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BEHIND THE MASK – MIKE WILLESEE**

An inimitable presence on our TV screens for 50 years, Mike Willesee now faces his greatest challenge – a diagnosis of throat cancer. In a two-part exclusive, *Australian Story* looks back over the extraordinary life of one of broadcasting's more enigmatic characters.

Born in Perth, Mike was profoundly influenced by the family's strong Catholic faith and his father's involvement in politics. "I went to John Curtin's funeral and I sat on Ben Chifley's knee and Gough Whitlam watched me play football so I guess by osmosis if nothing else I was learning about politics," Mike says.

As a 10-year-old, Mike was sent briefly to the notorious Bindoon Boy's Town by his father in order to toughen him up. It was a brutal experience. "I still don't know why my father thought I needed to toughen up," Mike says, "but I did toughen up. You know, it changed me."

Later, a split within the Labor party saw the family ostracised by the Catholic church. His father was railed against from the pulpit and Mike was forced out of school a year early by the Catholic brothers who taught him. These events, and an emerging interest in girls, saw Mike turn his back on the church.

After school, Mike fell into journalism, working for papers in Perth and Melbourne before ending up in Canberra. When the ABC launched the groundbreaking current affairs program *This Day Tonight*, he found himself in the right place at the right time. From there his career flourished. He reported for *Four Corners* during the Vietnam War before producing the template for commercial current affairs when he created *A Current Affair* for Channel Nine.

During the 1970s and early 80s, Willesee had top-rating programs on channels Seven and Nine. He had an uncanny knack for knowing what viewers wanted, combining humour with serious content.

As an interviewer, he was without peer – intelligent and meticulously researched. "He cut through the bullshit," says veteran current affairs producer Peter Meakin. "I think his father gave him an appreciation of the practice of politics without necessarily an affection for the execution of it."

Despite a stellar career, Mike has not always enjoyed a happy domestic life. He has been married and divorced three times, which is a source of great regret. He is, however, the father of six children, who he counts as his greatest achievements.

Part one concludes with Mike's infamous appearance as guest host on *A Current Affair* in 1989, when he slurred his way through two episodes before being replaced. It was the wake-up call he needed, forcing him to acknowledge a problem with alcohol that he continues to deal with. He speaks candidly about this and the impact it has had on his life.

In part two, *Australian Story* follows the broadening of Mike's business interests, the near-death experience that led him back to the Catholic faith, his return to television and his recent battle with cancer.

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