

BUSINESS CONSUMER AFFAIRS TRUSTS

Darrell Lea heir's millions locked away by state

By [Caitlin Fitzsimmons](#)

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As one of the heirs to the Darrell Lea fortune, Robert Lea is worth nearly \$15 million. At 72, he could be enjoying a sweet retirement.

Instead Mr Lea and his wife Simone Lea, 56, are living in a “run-down” house with mouldy tiles and ceiling cracks and he is forced to “beg” the Queensland government for permission to spend his own money.



Robert and Simone Lee at their Gold Coast home. PAUL HARRIS

Mr Lea is under financial administration of the Public Trustee of Queensland, which has charged him hundreds of thousands of dollars in fees since 2013.

Mrs Lea claims her husband has memory lapses but can make decisions in daily life and make his wishes known. Mr Lea spoke to *The Sun-Herald* briefly to confirm he wanted the story reported.

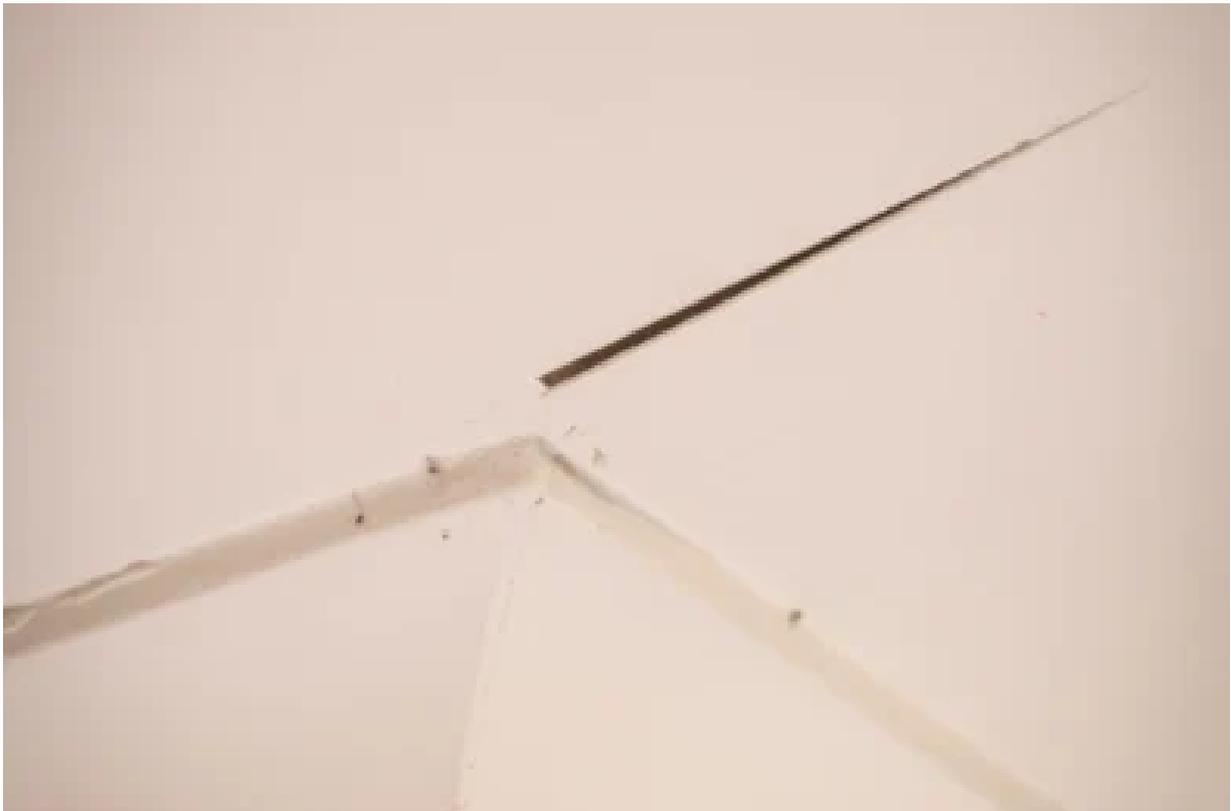
Mr Lea, one of the grandsons of the Darrell Lea founder, came into his millions after the Lea family sold the chocolate business to the Quinn family in 2012.

Mr and Mrs Lea live in a modest four-bedroom brick veneer home in Worongary, a Gold Coast suburb about 12km from the sea. The house is worth about \$520,000, based on Domain estimates.

Mr Lea was worth \$14.68 million at the end of 2018, an account statement from the public trustee reveals. From that Mr and Mrs Lea are paid a living allowance of \$185,000 a year including \$50,000 set aside for capital expenses.

While that is well above the average household income, Mr Lea's wealth could be funding a very different lifestyle.

Jonathan Philpot, a partner with wealth management firm HLB Mann Judd, said he could not give personal advice but a hypothetical couple with that net worth could "well and truly" afford to upgrade their home.



The Leas' house has cracks in the ceiling in the hallway, kitchen and living room. PAUL HARRIS

Mr Philpot said a risk-free investment strategy for \$14 million would earn 3 per cent a year - generating income of \$420,000 a year before tax. To beat inflation, it would be better to invest in some shares and aim for a 5 per cent return.

Mrs Lea said their home was "very run-down" and she and Robert had been begging for several years to be allowed to upgrade the "leaking, mouldy and ugly" bathrooms. Emails sighted by *The Sun-Herald* suggest that in 2016 the public trustee agreed to allow the Leas to order bathroom tiles, only to change their minds. The bathroom renovation is going ahead now, nearly three years later.

The Leas are now requesting the replacement of their shed, which Mrs Lea says has termite damage.

Mrs Lea has to pay for living expenses on her credit card and then apply to the public trustee for reimbursement. However, she claims that sometimes the public trustee will veto purchases after the fact even if it's within the approved budget. Bank statements reveal Mrs Lea had no

credit card debt in 2012 and 2013, but now has an outstanding balance of \$37,000, incurring interest charges of \$385 a month.



Mouldy tiles in the bathroom of the Leas' Gold Coast home. PAUL HARRIS

“It’s harassment, pure and simple,” Mrs Lea says. “This is how they break people - but they won’t break me.”

Meanwhile, statements reveal the public trustee charged about \$86,000 in fees and another \$17,000 in outlays such as tax agent fees, investment unit fees, postage and phone calls between September 2013 and April 2018. Separately, the public trustee has charged nearly \$223,000 in other fees to Mr Lea’s trust.

Most of the money held by the public trustee on behalf of Mr Lea is held in cash. A total of \$11.5 million is held in an at-call account earning about 2.5 per cent interest, statements reveal. The public trustee charges Mr Lea nearly \$2800 for placing an external investment, including opening or rolling over a term deposit.

When approached for comment, the Public Trustee of Queensland said it would be "quite improper and unlawful" to provide information about an adult for whom the public trustee is appointed administrator. The public trustee also said the information Mrs Lee had provided was "lacking in context".

Guardianship and financial administration or management are state-based systems designed to protect people who lack decision-making capacity and don’t have suitable family members to protect them.

There are [problems with the public trustee system Australia wide](#), as revealed by a *Herald* and *Age* investigation last week.

The [disability discrimination commissioner has described](#) the whole concept of substitute decision making as “butchering a number of human rights” and at odds with our United Nations human rights commitments.

PLEASE DON'T IDENTIFY YOURSELVES OR OTHERS UNDER FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT OR GUARDIANSHIP IN THE COMMENTS.



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