

# upwardly mobile

*The rise of “Crazy John” Ilhan is classic rags-to-riches stuff – the son of working-class immigrants goes on to build a communications empire. But there’s nothing mad about his method. The secret to his place as one of Australia’s richest men, he says, is family and his Muslim faith.*  
By Libbi Gorr.

It’s a long way up to the 46th floor of Melbourne’s Rialto Towers, the corporate headquarters of John Ilhan, also known as mobile phone dealer “Crazy John”. Named last year by *BRW* magazine as Australia’s richest man under 40, the now 41-year-old, elegantly slim and surprisingly boyish, relaxes at the boardroom table in a clean, white room against a panoramic view of Port Phillip Bay. Apart from a stylish pond of pebbles, the room is sparse. “There’s no wastage,” says Ilhan.

The boy from the working-class suburb of Broadmeadows, whose company made a net profit of \$10 million last year, needs no expensive reminders of success. He can see it all out the window, down in City Road, South Melbourne, where the Crazy John’s headquarters, mother ship to 100 shops nationally and more than 600 employees, are located. Of course, Ilhan would be happier if he could get his building plans for the site approved. Why Melbourne’s planners don’t appreciate the beauty of a multistorey building in the shape of a mobile phone, complete with oversized buttons, he can’t understand.

Be seen. Be heard. It’s the “Crazy John” Ilhan method. So, too, is sponsoring both the ARL and NRL *Footy Show* and sending an actor dressed as the Crazy John’s mascot to place the winning \$670,000 auction bid on 2003’s *The Block*. “You want loud?” he says. “Here I am, this is me, this loser from somewhere, here’s my brand. Heellllloooo! How do I make everyone know me for the sake of the business? Everyone wants to knock you down so I’ve got to get everyone to know me. Heellllloooo!”

After a rocky retail history – Ilhan went into voluntary administration in 1997 – Ilhan crashed through, discounting mobile phones to build a fortune estimated at \$300 million. He has a simple business plan: be known and loved by the masses. “You ever see an aggressive beggar?” he asks earnestly. “You don’t. A beggar is very humble. And that’s what happens in business when you are starting from scratch. You need people to support you so you’re very nice. You realise that people can be your best asset in business. And that comes from starting from nothing.”

Well, almost nothing. He dropped out of his La Trobe University arts degree after only a few months to take a job at Ford installing car batteries. Two weeks later, Ford made him a sales clerk but after three years of watching his uni-graduate colleagues get the promotions, he joined Strathfield Car Radios. He became the company’s best salesman. “If you haven’t studied, you don’t know any better so you just try things. Anything is possible.” But still he was unsatisfied.

Ilhan’s father mortgaged his home to give his son a \$15,000 overdraft to finance his first mobile phone dealership

in Melbourne’s Brunswick in 1991. The company almost floated in 2000 for \$80 million but during those early, hard years, Ilhan’s business partner left him, his girlfriend left him and he didn’t make any money.

It’s hard to imagine that now, looking at Ilhan in his swish Versace suit and tie. “He loves to shop,” says Patricia, 41, his wife of almost 10 years and mother of their three daughters, Yasmin, 8, Hannah, 6, and Jaida, 4. “He’s very fashion conscious. He likes nice shoes and suits, to look good for work. And he’s very generous. You couldn’t want for a better girlfriend to go shopping with. Except he pays.”

This is a man who knows it’s important to look good but that appearances only go so far. “I’m a Muslim and I realise that arrogance is a no-no,” says Ilhan, who was born Mustafa in Yozgut, Turkey, and moved to Australia with his family at age five. He took the name John after his best mate at primary school; the “Crazy”, he says, came later, inspired by a customer’s remark that giving away hundreds of dollars worth of free phone accessories was just that. “I think I will struggle in life spiritually unless I do good things. It might sound naive but I think life is as simple as that. If you are kind to your staff, they will probably work harder. Arrogance kills CEOs. I think life gives you what you deserve. But I think there is a higher being that controls us.”

