

The day after John Scriven passed away, I spoke to his sister Sally.

She asked me if I'd say a few words about her brother.

I said, "What do you want me to tell the congregation?"

Sally, in her lovely frank and honest way, said, "Look, none of that stuff about when he was born, and where he went to school, and how many sisters he had. Please."

"No, I want you to tell people who he was, and the great gifts he possessed, and the beauty he brought to the world and to this town."

Wow, where, then, do I begin?

In a 5-minute conversation Sally spoke of John's skills as a pianist, painter, performer and storyteller.

The shows he eventually became legendary for, it appears, started long ago. When the Scriven kids were little, Sally said John ran the best puppet show in the business. He ordered big sister, Mary, onto the pushbike. She peddled for all her life was worth to generate enough light from the bicycle light to shine on the stage. Sally was plonked out front as audience and told to clap wildly, or she'd be in trouble. Then, the show began with John working the strings on Noddy and Witch to the delight of the crowd – well, Sally – and the exhaustion of the lighting technician, Mary.

Growing older, John learned the piano and mastered it with the help of the nuns at St Josephs. When time allowed, he played the piano throughout his full life. After John's brain tumour was removed, Sally arrived at Aberdeen one day to find the lid up on the piano. She asked him why, and he told her he just needed to see if his hands still worked. She said, "Well, do they?" "Yes," he said softly. "Then, don't just sit there, my brother, play something beautiful." And he did, as sick as he was.

Like a lot of country kids, John grew up and headed for the Big Smoke.

He built an illustrious career in the textile and fashion industry, becoming one of the longest-serving senior lecturers at the National Art School in Surry Hills.

In 1987, under the glass dome of the world's then most famous Paris department store, *Printemps*, John organised 47 talented young Australians to show their designs.

John recalls it as was one of the proudest moments in his career.

"These students did two shows a day for 10 days straight and each time the venue was filled to capacity," he said, "about 1,000 people, all paying to be there."

"By the time we'd finished, 20,000 people had glimpsed the stunning colours and designs of young Australia," John said.

In the 1990s he helped organise an Australian fashion show at the United Nations headquarters in New York. During this time, he also started taking fashion shows into India and Bangladesh.

John Scriven also held the first fashion show on the Great Wall of China. The event took place only weeks after the World Trade Center bombings in 2001.

"So nervous were the Chinese authorities about security at the bridal show," said John, "no live audience was allowed and television pictures had to be beamed back to screens in Tiananmen Square.

Last year, John was acknowledged at London's House of Lords for his contribution to Australia's textile and fashion industry at the centenary of the World Textile Organisation.

It's a life very few of us here in Aberdeen knew of, because John never boasted about it.

Ten years ago, John Scriven came back to Aberdeen ... and aren't we the luckier for it.

Most of us thought we knew John as that scruffy, shirtless bloke who was always gardening at Segenhoe Street. Wrong.

John Scriven was a man of quiet faith. He loved his historic Anglican church, St Marks, where we have gathered today. He was among a dedicated group of Aberdeen Anglicans who worked tirelessly to ensure this church achieved a new roof, glistened with fresh paint and gleaming windows, and sported the loveliest rose garden in town. If you drive by St Marks now, you can't help but feel incredibly proud, and know John Scriven has been in here.

But he was ecumenical, too. When the Catholics recently came knocking on his door, asking him to sell the block behind his house to allow new school buildings to be erected at St Josephs, he could have turned them away, reminding them he belonged to another faith.

He didn't.

John listened to their plight and, although it wasn't something he'd planned to do, he met them half way with an easement. All he asked was that the big gum trees be preserved.

You see, trees were really important to John Scriven. They represented strength, purpose and, of course, they made Aberdeen look a million dollars. And every time those trees were cut down or poisoned, and that happened more frequently than anyone in this room realises, he just went out and bought more. And away he went, planting still more trees; in the cemetery to stop the flowers blowing off the graves in the searing summer westerlies; along the New England Highway, in Jefferson Park; and down by the river. Wherever a tree was needed you'd find John Scriven and his team of dedicated helpers.

But John gave this town a lot more than trees. He and his committee members, gave Aberdeen the most precious of gifts, a doctor. With hundreds of country towns fighting each other for a GP, John brought Dr Ali and his family to Aberdeen. We owe him a debt of gratitude for that gesture.

John also did a tour of duty on the local council. There are many who joke he should have received a Victoria Cross for that effort, fighting to represent the interests of residents and ratepayers on a council not always open to his Big Picture plans to ensure Aberdeen prospered.

The elder statesmen and women of this little town were not forgotten by John, either. Once a month, you'd find him down the back of the Aberdeen Bowling Club, sitting in the dark with his beloved projector, showing the great Hollywood films. A mere \$10 would buy you a ticket for a three-course meal, a good chin-wag with your mates and a chance to reminisce while Grace Kelly or Tony Curtis danced across the screen.

Well, you're not going to find John down the back of that room anymore, nor running frantically between the Club's kitchen and the dining room ensuring guests were enjoying themselves at one of his many costume extravaganzas.

His sister, Sally, said there's only one way she can reconcile him not being here.

"Somewhere in Heaven something looks pretty shabby and needs sprucing up and that's why at, 67, he got the Big Call to leave us when he still had so much to do," she said.

"My brother's up there decorating and advising, yes, that's what he's doing."

In the days since John's death, Sally said something else.

"I think he's like one of those artists from the Renaissance, you know, the ones whose contribution to the world is never fully understood, nor fully appreciated, until they leave us."

Of course, she is right.

John Scriven was a dreamer of gargantuan proportions. He could see a blank page, a blank space or a blank room and he could see what it could become.

He could see what the rest of us couldn't and he could see the promise.

Above all, he could see Aberdeen the same way; as that great place of promise.

My overwhelming sadness, as I finish this eulogy today, is that John Scriven never got to see the Rural Museum he, and his small band of committee members, fought so hard to achieve.

They knocked on doors, they filled out grant applications, they schmoozed the right people, I think they probably schmoozed the *wrong* people, and they begged to bring

this town the historic Glenbawn Dam collection, the cultural centre, the cinema and the café he so desperately wanted for all of us, for our children, and for those who will visit Aberdeen in the years to come.

Not long before he died, I asked John why the centre mattered so much to him.

"Why, Catherine," he said in that softly-spoken voice of his, "that's easy."

"More than anything, I want Aberdeen to have its own museum where we can display the textiles of our heritage and all the other great historical pieces that define who we are, where we've come from and where we are going."

John Scriven and his team are owed that legacy.

His loss to this town, and to the world, is only just beginning to sink in.

Vale, John Alfred Scriven, vale.