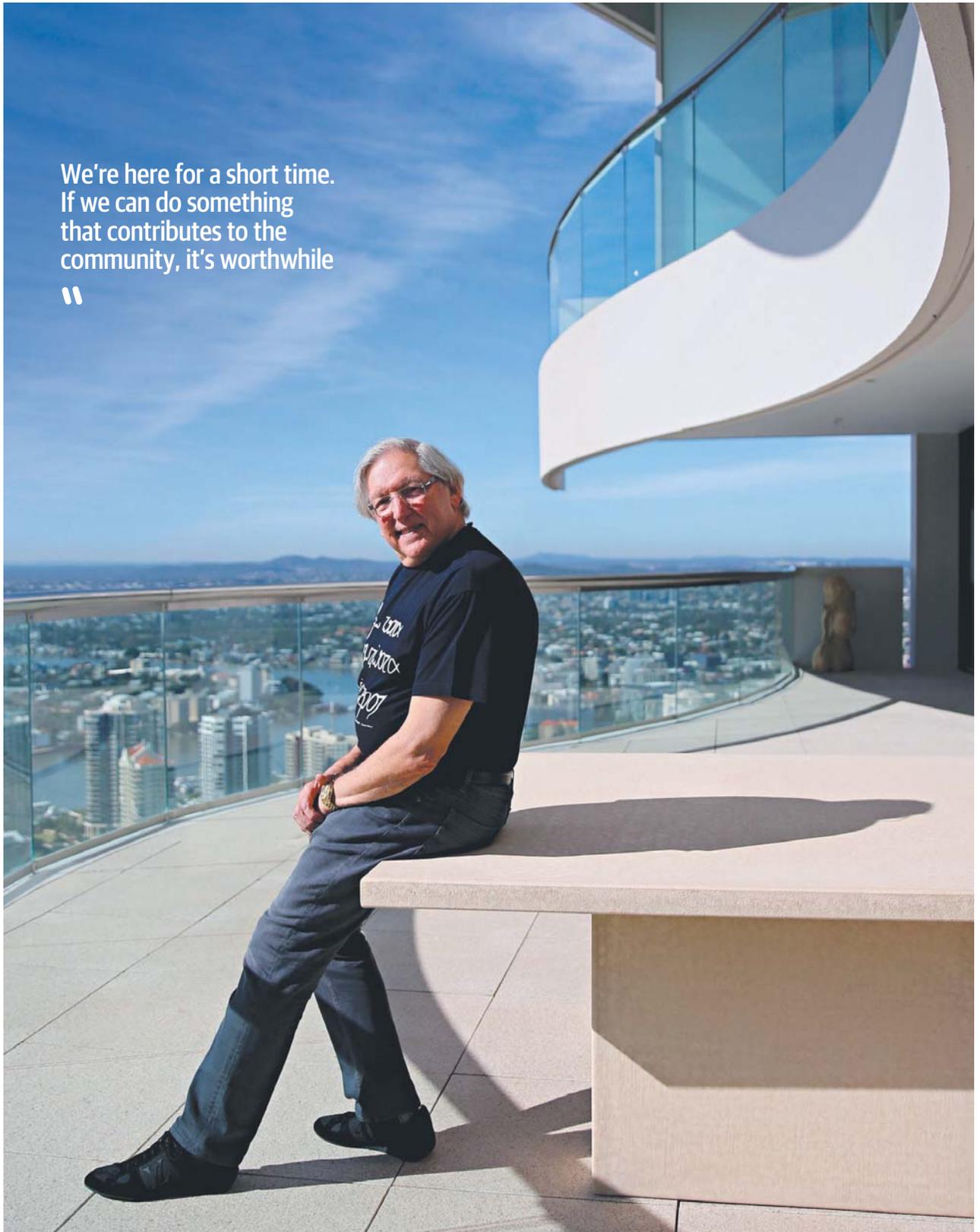
"We sign our letters and emails to each other *pros to kalon*, which roughly translates as 'towards that which is good'. Aristotle in his *Ethics* ultimately came to the conclusion that if you're living in a community and did something that benefited not just yourself but those around you, that is *pros to kalon*."

