

We call them 'Pokies' Down Under. Elsewhere, they're called 'Slot Machines'. Historically, they were called 'One Armed Bandits' because they were originally operated by a lever on the side of the machine (the arm) and because of their ability to leave the gamer penniless (the bandit). Today, the 'arm' has been replaced by a button on the front panel, but the outcome is still the same – they leave the gamer, and often many others connected with that individual, penniless.

The dictionary defines a 'bandit' as "a robber or outlaw belonging to a gang and typically operating in an isolated or lawless area". And, that's what happened to our family. We were left penniless due to an 'outlaw' that belonged to the Sky City gang, which operated in an isolated, lawless area – the Sky City Auckland Casino.

The gamer, or more accurately, the gambling addict, was our father - a retired and respected minister, philanthropist, and entrepreneurial businessman. He was sadly sucked into more than a decade of problem gambling at Sky City during what should have been his and our mother's golden retirement years. Instead of enjoying the fruits of a life of hard work, success in business, and generosity to others, his final years were spent fighting a losing battle with his gambling addiction. He suffered all the associated mental stress and breakdown, angst, debt, loss of assets, and bailiffs knocking at the door. His life became a downward spiral of lies and deceit – sadly to those he loved most – and totally at odds with his lifelong values and Christian faith, which he never abandoned.

And, the fall was dramatic. There was a lot to lose and he lost it all – his harbourside home, his beloved boat, his two cars, his three successful businesses. Every possession he owned of any value was gone – often pawned to get his hands on the desperately-needed cash. But the compulsion was still there. The addiction had to be fuelled. And so, he preyed on others. So great was his need to gamble that he lied and took money under false pretences from his family and loved ones, his closest friends, his business partners, and eventually, when his reputation as a business entrepreneur was in tatters and he had to go back to being an employee, his employer. From a successful business person to a fraudster – all for the sake of seeing three lemons line up in a row. And those lemons definitely left a sour taste in everyone's mouth.

As is the case with many Sky City problem gamblers, his introduction to Sky City Casino was, at first, innocent. It wasn't a 'flutter' with friends as a night's entertainment, because his values meant it wasn't an option for a night out – even when hosting international visitors. No, his introduction to Sky City was as a coffee venue for a meeting with a business colleague.

While waiting for his associate to arrive, he saw an ad for a 'jackpot' and decided to have a 'little flutter' for fun. Sadly, he won and walked away with a cheque for \$52,000. The reason we say "sadly" is that he then spent the next ten years emptily trying to replicate that win. At the time of winning, he was in a vulnerable situation having just had his life savings embezzled by his lawyer. And, the ill-conceived notion that he could somehow win back what he had lost, just like that first \$52,000 jackpot, was what, at first, lured him and, eventually, trapped him into a vicious cycle of gambling, lies, and debt.

As the addiction set in, the family did its best to try and 'rescue' him. Many nights were spent driving around the Sky City car park trying to spot his car and then, once we did, having to go in, track him down, and try to drag him away. We did everything we could to seek help for him through the Problem Gambling Foundation, but our efforts were futile.

After a troubled childhood, through his Christian faith and strength of character, our father had worked to overcome all the commensurate damage that ensues from such an upbringing, and led a successful and fulfilling life. But the 'pokies' were to become his undoing. His Achilles Heel - his mental health – fell victim to the gambling's compelling force. And so, a vulnerable man with mental health issues was driven to complete ruin – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially – by the bright lights and razzle dazzle of the casino, and the empty promise of another big and lucky win.

For our family, the man that our father became typified the profile of any problem gambler:

- making excuses or lying to friends and family to cover up gambling or why he hadn't been around or contactable via phone (Trying to account for his whereabouts – our family even went through the angst of wondering if he was having some late life extramarital affair?!)
- agitated and aggressive behaviour after gambling sessions
- repeated ATM withdrawals
- carrying large amounts of cash
- Offering excuses on how he had lost money – including reporting false incidents of wallet theft to the police
- hiding bank statements for both personal and company accounts
- losing interest in friends, family and other activities – the worst of which was going missing for two hours after his own mother's funeral and before the burial which he was conducting. You guessed it ... he was at Sky City!

