

EGlife

A WORLD OF CHANGE

This year, PROPS celebrates 21 years of helping disabled young people by raising money for the charity Variety. Noella Pio Kivlehan spoke to co-founder Neil Sinclair about the awards event's history, the famous people it has attracted and his hopes for the future



In 1972, a 28-year-old Neil Sinclair was invited by Granada TV's head of property to the Miss World tribute lunch. At the meal, Sinclair was sat beside Miss Brazil. "I was a young, single man at the time," smiles PROPS co-founder Sinclair, recalling the event and how beautiful and intelligent Rejane Vieira Da Costa, a doctor,

was. "But they are all chaperoned."

That dinner with Miss Brazil 40 years ago spurred Sinclair to join Variety and later led to the foundation of PROPS, which has changed the lives of hundreds of children, raised £7m for the charity and attracted support from some of the property industry's biggest names.

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"Miss World was the reason I joined Variety," says Sinclair, who is today managing director of Palace Capital. Variety's connection with Miss World, he explains, comes from the beauty contest's organiser Julia Morley, who has long been involved with the Variety Club of Great Britain and was the first British woman to become international president of Variety. PROPS raises funds for the children's charity, which was established in Pittsburgh, USA, in 1928, with the UK branch set up in 1949.

"Julia always says to me, if Miss World is available, then you can have her at the PROPS," says Sinclair. At this year's PROPS lunch on 15 May, a yet-to-be-identified man has paid £10,000 on the charity's internet site for the table where current Miss World, Miss Venezuela Ivian Lunasol Sarcos Colmenares, will sit.

After joining Variety in 1972, Sinclair became a trustee of the charity in 1984. But it was in 1990, despite the UK being in an economic downturn, that the idea of using the property industry to raise funds for Variety was first mooted. The suggestion came from Ronnie Nathan, a fellow Variety member, and today the

Miss World 2010, Miss America Alexandria Mills, was at the 2011 PROPS alongside Neil Sinclair (far left) and lifetime achievement winner Gerald Ronson (centre)



Miss Brazil, 1972

Rejane Vieira Da Costa was born in Rio Grande do Sul in 1954. She became Miss Brazil in 1972 and was first runner-up in Miss Universe the same year. She subsequently worked as an actress on Brazil's TV Globo network. Da Costa appeared in soap operas under her married name Rejane Goulart. She interrupted her career some years later, in 1988, but returned to TV in 2010 on the Record channel in the soap opera *Ribeirão do Tempo*.

Source: Missology.org

PROPS IN NUMBERS

21 years old
1,700 wheelchairs bought
£7m raised
Three-quarters of a million UK children are disabled

owner of Capital & Overseas Holdings.

"Ronnie said we have to do something to get the property industry involved [in Variety]," says Sinclair. The result was PROPS – a play on the word property and the props used in the theatre. The first event was a ball at London's Dorchester Hotel in 1991 which raised £60,000.

"We launched in 1991 in the middle of a deep recession," says Sinclair. "It was not an ideal time, but we still got 400 people at the ball. We decided to hold an auction of electric wheelchairs for kids, and that is what we have done ever since."

PROPS took off because no one was doing anything like it, says Sinclair. "No one else had awards. We decided to make it fun because getting money out of people is not easy, but it is easier if they have a good time. We always had an MC, and top comedians of the day, such as Tom O'Connor and Barry Cryer, who are chosen by a committee. We don't have smutty people."

And this "fun for funds" theme sits well with the industry. Former *Estates Gazette* editor, now *Evening Standard* columnist, Peter Bill says: "It's a good, fun lunch and a wonderful occasion for getting people to part with their money. It's a well-deserved cause, and it's heartening to see where the money goes."

The PROPS committee is chaired by Sinclair, Laurence Davis, Ronnie Natman and Nick Shattock. Sinclair's daughter Emma, along with Nick Spencer, co-chair the PROPS Brochure.

PROPS has become famous for attracting the biggest names in property, with Gerald Ronson, the Reuben brothers and Sol Kerzner appearing in person to accept awards. Then there are the video tributes from some of the world's top personalities, including Nelson Mandela and Israeli president Shimon Peres.

When asked how he gets such big names involved, Sinclair says: "If you want people to turn up, it's quite simple – you ring them up. I wanted Sol Kerzner [developer of South Africa's Sun City and 2010 lifetime achievement winner], so I called his office and spoke to his PA. Then he called me back." When the image of Nelson Mandela appeared on video giving a tribute to Kerzner at the awards, it drew gasps from the audience.

