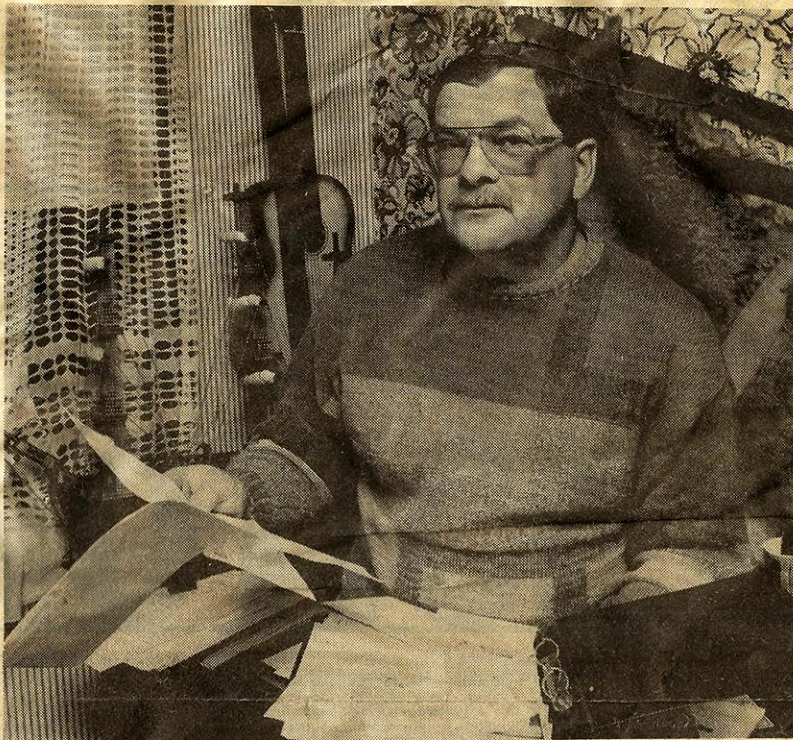


# Glaucoma sufferer launches research charity



● Former model shipbuilder Rolf Kaiser deals with the paperwork involved in starting his charity.

**R**OLF Kaiser finds irony in the fact that he used to donate model ships he built to charities and is now trying to start a charity himself.

Mr Kaiser is a victim of glaucoma, a crippling eye disease that strikes mostly people over the age of 40.

He was diagnosed in March, at the age of 47, with advanced glaucoma and now spends his time trying to start a national foundation in Australia devoted to research on the disease.

A former engineer, he was pensioned 20 years ago because of a spinal injury.

From his home, he has organised a one-man publicity campaign to make Australians more aware of the disease.

"My aim now is that by the time I'm finished, everybody in Australia will know what glaucoma is," he said.

There are stacks of bright orange pamphlets about glaucoma on a table, lists of television programs he has appeared on and a notebook filled with articles about his quest.

But the workshop, where he once

built intricately-detailed replicas of old sailing ships like Columbus's Santa Maria, is quiet these days.

Mr Kaiser says he had built as many as 200 of the ships as a hobby, many of them donated to help raise money for charitable groups and telethons.

Since he was diagnosed as having glaucoma, he has undergone laser treatments and an operation, but about 50 per cent of his eyesight has been lost.

He could still become blind. But he takes comfort in his newest endeavor, which also helps to keep his mind off his health.

"This has all happened so quickly I haven't had time to sit and think about what may be," he said.

His problems began five months ago with a visit to an eye doctor for new eyeglasses for a trip to Western Australia with his wife, Erika.

A test showed he might have glaucoma and further tests confirmed that.

It was a disease Mr Kaiser had never heard of.

Had it been discovered earlier, more

of his failing eyesight might have been saved.

Now, he wants to spread that message to others.

In his native Germany, 30,000 people are blind because of the disease and another 100,000 are partially blind, Mr Kaiser said.

In America and Britain, there are glaucoma foundations to publicise the disease and what can be done about it. But few Australians he talks to are aware of it.

"I am stunned," he said. Glaucoma is a quiet disease with few warning signs or symptoms.

Yet it is expected to affect one in 50 Australians over the age of 40 and is a leading cause of blindness.

It is thought to be a familial disease, and can also affect children, leading sometimes to blindness within a few days.

It occurs when clear transparent fluid in the inner eye becomes blocked and pressure builds up, damaging the optic nerve.

Unless pressure behind the eye is relieved, it eventually leads to blindness.

The problem can be spotted in a simple test by an eye doctor.

But Mr Kaiser said many people aren't aware that they need to get regular eye examinations after the age of 35 to detect it.

His dream now is to travel around Australia getting radio, television and print publicity about the disease.

Last week, he sent letters to 50 major corporations asking them to sponsor his tour.

Already he has appeared on television news programs in Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney, and been the subject of articles across the country.

Some stations have offered him free advertising time to get his message across.

He hopes to get clubs to conduct annual public eye testing and employers to screen their workers for the disease.

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In July, he set up the Rolf Kaiser Glaucoma Research Trust Fund.

He shows visitors letters and donations from people across Australia congratulating him on his work.

The fund now has about \$400 in it, enriched by a \$100 contribution in early August from a man in Melbourne who read about Mr Kaiser's campaign.

Although the trust fund he has set up through Commonwealth Bank carries his name, none of the money goes to him.

Mr Kaiser said he has spent about \$600 of his own money to "get the ball rolling."

He would like to raise as much as \$1 million to fight the disease.

"Every penny will go to research," he said. "In my opinion, there's still a lot of research to be done."

Publicising the disease and raising money to battle it now "will help future generations," he said.