

Our Voices In Writing

Bankstown

Older Women's Network

Writers' Group

Our Voices in Writing is a selection of writings produced as the result of a project initiated by the Bankstown Older Women's Network Wellness Center, and funded by Bankstown City Council. This project was auspiced by the Older Women's Network NSW Inc.

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Foreword

This book is a narrative of women's stories. It is an account of their lives in their own words. It should also be viewed as study of their achievements, a study which will help reveal the importance of women's capabilities and resilience.

Some of the participants did not have the opportunity for an academic education, but many had the desire to express their feelings and experiences in writing. For some, there was no access to higher education, and for many the only work available was limited to factory or domestic work, with little opportunity to explore other options because society deemed it improper, or it was simply an unaffordable dream.

With the desire to express their feelings and experiences there was also the need to express their frustrations.

With this book they had the opportunity to write, to cultivate a network of friendship, which gave them the space to develop their style, and their sense of self. The very art of writing is proof of their existence, an extraordinary achievement, not just a pleasant past time, but a declaration of their self worth.

Our project was to produce a small collection of 3 autobiographies and 3 biographies of women from the Bankstown area. We did, and along the way we produced so much more! The women in the group whose work is not featured in this collection also learned to write stories, do research, visit libraries, collect data, perform public presentations, negotiate group dynamics, as well as gaining experience in report writing, and many other skills. They also hope one day to publish their work.

On a personal level I wish to add, what a pleasure and a privilege it has been for me, to work with this wonderful group of women!

The women who participated in this important project were:

Mavis Rosenberg, June Hatzidoulis, Barbara McDonall, Lydia Sarabi, Diane T. Brown, Laraine Sullivan Lina Marzolla, Nancy Griffith, Hikmat Rihani, Lola O'Reilly, Nefley Takacs, Daphne Smith, Jill Mac Donald, Demi Daskas and myself, Silvana Gruber.



Silvana Gruber

Bankstown Older Women's Network Writers' Group Facilitator

Acknowledgments

Together, we wish to thank Jan Malley, Bankstown Older Women's Network Coordinator, and the Bankstown OWN Management Committee for their support and encouragement.

We also wish to thank the Bankstown Council for approving the grant that made this project possible.

Thanks also to all the staff of the Bankstown Library for their kind assistance and support.

With the biographies, huge thanks to The Hon Helen Westwood, June Hatzldoulis and Phillis Johnson, for agreeing to be interviewed and giving us their permission to write and publish their stories.

Thank you also to OWN NSW for their assistance with the publication and launch, and particularly special thanks to the editorial team: Helen Young, Lorraine Inglis and June West, helping us achieve our dream.

Lastly, I personally would like to thank all the women mentioned above for entrusting me with this incredible project and for travelling with me on this great adventure.

Silvana Gruber

Bankstown Older Women's Network Writers' Group Facilitator

About the Autobiographies

The following 3 autobiographies are a selection of the work produced by the Bankstown Older Women's Network Writers Group.

The reader will find that, famous or not, all the women in this book are very important. All have played pivotal roles in making our community a wonderful, strong and vibrant place to live. I admire their courage, strength and their honest expression. They have certainly made an impact on my life, and I'm certain now they can share their stories, their lives will resonate with a wider audience.

Silvana Gruber

Bankstown Older Women's Network Writers' Group Facilitator



MY JOURNEY - Barbara McDonall

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MY JOURNEY - Barbara McDonall



Preface

I decided to write my story and share with my family, the journey of my life.

I have had the memorable experiences, the happy experiences and the traumatic heart breaking experiences.

Memories that could not be erased were locked in my heart,

the brightness of the summers,

the fall of the autumn,

The cold reality of the winters,

and the wonderful awakening of the spring



MY JOURNEY - Barbara McDonall

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my family and friends who helped to make this autobiography possible.

Many thanks to my teacher, Silvana Gruber who encouraged me to write, and I am eternally appreciative to her for the hours spent, reading, correcting and advising me how to construct and prepare my stories.

Putting pen to paper has gradually opened the emotional doors I had kept tightly closed for many years.

Dedication to My Family with Love

If you think you are beaten, you are.

If you think you dare not, you don't.