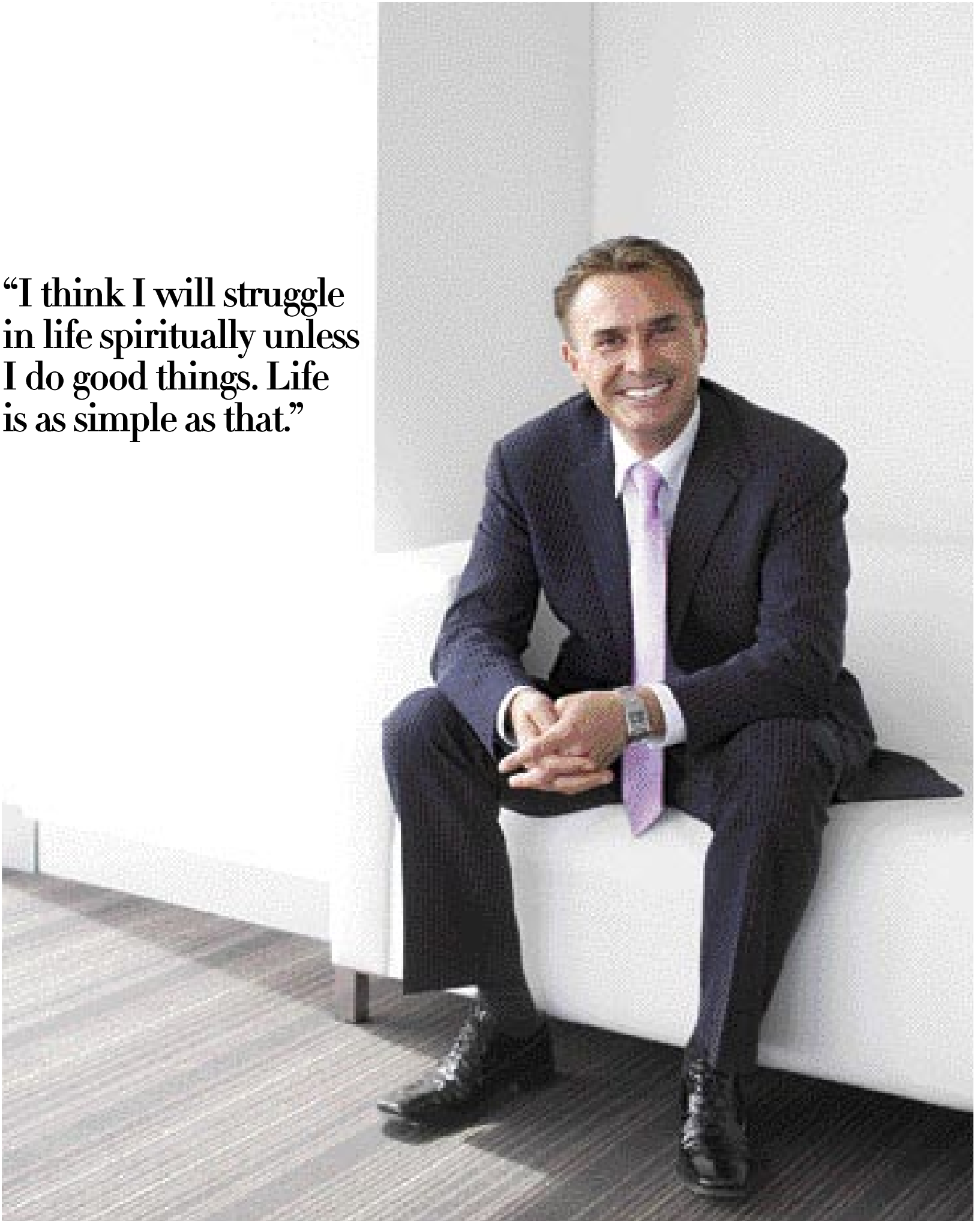
He believes in destiny because “I’m a coward. Being a coward, you think somebody else is determining your life. I’m not so courageous to be an atheist. That just scares the hell out of me. I need to have someone looking after us.”

