

JOHN VAN LIESHOUT

The title of Queensland's richest person now belongs to John Van Lieshout who established his Super A-Mart furniture chain into a retail giant, sold it and now heads a property empire.

HOW QUEENSLAND'S RICHEST MAN MADE IT TO NUMBER ONE

"You know," Mr Van Leishout tells *The Sunday Mail*, "the funny thing is you still don't ever really feel that you have been a success.

"You never really feel that. . . that you've made it."

This from the man who became Queensland's first billionaire nine years ago; from the man who built one of the nation's most successful retail chains from nothing and then changed careers at 60 to run a real estate empire; from the man who arrived in Australia from Holland as a 14-year-old kid, friendless, frightened and unable to speak English and dropped out of school two months later after a row with a teacher who thought he was faking his inability to understand lessons. "You always think it could be done better. You think you could have done it better, you should have done it better, that you could have done it a different way."

"That's the reason you keep going because you always feel that you have to keep going," says Mr Van Lieshout who, even at the age of 68 with a \$1.38 billion fortune, admits he would feel guilty sitting at home in retirement.

"I think you will find that people that end up being successful to that extent often come from poor backgrounds.

"I think feeling insecure creates a feeling of having to achieve because you really don't want to go back to being that way. You want security.

"It stays forever. That feeling never leaves you."

After a very brief stint as a builder's labourer — "it nearly killed" me — and working at Brisbane's Turbot St fruit markets, Mr van Lieshout found his niche in retail.

Starting as a junior cleaning windows and toilets at the Royal Art Furniture store in Fortitude Valley, he worked his way up to dispatch and then second-floor bedding sales where he and workmate and lifelong friend John Pilkington supplemented their income by buying trade-ins which they repaired, restored and sold from a garage at weekends.

In 1969, the 23-year-old and his new bride Linda used their \$2000 house deposit savings to open a furniture store with Mr Pilkington in Coopers Plains on Brisbane's southside. "We didn't have much knowledge — just a lot of ambition."

By the time Mr Van Lieshout bought out his partner in 1984, Super A-Mart furniture had six stores. Along the way, they had also launched and sold the A-Mart All Sports business.

"We came close a few times to going bust (in the early days) but we always managed to get out of that.

"We went through the floods in 1974. We just about lost everything there. We've had floods, we've had fires, we've been shot at. We opened one store in Virginia and someone in competition put bullet holes in our windows one night."

Mr Van Lieshout grew the Super A-Mart furniture chain to 21 "big box" stores in Queensland and northern NSW, capturing more than 20 per cent of market share based on a simple "product and price" philosophy.

"We knew how to buy quality items at a good price from local manufacturers and we didn't like being beaten by anyone. We were super-competitive," he says.

After rejecting several approaches to list the company — "if I can't understand something after five minutes, I don't do it" — he sold the business to private equity in 2006 for \$500 million.

"It was very fortunate because, without any real intention, it was excellent timing. Retail trading became a lot tougher soon afterwards," he says.

Mr Van Lieshout retained ownership of the buildings the stores occupied which were worth as much again.

"We used to landbank sites where we wanted to build. From Cairns to Port Macquarie, we built all our own stores, but I only built when I could afford it.

"I hated landlords and I hated debt."

They are now part of a vast property portfolio which also includes the Ikea building at Springwood, shopping centres, commercial buildings and the recently refurbished \$80 million Seahaven Resort at Noosa.

Mr Van Lieshout's Unison Projects is involved in residential land developments at Sherwood, Oxley and Griffin.

He says the career transition has been made possible by surrounding himself with a small team of wonderful professionals.

"That's the secret - its 90 per cent others and 10 per cent yourself. But someone's got to have a vision. Someone's got to have a goal."

The large amounts involved make real estate a tougher market than retail, but he prides himself on maintaining high ethical standards — perhaps influenced by his tradesman father Karel, a staunch unionist and anti-capitalist who believed that being in business was not an honest living.

"You can drive a hard bargain. You can be tough in business — as long as you're honest," says Mr Van Lieshout.

Despite his success, the entrepreneur has always kept a low public profile. "I'm not one to socialise in all the right circles and all that. I'm not someone who wants to go out and be seen.

"I like to lead my own life quietly. A perfect weekend is spending time with my family - going to Noosa or somewhere like that. I might do a bit of sailing. All quite low-key.

"I've got a catamaran. I've always had a boat - not particularly big boats. "So looking back, what advice would the 68-year-old billionaire John give the 23-year-old budding businessman John? "I'd say go for it! Start your own business as soon as you can — and do it bigger and better."



John van Lieshout



John van Lieshout, far right holding the binoculars case, and his family arriving in Sydney. 1960