*If you like to win, but you think you can't,
it is almost certain you won't.*

Life's battles don't always go

To the stronger or faster man

But, sooner or later, the person who wins

Is the person WHO THINKS HE CAN

Anonymous



MY JOURNEY - Barbara McDonall

Introduction

The King is dead. Long live the King. The British Government and Monarchy, with traditional pomp and ceremony, prepare for the funeral of King George V and the accession of King Edward VIII.

On the other side of the world my parents anxiously await my arrival and on January 22nd, 1936, without any twenty-one gun salute, I quietly arrive into this wonderful world.

I was given the name of Barbara, after Saint Barbara, symbolizing Love, Strength and Courage.

Now my journey begins.





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The key

I placed the key hesitatingly in the keyhole of the front door, knowing when I entered, it would be an emotional trip down memory lane.

My immediate awareness was of the intense silence, the cold emptiness, the loneliness that comes from something that was, and now sadly has passed. No personal objects lovingly placed throughout, not even the ticking of the clock. Complete stillness. The musty, stuffy smell of a home closed up for some time. I could hear my Mother say "Open the front door, open the back door and let the breeze flow through and air the house".

The large rooms, the unfurnished spaciousness, the high ceilings, the walls in need of a touch of paint, and the carpet, although in good condition, requiring cleaning. This was my family home, my parent's castle for over seventy years, where they had lived, loved and shared the joys and sorrows that come in a long married life.

As I passed my parent's bedroom I thought of the wonderful times we had in there – Sunday mornings, all in bed together, laughing, playing, with the smell of burnt toast wafting from the kitchen as my parents persevered with the hard crunchy burnt toast and the crumbs that came with breakfast in the bed.

The lounge room where once the Pianola had held pride and place, and where many hours were spent with family sing-alongs and get-togethers. The noise had been unbelievable ...

The kitchen, that had catered for the parties, birthdays and weddings ...

As I open the window I see the graceful peppercorn tree and inhale the aroma of its leaves. Its lower branches had held our swings and, higher up, our tree house. For a brief moment my home was alive again, and I held it tightly, looking once more on a family's life.

This was my final journey, recapturing the home I grew up in, grew old in. Now it will once again be filled with a happy family, the laughter of children, enjoying their new life, awakening the sounds of their new home.

I removed the key for the last time, conscious of how it echoed and how loud it seemed.

But all is not completely lost — I hear a piano with someone singing, I capture wonderful baking aromas as I pass the cake shop, the peppercorn trees scattered around our area fill the air with their familiar fragrance. My home as I left it may be silent, but the sounds and smells are always in my heart, ready to come alive ...

The way it was

That huge peppercorn tree in the corner of the yard was part of our lives in Canterbury. We had climbed it, played in it, and later it provided a shady canopy for our table and chairs, and somewhere to relax after each set. Because another wonderful part of our lives was our tennis court.

During the week the neighbourhood children would rush home from school, change their clothes, grab their tennis racquets and come to our place for a game of tennis. We were all beginners, about the same age, eight to ten years, anxious to learn, and with tuition and constant practice we all gradually improved.

Sunday was especially important to us, it was the day of the week when we all got together, Mums, Dads, Uncles, Aunties, sisters and brothers, whether it rained, hailed or shone we were together for our extended family tennis day. We all participated, some with skill, some hit and giggled, while others had to win at all costs, knowing that there was always a lucky prize to be won from the winner's gift basket. Then there were others who were happy just to be there and to enjoy the fun.

A lot of preparation had taken place before the Sunday. My Father, Uncle and the boys had to prepare the sandy loam court to accord with the rules and measurements stipulated by the Tennis Association, and a very professional approach was taken to ensure the court met with the required standards.

After a heavy drenching of the sand-based loam court, it was an exhausting exercise to roll the court with a heavy



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concrete roller weighing more than a ton, backwards and forwards to compact the surface and have it in readiness for the lines to be painted.

The paint was a light paste solution of white lime and water and, as a guide for the white lines, Dad had made a template using two wooden planks joined together having the exact width of the regulation lines. As one section was completed the template was lifted and moved to the next section until all the lines were marked. It was our job to fix the net to the retaining poles, adjust its height and of course repair any of the breaks in the netting. When all this was completed, the court was a picture to behold.

At about 9.30 am the extended family began to arrive with cakes, scones and biscuits for morning tea, and then there was cold meat and salads for lunch. We needed the tennis to work off those unwanted excess calories.