Our efforts to get him into counselling for problem gambling were fruitless. Even after forcing him into signing a self-imposed ban at the casino, he was still able to move freely in and out of the casino at will. The lip service paid by Sky City around enforcing the ban was nothing short of platitudinous. Through the ensuing years after the self-ban was imposed, we saw no evidence of monitoring or enforcement over a five year period of problem gambling. Instead, we watched Sky City ply our father with increasingly elaborate loyalty scheme offers, including a Sky City Gold Card. All we saw from Sky City were enticements, not deterrents.

We stood by, feeling powerless and angry. Our mother's financial security was being systematically sucked into a horrible, black vortex and we could do nothing to prevent it.

Sadly, the depth of his deception and the extent of his indebtedness only came to light after our father passed away. The fabrications and stories were so elaborate and complex that, even though we knew

all too well his gambling addiction and did our best to keep tabs on him, we had no idea of the pit he had created.

Our father passed away from brain cancer, just before his 70th birthday. He died a gambling addict, over \$200,000 in the red, with an insolvent estate and a convoluted financial web for us, his three children, to sort out. Our mother was literally left penniless and now has to live on the government pension, supplemented by support from us, her three children. Unravelling the horrific financial mess after our father's death, made us realise that even the strongest faith, backed up with counselling and support, struggles to withstand the power of a gambling addiction.

We have no doubt that the average gambling stats commonly quoted absolutely applied to our father – that he lost 9 times (and probably way more than that) what he won.

But far worse than the financial repercussions, was the emotional turmoil suffered by our family, including our father. We all remember the stress, the heartbreak, our father's tears, his self-recrimination, and his promises to 'beat this thing'. We believe he genuinely suffered from terrible guilt and internal conflict over his addiction. His life became a 'double life' – on one hand a man with a good heart, who would give you the shirt off his back. This was juxtaposed against the addict who harmed himself and those he loved through lies, deceit, and fraud. It is truly heartbreaking that this became his final legacy when so much of his life was devoted to serving and giving to others, especially those less fortunate than himself.

And so, we come back to the 'bandit' – who robbed our family of our inheritance. Yes, there was financial loss (and plenty of it) but the thing that we feel most keenly, is the loss of our emotional inheritance. It is a struggle to recall the good times and happy memories of our father. They will, forever, be overshadowed by the broken promises, the lies, the pain, and the disappointment of living with a gambling addict.

So, when we hear that the National government is trading more pokie machines for a convention centre in downtown Auckland, we feel as cheated as we did when our father lied to each of us and took tens of thousands of dollars from us under false pretences.

Our country has laws which prevent liquor being sold to intoxicated persons, one of a raft of solutions that is in place as we try to grapple with our nation's binge drinking problem. As a nation, we recognise that an alcoholic is not able to make the right choices to temper their drinking and say 'enough is enough'. Sadly, gambling addicts are not afforded the same protection.

To leave addiction management in the hands of the gambling industry is folly. Neither Sky City Casino nor any other gambling establishment has the necessary safety nets in place to support problem gamblers. And, let's be honest, why would they? Every time they take preventive action to deter problem gamblers, it impacts on their bottom line.

So, those most vulnerable and most at risk are the ones that suffer - people burdened with poverty, the unemployed, those with mental health conditions and addictive disorders, to name just a few. The 'empty promise' of gambling sucks in society's most defenceless and susceptible, then chews them up and spits them out. In particular, Sky City Casino acts as a 'gateway' for individuals who may have addictive compulsions in other areas of their life. It acts as a breeding ground for problem gamblers whose first introduction to gambling may come through a night of innocent 'fun' entertainment or as a tourist 'holiday treat'.

The adrenalin rush or 'high' that accompanies a win, and/or the 'carrot' of "the next one will be the big one" hooks these susceptible personalities into the world of gambling. So, even if a person becomes addicted and they or their family initiate a Sky City 'self ban', by then, the gambling habit is already entrenched. However, due to the prevalence of pokie machines elsewhere, addicts can continue to feed their appetite for gambling at other establishments, where those same people may never have previously frequented but are now driven to do so by the intensity of their need to gamble.

This was our father's plight and, consequently, our own. It is our sincerest wish that in speaking out, other families and individuals may be spared the heartbreak and decimation of their family life, which we experienced.

And so, we challenge this government to find another way to build a new convention centre in Auckland – one that does not result in the proliferation of "one arm bandits" in our beautiful city.