If the great Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle spent their lives attempting to define what *kalon* is, then so – in his own way – is Eliadis. Kane, his Ancient Greek tutor from the University of Queensland, makes it clear: "Paul, to me, is a living embodiment of this athletic impulse towards the good".

THE EASTON PEARSON ARCHIVE WAS PURCHASED BY ELIADIS when the company was wound up, and donated to the Museum of Brisbane through the Australian Taxation Office's Cultural Gifts Program, administered by the Department of Communications and the Arts. The program enables gifts of "culturally significant items" to be made by offering donors a tax deduction for the market value of the gift.

The archive includes one-off and specially commissioned garments, as well as prototypes, accessories, look books, photographs, catalogues and other objects collected or created by designers Pamela Easton and Lydia Pearson, arguably Brisbane's most successful design team. At the label's peak, just before the 2008 global financial crisis, it was stocked in 140 stores in 24 countries and regarded not so much as a fashion label as living art. To celebrate its 20th anniversary in 2009, for example, GOMA held a survey exhibition of its designs.

Eliadis says he couldn't give a reason why he acquired the archive in the first place. "I wasn't sure what I was ultimately going to do with it; all I thought was, here is this archive of the complete works of Pam and Lydia – to have a complete archive of one of our greatest fashion houses and to keep it together, that was the only thing going through my mind." But he soon realised that having such a valuable and beautiful thing locked away was a waste. "To have it ►



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locked up and for me to sit in a corner saying, 'Isn't this great? I've got this archive all locked away!' achieves nothing. All I knew was that the last thing I wanted was to see this amazing archive cannibalised, sold off in auctions, so some lady in Neutral Bay (Sydney) or Toorak (Melbourne) could say she had a dress from the archive."

Eliadis is more financially able to purchase – or donate – works of art than most. Since he began collecting Australian art in the late '80s he's supported the arts in multiple ways, from buying the works of individual artists – and also shouting them dinner – to donating to the Griffith University Art Collection and the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. His Paul Eliadis Collection of Contemporary Art – worth an unspecified amount but believed to be in the millions – is spread over his residences in inner Brisbane and the house where his widowed 88-year-old mother, Ellene, lives in Brisbane's southeast, but mostly it's kept in storage at an undisclosed location, or else is on loan to museums and galleries. At any given moment, there's a work owned by Eliadis on loan somewhere around the country.

IT WAS A SERENDIPITOUS COLLISION BETWEEN ART, FRIENDSHIP and Greek connections that eventually allowed the Easton Pearson archive to find its permanent Brisbane home. A famous expression on the Dodecanese island of Karpathos, near Crete, where Eliadis's paternal family come from, is: "It is impossible to escape one's fate." Eliadis suggests another way of saying how the archive came to the Museum of Brisbane is that "the stars aligned".

It happened like this: The Greek-Australians of Brisbane are a tight-knit bunch – pretty much everyone knows everyone. Nick Nicolaides (descendant of another successful Greek-Australian family including his grandfather, also Nick, co-founder of the Sullivan Nicolaides Pathology group) was chief executive of Easton Pearson when Lydia Pearson and Pam Easton first began to talk of quitting the business. The Nicolaides and Eliadis families are friends.

Then, Eliadis's longtime friend and (unofficial) adviser on art, Simon Wright (now assistant director, Learning and Public Engagement, at QGOMA, but whose friendship with Eliadis pre-dates his appointment and is independent of it), heard the news: "It became clear to me that there was this asset, and Paul's history as a patron in art and design put him in a direct relationship there," Wright says.