If inclement weather precluded tennis, the prepared food was always there for lunch, and at the end of the day there was a Chinese feast. As my Mother and her brothers were brought up with a Chinese family, they loved Chinese food and so, at the end of the normal tennis day, the menfolk would gather a number of containers, walk to the railway station and catch a train to the city Central to purchase the Chinese meal.

It is hard to believe that they would travel from Canterbury to Central each week to buy this Chinese feast, but they had to – there were no Chinese restaurants in our area in those days.

By the time the menfolk arrived home, the tennis gear was packed away, all the children were bathed or showered, the dining table was set and everyone was waiting patiently for the special Chinese treats to arrive. There was so much variety: soups, rice noodles, prawns, chicken and pork, all with those exceptional sauces the Chinese are famous for. The aroma was always inviting.

With dinner completed, the table cleared and washing up done, the tablecloth was replaced with a blanket in readiness for our Sunday night's ritual game of cards. Even though we were not big money spinners at the gambling table, everyone enjoyed their involvement, especially with the possibility of doubling their money.

These never-to-be-repeated years were the great times of total involvement of family and friends. Unfortunately as the years rolled on "progress" brought about the subdivision of our beloved tennis court for additional housing, but although we lost the tennis, the gathering of the family and friends continued every Sunday for many years, together with the special Chinese banquet followed by the traditional card game.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Perhaps I should go back to the beginning.

Growing up

The Depression was at its height when, in 1936, my parents and I moved from inner city one-bedroom accommodation to a rented three-bedroom home in Canterbury. It was a vast change – now we had plenty of space, gardens, trees and even a tennis court.

Times were tough, it took almost every penny of my Father's income for us to survive, but everyone was in the same situation and prepared to help each other in any way possible. My Mother's younger brother was married with a baby girl and finding it hard to make ends meet, so my parents suggested they come and live with us, making everyone part of this extended family. We children always had someone to play with; we were fortunate to have so many wonderful new friends and playmates. My brother arrived in 1939 and my cousin in 1940. We were now a family of eight, and stayed that way for thirteen years.

When World War II came in 1939 my Father and Uncles soon enlisted; my Uncles were accepted into the Army, but my Father was rejected as he was working in the piano trade which was a protected industry. As an alternative he became our local Air Raid Warden as his contribution to the war effort.

We young children, did not realize the seriousness of the war, so the air raid practice conducted several times



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each week seemed great fun. Covers were on the windows, there were candles for light, and my Father went checking all the homes to see if the local residents were abiding by the restrictions.

When three Japanese midget submarines entered Sydney Harbour in May 1942 our family became really alarmed, since some of its members lived in the Botany Bay area and they feared more subs would enter Botany Bay. It was then that our matriarch Aunt suggested that all of us should come to her country home in the Southern Highlands until hopefully things were safe to return.

So in 1942 our four families, totalling twelve, consisting of Mothers and children, travelled by steam train to our new home in the country. It was situated on acres of land, rolling hills, a dairy on the next property where we learnt to milk cows, ride horses and acquire general knowledge of the workings of a farm in a rural area.

Bath time each night was quite an experience. The large tub was placed in front of the fireplace and the water was bucketed from the kitchen, having been heated on the kitchen stove. Eight children to bath each night became an ordeal, so we had a roster of who was going to be first each night, number one being best and number eight the worst, where we had to keep adding more water to keep the water at a comfortable temperature.

Only bore water was used, as we had to be very aware of water restrictions; there was no electricity, only candles and hurricane lamps. We were all in bed early every night and up with the birds at the break of dawn.

It was an exciting period of our lives and even now when we cousins get together we reminisce on the wonderful times we had. We often returned to my Aunt's home, but with 'progress' things have changed. Her home is now an antique house, the dairy where we had so much fun is now a garden nursery, and all the surrounding properties have been subdivided into small building blocks. The quiet rural area we knew has become a busy thriving town easy accessible by a modern freeway. Inevitable, but the atmosphere of that small, close-knit village can never be replaced.

It was 1945 and the war was over. My Uncles returned home safe and sound, both having had a traumatic time in POW camps. We had returned to our respective homes months earlier.

Eight years old

*Think about when you were eight
years old,*

We were asked in class,

To write a poem or a story,

Relating to this period of our past.

Well! I'm thinking and I'm thinking—

Gosh, it's becoming a strain.

*Do I have something of importance
stored somewhere in my brain?*

*Well! I'm still thinking, and I'm still
thinking—*

Hoping for a sign,

That will jolt my thoughts and memory.

back to this special time.

