

Simon Challies & The Braintree Wellness Centre

Simon Challies was Chief Executive of Ryman Health after holding many prestigious offices, but he resigned in 2017 due to the toll Parkinsons Disease was having on his health. He had been diagnosed with Parkinsons Disease in



2011 at aged 41 but, with the backing of the Ryman Board, he continued to lead the organisation. In 2012 Simon went to Oregon USA to see Professor John Nott who said people who lived well with neurological conditions ‘ate super healthy, physically and mentally challenged themselves, had social contact and slept well.’ Simon had gone to the States to see Prof Nott because he wanted to know whether or not carrying on in his role at Ryman was putting himself into an early grave. The Professor said no, he would probably feel fatigued but it wouldn’t change the progression of the disease.

Simon’s challenge was to raise funds to build the Braintree Wellness Centre at 70 Langdons Road in Papanui. It aims to support the wellbeing of people with neurological illnesses like Parkinsons, Multiple Sclerosis, stroke, and dementia. The Centre was opened by Christchurch Mayor Lianne Dalziel in 2022 with a host of financial backers and other guests attending. The \$8 million cost was raised by corporate and private funds and, as Simon said, on time and on budget.

The Centre is a facility where people can meet and talk with similar sufferers. They can attend classes, there is a gym, a café, large social areas, meeting rooms, offices and outdoor spaces. Fundraising is ongoing including an annual golf tournament which is regularly oversold with a waiting list. Simon was honoured with the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2023.

Note: The Braintree Wellness Centre has an excellent website which includes the following commentary: ‘There is now significant data to show that a total wellness approach – covering exercise, diet, cognitive stimulation, education and social connection – has a hugely positive impact on the lives of people living with a neurological condition. Medical specialists can prescribe medication to alleviate disease symptoms, but lifestyle changes can also make a significant difference to how a person can live with their condition.’ (The website address is: www.canterburybraincollective.org)