Eliadis agrees: "Clearly the two bright stars of the constellation are Pam and Lydia, but for this to have happened you needed Simon, you needed Nick Nicolaides and you needed myself – we all came together and ultimately it was done in a way everyone was happy with: the archive was saved, it was kept intact, and now it's in the right place."

Museum of Brisbane director Renai Grace says she's "awed by Dr Eliadis's contribution, it really is a most incredible act of generosity that he's given to the city of Brisbane, not just for today, but for generations to come". She says the archive will be rotated through permanent displays and also included in specific exhibitions and made accessible to students of art, fashion and design.

The Museum's chairwoman, Sallyanne Atkinson, says Pamela Easton and Lydia Pearson are "pivotal historic and cultural figures" in Brisbane, and because the Museum of Brisbane is the city's "storyteller and historic keeping place, it's the perfect home". Pearson – now teaching fashion at the Queensland University of Technology and who will guest lecture at the Museum of Brisbane in future – says both she and Easton are "thrilled" about the move. "It's such a great fit," Pearson says. "We really wanted it to go somewhere in Queensland, even though it could have gone to other places, so the Museum of Brisbane is perfect. And Paul is such an amazingly generous, philanthropic person – it's just wonderful."

BY ANY STRETCH OF THE IMAGINATION, ELIADIS'S ACHIEVEMENTS are not bad for a former Brisbane State High School boy who considered himself "pretty average academically", and who spent his early years squeezed into a modest house in East Brisbane with his parents, four younger siblings and maternal grandparents, before moving to a house behind a snack bar at South Brisbane. The teenage boy christened Polyhronis after his paternal grandfather (it's still the name in his passport rather than the Anglicised version of "Paul") rose at 3am to study and cut up potatoes ready to be made into chips for the snack bar. At lunchtime he'd jump the school fence and run to the snack bar to help



Museum of Brisbane director Renai Grace with some of the dresses from the Easton Pearson archive. Picture: David Kelly

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his dad, Elias, cook hamburgers, race back to school and back to the cafe again – often serving the kids he went to school with – before mopping the floors, doing the tills, then heading home again to study.

Today, up on the 44th floor – toasting the beautiful winter's day with sparkling water rather than champagne – Eliadis says his life has been a fortunate one. "I don't think I've planned things; they've sort of happened when opportunities have arisen. When I see a good opportunity I go for it, at a personal level and on other levels of course,

but I've got a friend who says we should never use the word 'lucky' – we're fortunate that we're living in Australia; anyone who has the fortune of living in Australia is not doing too bad."

He says too that he's been fortunate to fully engage with the two parts of his life that mean most to him: medicine and art. He believes both vocations are not as far apart as they might first appear: "There's an artistic side to medicine too, a human aspect," he says. "Medicine is never completely scientific." A good doctor needs the empathetic eye of the artist. "You have to have an understanding of people. I think the very good doctors I've known have got that medical/scientific aspect to what they do, but they also understand people at a human level. There'd be nothing worse than being looked after medically by someone who only thought as a scientist."

Eliadis says he tries to put himself into a patient's position and asks, "What would I like? It may be that the goal for one patient is cure, for another a painless death that might occur in a few days' time, or for an elderly lady, it may just be that she wants one more Christmas to be with her family, just one ..."

It's possibly here, listening to Eliadis talk about the meeting between medicine and art, where he shows his true face. He has never married – he's come close a few times – but his face lights up when he speaks of his family: his mother; brother Emanuel, 62, a solicitor; sister Tina, 58, now a full-time wife and mother but who also qualified as a lawyer; and younger brothers Michael, 57, a barrister, and Vass, 51, a retired hairdresser.

His face glows with pleasure when he speaks of the beauty of Ancient Greek, of art itself, the way a beautiful work of art draws us closer. And yet he still looks on what he has made of his life as "fairly ordinary or average".

He says: "I've just sort of gone along and I've made some good choices and occasionally I've made some bad choices but – you know – an opportunity comes along, you do it." ■