*Too many years to retrieve, or recall any
of these days.*

*Although some visions are emerging, but
only in a haze.*

No dolls, dressing up or tea parties for me.

Only bikes and activities are all I can see.

So I'm thinking and I'm thinking

And hoping it will be great.

More memorable and exciting,

When I am Seventy Eight.



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Hop-a-long

Having chooks in the country is one thing; having them as pets in suburbia is another.

My Mother decided to take my brother and I to the city by train, then the ferry to Manly, and finally visit Paddy's Market to buy some fruit, vegetables and some two day old chickens. We were about four and seven years at the time and very excited to be travelling to the city.

Paddy's Market has been on the same site in the City of Sydney for many years, with sellers making available to the public fresh produce, flowers, clothes, bric a brac and every conceivable item you wish to buy.

After a long search we found the area selling the yellow, cuddly, chirping chicks and selected six of these tiny creatures. They were placed in a shoe box, with a little covering of straw on the base of the box. and holes in its lid so they could have some fresh air during the journey home. For security, the supplier put an elastic band around the box.

Not trusting my brother and me to hold our precious chicks, my Mother carried the box to the train for our journey home. It was great, we had a window seat and Mum was caring for our treasured cargo on a seat nearby.

No sooner had the train moved off than the public address system announced there would be some delays during our journey, as maintenance was being conducted on the train tracks.

Some time later the train began to slow down, almost to a stop and we were able to observe and take more notice of the local environment. "Mummy, Mummy" my little brother called out, "Look at the horses. One is on the other ones back"!

Everyone in the carriage was drawn to his observation, and for an extended moment we had a visual demonstration of the mating behaviour of horses. Almost at the same moment the work on the train tracks exploded, Wow! what an impact! My Mother jumped with fright and dropped the box containing our treasured chicks, the elastic band broke, the lid fell off, and six of the yellow balls of fluff took off in all directions.

They were under the seats, on top of the cases and in any little crevice they could find. Like the other kids on the train, we were screaming in desperation to find our chicks.

We could hear the passengers saying "Here's one", "There goes another one". It was sheer pandemonium, hard to believe that these little chicks could create so much chaos in such a short time. One man had to be assisted from the floor as he was caught between the seats while looking for them, and couldn't free himself. With the help of all the passengers the six little yellow balls of fluff were finally found and placed back in the box as we approached our destination.

"Many thanks to all and enjoy your holidays" my Mother said as we left the train. We were eager to arrive home and tell our experiences to the neighbours, to whom we had promised three of the little birds

As time went on the chicks developed well, they put on weight and were happy foraging in the garden. One of the chicks had an obvious limp, probably the result of our chaotic train journey, so we called him Hop-a-long. Even with his limp he adjusted to the surroundings – a little slower, but he managed quite well.

Unbeknown to the chickens, a family reunion dinner party was fast approaching and everyone was looking forward to a wonderful spread of food and drinks.

"Welcome, welcome!" my Mother said as she ushered the family in.

"Dinner is almost ready, come and sit down and enjoy yourselves." They were all very appreciative of the display of food Mum had prepared.

My brother and I looked at the three roasted chickens, the centrepiece on the table, knowing that one of the chickens must be "Hop-a-long". We could not eat any part of our dinner – we excused ourselves from the table and



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went out into the garden. How devastated we were at the thought of eating our little pet. When we called his name he used to hop along to greet us.

He didn't deserve being the centrepiece at a dinner party.

The moral of this story is to be more selective when you choose a farm animal as a pet.

The Southern Highlands

My early years, between eight and fourteen, were spent between the city and the Southern Highlands, where I stayed with my Aunt and Uncle, who had a Post Office Agency three kilometres out of Mittagong. My Aunt was a wonderful lady, short, round and cuddly, who was always happy and loved life. My Uncle, on the other hand, was a serious man brought up in the Victorian era, who watched us like a hawk at mealtimes to see if our manners were up to the standard he expected. He and my Aunt were complete opposites who had a compatible relationship, and I loved them dearly.

Life was simple. All our meals, including breakfast, were cooked on the wood stove, as electricity has not been installed in the outlying areas. We had chickens which provided the meat and eggs, the orchard for fresh fruit, and the vegetable garden supplied all our vegetables. We lived by candlelight and hurricane lamps and we relied on the rain for tank and bore water.