Sinclair also managed to entice the elusive Reuben brothers, David and Simon, to the 2005 lunch to pick up their



PROPS lifetime achievement winners

Centre Point architect Richard Seifert was the first lifetime achievement winner in 1982.

Recent winners are:
2005: Ian Henderson
2006: Sir John Ritblat
2007: Sir William McAlpine

2008: Trevor Hemmings
2009: Everard Goodman
2010: Sol Kerzner
2011: Gerald Ronson



entrepreneurs of the year award. "Simon Reuben made one of the funniest speeches," says Sinclair. Last year it was the turn of Gerald Ronson to be honoured, with a video tribute from Israeli president Peres.

But despite its success, PROPS has not

[£625,000 in 2008], but that's a fact of life. What you have to do is ride the recession and keep going, because if you look at the property market, there are still areas doing well. Again, he reiterates that "we have made a superhuman effort to sell tables".

Looking ahead, Sinclair says he just

Nelson Mandela paid a tribute to Sol Kerzner (far left) at the 2010 PROPS and Simon and David Reuben (above left and centre) were honoured in 2005

Sinclair adds: "Over our 21 years, we have raised £7m and we want to raise another £7m. A lot of kids are going

"Over our 21 years, we have raised £7m and we want to raise another £7m. A lot of children are going without and we want to make life easier for them"

been immune from the UK's economic woes or competition from other property award events. "Yes, there is now more competition from other awards, but it has driven our organising committee to sell more tables," says Sinclair.

Reflecting on the effect of the recession, he admits: "We raised less last year [£350,000] than we have done before

wants to continue raising money for children. PROPS is looking to stage more events throughout the year, and last November it launched a PROPS Breakfast, attended by 250 property professionals, raising more than £22,000 for charity. The next breakfast will be held on 8 November. There are also hopes to hold a five-a-side football tournament this September.

without, and we, through PROPS, want to make life easier for them."

Places are still available for this year's PROPS lunch on Tuesday 15 May at the London Hilton, Park Lane. Contact Rebecca Morgan on Rebecca.morgan@variety.org.uk or 020 7428 8138, or book online: www.variety.org.uk/theprops2012

How PROPS has helped

The pride in the voice of PROPS co-founder Neil Sinclair is clear when he talks about how the charity event, which this year celebrates its 21st birthday, has helped disabled young people. "What we are very pleased with is that since we started, we have raised £7m and bought 1,700 electric wheelchairs for kids," he says. "It is all about making a difference."

Just two of the many examples...

Matt King

Matt King was 17 when he broke his neck playing rugby in 2004. After being airlifted to Stoke Mandeville hospital, King spent a month in intensive care and eight months rehabilitating.

Sinclair's wife Pamela, chairman of Variety's wheelchair programme for 10 years, was involved with helping King get his wheelchair from the beginning. "He was unable to leave Stoke Mandeville because he didn't have a wheelchair to

accommodate his needs." PROPS gave him £25,000 to buy the chair. He decided to go back to school, got his A-levels and law degree with first-class honours. He is now working in the City for Stewarts Law.

"We are very proud of him because the PROPS money helped turn his life around. He has got his own chair.

King adds: "The wheelchair allowed me to return to school, complete a degree and start work as a trainee solicitor with Stewarts Law in London, which is certainly not something I thought possible during my nine-month stay in hospital, and it would not have been achievable had it not been for the support of the Variety Club and the PROPS.

"I am extremely grateful for the continuing support the PROPS provide me with, but know from first-hand experience that there are many other youngsters in a similar situation to that which I found myself in, so the work of the

Variety Club and the PROPS needs to continue if these children are to maximise their quality of life."

Matt King will be introducing this year's PROPS lunch at the London Hilton, Park Lane, on 15 May

St George's Hospital, Tooting, London

Sinclair says: "In the early years of PROPS we built up a bit of a cash balance that we could use. One appeal we got was from St George's Hospital in Tooting. They wanted £50,000 for their children's intensive care unit. But when we went down to the hospital to see the unit, I said: 'You don't want £50,000 – you want £250,000.'"

Sinclair recalls going to the opening and seeing a little baby in a big cot tied to a machine. She had had a stroke and the unit doctor told him the machine had saved her life. "And this machine came from us," he says.