

## Former Geelong man Ragnar Purje on a mission to rewire learning

Former Geelong high student Ragnar Purje tells why leaving school at 16 hasn't stopped him pushing the boundaries of neuroscience and teaching.

By Nicole Mayne, May 21, 2022, *GT Magazine, Geelong Advertiser*

Ragnar Purje never imagined when he left school at 16 that he would one day earn international acclaim for his pioneering work in neuroscience and education.

The former Geelong High School student has come full circle since turning his back on the classroom to pursue a trade.

He credits a passion for karate for reigniting a lifelong love of learning that eventually lured him off on the tools and into a remarkable career that's pushed the boundaries of brain science and teaching.

The former Newcomb man, now an academic based on the Sunshine Coast, first broke new ground in the rehabilitation field when he helped Australian former world champion boxer Johnny Famechon recover from a debilitating brain injury after he was hit by a car while crossing the road.



**Ragnar Purje has multiple degrees under his belt.**

The boxing hall of fame had been in a wheelchair and unable to talk for two years when Ragnar offered to try and help him regain movement back in 1993.

Armed with degrees in physical education and psychology obtained after returning to night school to finish his HSC, Ragnar drove from Geelong to Frankston for their first meeting with the hope that stimulating the brain could bring about a physical change.

“His chin was on his chest and he looked as if he had been poured into the chair,” he recalls of his first impression.

“He had no tone and nothing in any way indicated that he was going to move in any other direction — he was in a very, very bad way.

“I had it in my mind that if you work towards something the brain is being stimulated and even when he said an ‘Ah’ it meant his brain was working hard.

“I ended up spending three hours that first day with John and he was so funny even though the conversation was difficult, he was so insightful and so profound.”



**Former boxing champion John Famechon and Ragnar Purje, pictured in 1998, formed a strong bond.**

He embarked on a novel form of rehabilitation, known as multi-movement therapy, which combines challenging complex movements and intense cognitive work.

Within 12 weeks Johnny took his first steps and four weeks later ran 10 metres towards his wife Glenys.

“It was really quite extraordinary when all that time he hadn’t been walking at all,” Ragnar says.

“John and Glenys and I were shouting and crying all at the same time.

“That led to the situation where John started to walk independently ... and then after that he was attending boxing nights, sports nights, giving speeches and presenting himself to the world again as the John Famechon that he was.

“I’m still moved by it now.”

Ragnar’s groundbreaking work was documented in a PhD through CQUniversity, where he’s now an adjunct lecturer at the School of Education and the Arts, and published in the *Journal of Neurology and Neurosciences*.

He says it proved you could use movement to stimulate the brain, while simultaneously using the brain to stimulate movement, and led to the coining of a new term, “hòlos”, to describe the unified brain and body.

The academic says his interest in the interplay between the two was partly born out of Goju karate, which he took up in his late teens.

The martial art required commitment to arduous mental and physical demands but brought great personal rewards that set him on a path to further self-improvement.



**Ragnar still practises karate every day.**

He went on to become an Australian karate champion but the ripples reached far greater.



“It was my Goju karate that really changed the direction of my life,” Ragnar says.

“If I hadn’t started that I would not have done all the study that I have done.

“It was an activity that I enjoyed, the process was very demanding but I embraced how hard it was and if didn’t do it I wouldn’t have success.

“All the success actually comes from hard work.

“I left school at 16, did a trade, worked as a tradesman but the one factor I always followed was that I listened to the experts and did the work.”

After studying a bachelor degree in physical education, Ragnar went on to complete another in psychology, as well as five post graduate diplomas and three Masters degrees in education, guidance and counselling, and leadership and management.

“It just inspired me because it was the pursuit of knowledge for the sake of the pursuit of knowledge,” he says.

“I didn’t know if it would open the door to any jobs but I enjoyed the pursuit of knowledge because I’m interested in the human condition and how people think and behave.”

He took up teaching in his 30s but was surprised to learn that there were defiant children who didn’t want to learn — a concept he found foreign. The experience planted the seed for a new method of teaching, called the Responsibility Theory, which he started documenting in a book at his wife Janet’s suggestion.



**Ragnar with students from the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children in 2008. Photo: Megan Cullen**

Ragnar's successful method is now a prescribed text book for students at CQUniversity and has just been nominated for an international Grawemeyer Award in Education, for ideas that have the potential to bring about significant improvement in educational outcomes.

At its core, Responsibility Theory is an immersive, self-talk sequence learning program where students learn about the power of their own thinking and behaviour and that they are in control of what they do, think, say, choose and learn.

Ragnar says he knew he had to change his traditional authoritarian teaching methods when he started at a tough new school and some students were predictably rude and refused to engage in their work.

“If I'm trying to force a student to do something they don't want to there's only one outcome, conflict and resentment and I thought to myself something has to change,” he says.

“All of this came to me like an epiphany and I just said ‘Who is responsible for their learning? The student is responsible and that's what I'm going to tell them’.

“What took place from the very start surprised even me ... it changed the classroom immediately.”

So great was the impact that one parent, whose son had been seeing a psychologist to control his anger, came to Ragnar asking what he had done to her child who was now coming home from school happy.

For Ragnar, there's always more to learn about the brain's power, something karate still helps him tap into.

“I'm an eighth dan karate master and even though I'm in the more senior years I still do karate every day,” he says.