Our cooler or meat safe was a square wooden frame covered with hessian, with a metal tray top and bottom. The top tray was filled with water which would gradually seep down the sides of the hessian, keeping the safe cool for our perishable goods. We also had cast metal clothes irons which were placed on the top of the wood stove to heat up; as one iron cooled off we replaced it with the second iron from the stove.

When I returned to the city I completed my education and joined the workforce with the NSW Railways. Having lived through the depression in the 1930s, my father advised me to "join a Government organization, it is more secure", so in 1951 I began my working career. I was fifteen. How exciting life was, with new people, new friends, and new interests. The world was my oyster!

Adolescence

The Macquarie Dictionary lists the word Adolescence as Immature, youthful, young, teenager, growing up. I can remember being in all these categories at the same time.

Take the first two. I was certainly young and immature, spending most of my youthful days riding push bikes, playing games in the street, and having fun with my friends, boys and girls. Then almost overnight everything looked different. The boys somehow seemed strong, handsome and good looking, and were paying special attention to me.

They were changing and so was I, not only my attitude, but my body, and for a frightening moment I thought I was going to die.

I cried and cried to my Mother, as I had no idea what was happening. She assured me everything was going to be OK, because this happens to all young girls, and it will happen every month.

"Oh my God, I really am going to die", I said.

"You are now a young lady, put your shoes on and don't sit on the concrete because you will get a chill in your bladder", she told me. "How come"? I asked my Mother, "I'm still the same person I was yesterday"!

Once again she made the statement, "Don't worry, you will be OK" and that was the end of the discussion. Thus began my transition from adolescence to being a teenager.



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Gone were the days of frivolous childish games with the boys; now they were more serious, holding hands instead of the handle bars of the push bikes, even the touch or the peck on the cheek took on a whole new meaning. It was beginning to be a very interesting and exciting life.

Boyfriends

Our family tennis days led me into competition tennis on Saturdays and social tennis on Sundays, and this led to more association with the opposite gender.

My first boyfriend was my competition tennis partner, a tall, fairly good looking fellow, suntanned and a great tennis player. We would meet at tennis and enjoy each other's company, but there was no togetherness during the week.

We were very excited when, as a pair, we won the All Comers' Competition, which allowed us to attend the presentation night. However, before we could attend my partner had to request my Father's permission to take me. He was very nervous, but permission was granted.

Off to the presentation in a beautiful blue satin and lace dress, fitted top, a full circular skirt with several tulle petticoats to hold the skirt full and flowing, small heel dancing shoes, and the final touch were the flowers in my hair. My partner was well groomed, in a dark blue suit, a crisp white shirt and a beautiful blue striped tie. We were like Cinderella and Prince Charming going off to the ball.

Our very proud parents were guests at the presentation. It was such a wonderful night and on conclusion my friend walked me home. No holding hands or a kiss or a cuddle, just an arm around my shoulder and a peck on the cheek. "Is this romance?" I asked myself. It was so disappointing.

He was far better on the tennis court.

Social life with my many tennis friends involved dancing, not one of my strong points, so I decided to have lessons in ballroom dancing at the local dance studio and I had soon gathered enough confidence to attend the dancing at the local Town Hall several nights each week.

My Father, who was very protective, would regularly pick me up from the dance, eliminating the need to travel home on the tram or bus. Our arrangements were well organised and generally worked with great precision. However, even the best laid plans sometimes came undone.

On one particular night, it was nearing the end of the dance when I was asked by a fellow I had met earlier in the evening if he could take me home. I thanked him, but had to say "no", because I had a lift home and said I would see him next week.

The dance had completed, everyone had said their goodbyes, and as usual I was waiting for my Father to arrive. I waited and waited. No Father after some thirty minutes.

At that time the fellow who had offered to take me home showed up, to find me still waiting. He made the offer again, and this time I accepted. Being a good character he took me straight home, to find my Father sound asleep in his favourite chair. He'd had a few quiet drinks, went off to sleep and forgotten all about me.

From that night and the chance meeting, my Father had no need to worry about picking me up as I had a regular, reliable man who became part of my life!

I was nineteen and had fallen in love. His name was Cohn.



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Separate honeymoons

"But I'm to be married in May", said Cohn.

His Managing Director had just told him that the company had plans for him to have specialized training in the United States, and that the programme would begin in early April.