Patricia Ilhan, raised a Catholic in conservative Hawthorn, confirms his beliefs. The pair met 15 years ago when she worked as an account manager for Telstra and John was struggling to make ends meet in Brunswick. He kept asking her for a coffee; she kept refusing – until he enlisted the help of her sister. “When we were going out, I knew deep down he was a very good man with a very good heart,” says Patricia. “He is very careful about how he acts towards other people – his staff, his colleagues, me and the children. It stems from a fear of the afterlife. He believes if he is mean on earth, he will pay the price for it when he passes away.”

Fellow Broadmeadows boy-done-good Eddie McGuire, who’s known Ilhan since 1993, puts it a different way. “The thing about John is, it’s not always about taking. He asks for something, you provide it, he pays – it’s pretty straightforward. But he wants everybody to do well around him.”

Ilhan is aware that coming out as a Muslim in Australia right now is a risky cultural business. “Some of my staff probably haven’t met a Muslim before,” he reflects. “When I was young, I used to hear all about the wars in the →

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Family man Entrepreneur John Ilhan with his wife, Patricia, and their three daughters (left to right), Jaida, Hannah and Yasmin.

**“He is not an extremist. His faith is important to him but he has assimilated into our community.”**



Middle East. And then you come to a country like Australia and make so many wonderful friends who are Jewish, it's like, what are we talking about?"

The first non-family member who helped Ilhan in business was Peter Pyles, a lawyer who is Jewish. Pyles is flattered that Ilhan remembers him as "an adviser, a mentor". "I acted for him when he opened his first store," says Pyles, who runs a general legal practice in Melbourne's CBD. "I was aware that he was Turkish and a Muslim but we didn't talk about religion. I know that he keeps *halal* [Islamic laws governing food preparation] and he doesn't drink alcohol. He is certainly not an extremist. His family is important to him and his faith is important to him but he is someone who has been able to assimilate into our community as Jews and Buddhists have done. He's a brilliant businessman and I can't think of an example of any finer person of the Muslim faith who I've met."

In the late 1960s, Ilhan's father, Ali, then an administrator at the university in Ankara, fled Turkey's totalitarian rule following the toppling of the democratically elected government. "My father was a liberal," says Ilhan. "But it was getting too dangerous for a lot of families. You'd walk down the street and be asked: what party are you from? If it wasn't the right answer, you'd get shot."

Ali arrived in Sydney in 1970 with his wife, Nezaket, and their three children. After a few months in a refugee hostel, the family rented an apartment in the tough suburb of Broadmeadows. All three kids – John, sister Ayse, now 38, and eldest son Celal, two years John's senior, known as Gerald, shared a bedroom for 10 years while Ali and Nezaket worked on the production line at the Ford factory.

"Gerald was dark, like a Maori," says Ilhan. "And in Broadmeadows, he used to get picked on a lot. He got into fights a lot and became a bouncer, a kick boxer. He was

fighting in nightclubs. We couldn't rein him in. He got married a couple of times, had a child from each marriage." Then one day, he was found dead in his apartment. "They say it was a heart attack but they say it could be suicide – no one is too sure." That was 10 years ago. "I've got three beautiful nieces. They're good kids, gorgeous girls. I'm the only uncle. Their father is not around. It's a duty, isn't it, to look after your family?" Two of the girls – Neslihan, 22, and Leyla, 16, work for their uncle when they're not studying.

Family is Ilhan's rock. When he was 32 and his company went into voluntary administration, Ayse would work by day at a medical centre, then help John by night with his paperwork. Now she works for him full-time. Indeed, Ilhan lived at home with his folks until he was 31. "No matter what hard times I went through in business, I could always rely on my parents. I would not be here today if I did not have them." Just last year, in gratitude, he built his parents, now in their 60s, a grand new house "in Broadmeadows", he grins. "They won't move; they just will not. All their friends are there."

Unlike his parents, Ilhan and his family live at Brighton's Golden Mile in a house reportedly worth \$15 million. Life is luxurious now but the couple had a rocky start. "It was very, very difficult," recalls Patricia, who runs the Ilhan Foundation's healthy-eating education program, with a sigh. Ilhan, then 24, was a struggling phone retailer from the wrong side of the Yarra, and she, a few months older and the epitome of a Melbourne, Camberwell, upbringing, complete with convent education and Melbourne University psychology degree.