"Do what needs to be done, as it is certainly an opportunity not to be taken lightly, and definitely not one to be missed", the MD responded, "Your future is at stake".

My future Husband cautiously approached me and my parents to bring the wedding forward to the earliest date in April.

"Postpone the wedding until you come home", my parents suggested.

"No, no, no", was the answer. So after a great deal of discussions and a "Yes you can" and "No you can't", the date was brought forward to Friday 3 April, 1959. My, how the tongues wagged, on the assumption that the change of date was because I was pregnant. Everything went into fast forward.

"The ring? The ring?" someone asked on the Thursday before the wedding. Another pre-wedding drama! Off to the jeweller early Friday morning to purchase the sacred golden band.

After the wedding on Friday we travelled to Terrigal for our honeymoon and a lost week end. Home on Monday, packed the travel bags for overseas, and off to the airport early Tuesday morning to wave goodbye to my new Husband.

Cohn is probably one of the only men who have spent their honeymoon alone in Niagara Falls, Disneyland, not to mention staying in the same New York hotel as Fidel Castro and his gun-toting bodyguards, unaware how powerful this man would be in Cuba and the Communist Party.

While Cohn was away work had begun building our home, and I was elevated to the position of overseer in his absence. I learnt a great deal about construction, electrical and plumbing installation, so much so the builder and I developed a love-hate relationship. "Women", he would say, "they think they know everything".

He was thrilled when my husband came home and replaced me in the position,

The Gift

We had been married several months when my Husband brought home a beautiful "surprise" gift of a two-month-old female German Shepherd puppy. Absolutely gorgeous ball of fluff, black and golden brown in colour, soft appealing loving eyes, floppy ears and the largest paws I had ever seen on a puppy.

Her pedigree was of gentle character and a good champion line but, like all puppies, she was hell bent on ruining anything she could get her teeth into. We decided she needed discipline and obedience classes.

She was a very intelligent dog and responded to the instructions extremely well, graduating with flying colours. At the suggestion of several breeders we decided to show her, and with a great deal of hard work, training, and exercise she was ready for her first performance. It was the beginning of a fulfilling experience. She blossomed more and more, receiving many trophies and a great deal of praise; however to reach higher levels in this field she would best mature if she had a litter of puppies.

We made extensive inquiries as to the best line of breed, made the selection and in no time she was mated and we waited anxiously for the arrival of her litter.

Everything seemed so simple until the arrival. She was a very sensitive and frightened mother; could not supply any milk, and in no time the happy event turned to disaster.

I was still working and had been in the same organisation for several years, and when I made application for three weeks leave, reason being to feed and care for a litter of 6 puppies, they were astounded. The application was



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granted and I was now a Mother feeding a litter of twelve-day-old puppies. In an endeavour to fix the problem of feeding the puppies I made a quick trip to Bankstown Hospital to request six premature baby bottles to feed them.

Fortunately my cousin was in charge of the premature ward so there was no problem. I spent the next four weeks feeding them every two hours, washing bottles, preparing milk and generally caring for the litter of these gorgeous little puppies. They developed beautifully and eventually graduated to solid foods.

At eight weeks old it was time to face reality, six little puppies were too much to care for, so we decided to sell five and keep the best of the litter to show both mother and son at the Pedigree Dog Shows.

Weekends were extremely busy, preparing, grooming and exercising both dogs. The puppy was now six months old, gaining great potential in his breeding class when unfortunately he had an accident, breaking his leg and damaging his tendon. He was left with a stiff leg and we were unable to show him. It was the end of his show business career.

We decided to give him to a friend as her companion and we kept mother as our family pet and protector.

It was now time to begin our own little family.

An early arrival

At Melbourne airport the pilot was preparing for departure. He had ordered the removal of the movable stairs and was just about to close the door when a wild man dashed across the tarmac, up the moving stairs and banged on the almost-closed aircraft door.

"My wife is having our first baby", shouted Cohn, "and I must catch this plane to be with her".

"Make way for a very frantic expectant father", were the words of the airport official after he had checked his ticket. The door opened, and Cohn was aboard.

Meanwhile, back in Sydney, I was calmly preparing to go to hospital. A doctor's check an hour earlier had confirmed that the baby was on its way, three weeks early, and having phoned my husband I was making sure everything in the house was OK.

Cohn arrived at the hospital in time for the delivery and our son Bradley made his early entrance. Our daughter arrived two years later, calmly, peacefully and without all the drama and panic we experienced with our son's arrival. She was a treasure to behold.

It was the beginning of a whirlwind marriage of travel, excitement and the unexpected.

A happy family

Our children were the joy of our lives. We looked forward to the school holidays, spending time and relaxing together. We enjoyed the closeness of living in the caravan, the closeness of each other and the closeness of our family.

We spent our holidays in our caravan at St Georges Basin, and boating, fishing and prawning were the daily routines. I think we spent more time unravelling the fishing lines than we did fishing. Prawning at night was another challenge, with polystyrene surfboards, hurricane lamps and landing nets. It looked like fairyland with all the lights on the water, and some of the people had prepared bonfires on the beach to place the containers on to cook the prawns. They were more professional and caught many more prawns than we did. We spent many hours catching the evasive prawns, and then we had to come home at all hours of the night to cook them.

I well remember our last caravan holiday. The children were very inventive and made a "billy cart" to carry their dingy to the shore, and when the boat was packed with the necessary fishing gear and life jackets they set off into the little bay. Too much gear ... the boat began to rock ... it overturned and everything fell out, including the children. No need to panic, they stood up in the water, retrieved the boat and all the fishing gear and returned to shore walking in the water and dragging the boat. For the records their failed boating excursion was taken on video.



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We returned to Sydney to prepare for the Christmas season, the Carols by Candlelight, the baseball championships and the dancing school concert the children were participating in.

We were unaware and unprepared for how dramatically our lives would change in the next few weeks, never to be the same again.

Someone who changed my life

Christmas 1975 was just a few days away. The specially selected tree was looking fantastic, having been decorated with tender loving care by the children. The decorations have been with us for many years and had been carefully wrapped in tissue paper to protect them from damage. These treasured decorations took pride of place on the tree and those bearing our names were personally placed on those special branches, along with the angel and the star of Bethlehem on the pinnacle of the tree.

My daughter had completed her under -eleven year basketball competition until after the school holidays, so she was enjoying the days with her friends without the routines of training.

My thirteen-year-old son, who played with the community brass band, had been invited by the local council to perform at the Carols by Candlelight. They had practised for weeks, and for their final rehearsal they were dressed in their uniforms, white trousers with a blue strip down each side, a white jacket with gold braiding, and a white peaked hat, also with gold braiding. He certainly looked very professional for the final rehearsal.

Sportsman, he was also a member of the under-fifteen State Baseball team, who were set to play in the Australian Championships in January. To bring the team to its peak the baseball coach decided to have one more training session before the Christmas break, knowing there would be little baseball activity during the holiday period. Unfortunately, the day selected by the coach was the same day as the band's recital at the Carols by Candlelight.

While my son was at training, my daughter and I played a little basketball in the park. It was a great afternoon, just a light breeze and beautiful sunshine, not a cloud in the sky. Usually we would take a little friend with us as company for my daughter, however on this occasion we were going to be home late and decided to make it just the three of us.

The baseball training went well, the coach and the boys were excited having completed their programme and were well prepared for the championships in January.

We said our goodbyes and good wishes for Christmas while my son changed from his baseball uniform into his band uniform, and left for our next destination, the Christmas Carols, at 7.00pm.

Knowing we had quite a distance to travel, I decided to take an alternative route, to miss the peak hour traffic and hopefully enabling us to be on time. It was the worst decision I had ever made, and I will have to live with it forever. We were involved in an accident.

The driver of the other vehicle was travelling so fast, he came from nowhere, abandoning all the road rules, racing through a stop sign, hitting us directly on the side, spinning our car around and around until the doors opened.

I don't remember too much, only that I was on the road unable to move, my only concern being for my children. "Were they OK, did they survive the impact?"

Unfortunately for us, not all. We had lost our beautiful girl.

The other driver survived the impact without a scratch, unaware of what had happened. He was completely under the influence of alcohol, with a very high reading.

Although many years have passed since this tragic accident, Christmas for our family is filled with many mixed emotions. Our hearts are aching, however we treasure the happy times and wonderful memories we shared together. Nevertheless our family can never be a complete chain. There is a missing link.



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The beauty of sound

How lovely it was to hear the long-awaited rain pounding on the roof, quite heavy at times then easing off to light showers. Then the drip, drip, drip of the raindrops added to the ever-changing sounds of nature, or maybe it was the dripping sounds coming from the much-needed repairs of the guttering.