Ilhan chuckles at the memory. "Oh, her mother... You know that movie *Not Without My Daughter* with Sally Field? [For those who don't, in the 1991 drama, an American woman is trapped in Islamic Iran by her brutish, fundamentalist husband.] I'm at Trish's place, having coffee. Her mother →







**“I was brought up in Australia. I’m an Australian. Everything I’ve got in my life is due to this country.”**

**Lord of the rings** His father mortgaged his home to finance John Ilhan’s first mobile phone shop in Melbourne’s Brunswick. Today, Crazy John’s is a 100-strong national dealership worth an estimated \$300 million.

heard she was going out with a Turkish Muslim guy. She knocks on the door. I open the door. She’s got a tape in her hand, pushes me out of the way and says, ‘Have a look at this, Patricia.’ In front of me, she puts the video on and says, ‘That’s what he’s going to do to you.’ She was serious; she was absolutely serious.”

Ilhan recounted this tale at his 40th birthday party last year and his mother-in-law was “sort of laughing. Which is fine. You know every parent would worry about their child, especially a daughter. But she loves me now. She says I’m a good father and a good husband and so we are really close.”

Patricia converted to Islam to marry Ilhan. “I learned the five pillars of Islam: that there is only one God; that you should fast for 30 days during Ramadan; that Mohammed is the main prophet of God, rather than Jesus; that you should go to Mecca once in your lifetime; and that you should pray five times a day. On my wedding day, I made a vow that I accepted those five pillars of Islam and that I agreed to raise my children as Muslim and from that point, I became a Muslim.” If she hadn’t converted, “he wouldn’t have married me,” she says. “His religion, his spirituality, is who he is.”

Ilhan is at pains to say he is not one to impose his beliefs on others. “I was brought up in Australia. I have my own beliefs religiously. But that’s a personal thing. First and foremost is your allegiance to the country. You look at some Muslims who don’t feel passionate about Australian values or Australian Government decisions. And how are you Australian? It doesn’t make sense to me. I’m an Australian. It just happens that I am Muslim.”

He is angry with some of his fellow Muslims, he says. “When the Bali bombing happened, when so many Australians died, a lot of Muslims didn’t donate money. That’s a problem. It’s as if they’re not really Australian. Then why are you here? My wife’s Australian. My kids are

Australian. Everything I’ve got in my life is due to this country.”

He knows his views will anger some of the more traditional members of the Turkish community but he is unafraid. This, after all, is the man who’s midway through a legal stoush with Telstra, his exclusive network provider, which claims Crazy John’s has been overpaid some \$33 million in commissions. “For all the fun and mucking around,” says Eddie Maguire, “he’s no fool and no one will ever walk all over him. Whether it be someone trying to rip off his name or squaring up to Telstra, he won’t back away from what he thinks is right.”

Plans to branch into franchises and double the size of the network would put Crazy John’s among the 50 biggest franchise chains in Australia. The company’s profit was down from the previous financial year’s \$30 million but that was after rolling out 70 stores across the country, driving up staff numbers by two-thirds and partnering with Kodak, at a rate of two stores a month, so that eventually 50 or 60 Kodak stores will be selling his phones. Ilhan wants Crazy John’s to be a network provider, like Richard Branson’s Virgin Mobile, by 2007.

Ilhan works about 18 hours a day but claims life is not all about work. “My father says it’s not where you are heading that matters, it’s what you’re leaving behind. You could be working so hard and not spending time with your family. Always look at what you are walking away from and that will bring you back down to earth. And it’s true. I don’t care about business; I promise you I don’t. Business is a game.”

It’s impossible not to guffaw. “You don’t know me very well,” he says firmly. And then he relents, a little. “I care but it’s not everything. Where I’m from, everything’s a bonus, trust me. Would I want to be back in Brunswick 14 years ago with not a dollar in my pocket? I’d rather today any day of the week. Not because of money but because of the love of a mother and a father and a family. You can’t replace that.” ●