In the early break of dawn I could hear the sea rolling onto the beach then breaking with such force as it ran up the sloped sandy beach. The birds were chirping loudly, convincing me of the start of a beautiful day. A microwave was beeping for someone's early cup of tea.

Then came reality. There was no sea, no rain had been falling, there were no birds and there was no microwave. What has happened, where have I been for the last few days? Gathering myself together, I listened and concentrated on the sounds and noises around me. The sounds of the rolling seas must have come from the surge of the flushing toilet and those drip, drip, drips came from the saline drip in my arm. The sounds of the rain must be coming from the pan room, on again, off again, running water. The chirping of those birds came from the cut-off button of the TV monitor, the microwave beep came from the emergency button being pressed by patients in the adjoining room.

I suppose by now you can realise I am in hospital, the medication after the operation is gradually wearing off and I will soon be facing my daily routine of rehabilitation.

I must say that I am thankful to Silvana for her writing classes and her teachings to be aware of thoughts, sights, sounds and situations, even during those very demanding hospital nights.

Oh what a difference a day makes.

The second man

The second man, who had an important and tremendous input during this part of my life, was the Matron (now known as the Director of Nursing) of the ward where I was admitted to for my long and arduous recovery and rehabilitation.

He was a compassionate, caring, understanding man, gifted in many ways. He had an inner sense of when one needed him, when conversation and reassurance were essential. Whether it was during the day shift or the long lonely, dark and frightening night shift, he would sit beside my bed listening and comforting me.

He was English, trained in nursing at a very prominent hospital in London, who had decided to bring his family to Australia and begin a new life. He had beautiful skin almost translucent, soft blue eyes with so much expression they would almost speak. Without the mobility to move, my concentration was visual on eyes, facial expression and everyone's personal features.

We developed a wonderful friendship, and as we all progressed and moved on, he accepted a position outside the Public Health System to a Residence for permanently disabled people needing high level twenty-four hour care. Several years later he contacted me and encouraged me to join the staff to help with the residents as a carer, confidante, to help serve the meals and to assist in any other capacity I could.

An odd assortment

I had obviously lived in a sheltered and naïve world and had not been exposed to injured, disabled and broken bodies, which became part of my everyday life. It was a ward of acute patients, male and female, a mixed group both in age, gender and injuries.

The young man in the bed beside me had been injured in a motor bike accident, and as we were flat on our back,, unable to move, all we could do was to converse with each other. He openly discussed his life style. He enjoyed



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cigarettes laced with pot or grass and took drugs or any other stimulant he could get his hands on, and he was a member of the notorious motor bike gang the "Hell's Angels". His friends regularly came to visit, dressed in their leather outfits, black trousers, black leather boots, leather jackets with the logo "Hell's Angels" across the back, chains draped around their waist and black leather gloves to complete the outfit. All had various forms of facial growth, sideburns, moustaches or beards, and tattoos were prominently displayed on their bodies.

Fortunately, only three visitors were allowed to visit each patient at one time, and when his bikie friends came to visit, we could hear the stomping of the boots, the rattling of the heavy decorative chains hanging from their leather jackets and around their waist as they entered the ward. We thought we were being invaded, their appearance was so intimidating, however with regular visitation and conversation we became friends. They even offered to share the odd cigarette with me.

When the ward filled with the sweet-smelling aroma of drugs the administrators quickly evicted the persons involved. "Was this going on in the world around me?" I asked myself, "now, I know the sweet smell of drugs". My bikie friend was threatened with transfer to the goal ward of the hospital if there were any more drugs brought in, or smoking in the ward.

My other close bed mate in the ward arrived on a stretcher, flanked by two burly policemen. He had been an inmate of Long Bay Gaol for several years and his reason for being there was interesting. He and two accomplices had held up and robbed a bank van transferring money to another bank. They absconded with the money and were on the run for several months before being, finally caught, sentenced and goaled. But they had not divulged the whereabouts of the money. The other inmates had tried desperately to prize the information from him as to where the money was hidden, to enable their contacts outside the prison system to retrieve the money, but he remained silent. They then tried alternative tactics. He was severely injured in a football game and unable to move, and that is how he finished up in hospital. He spent two months with us in the ward, transferred to the goal ward of the hospital to complete his recovery and was then transferred back to Long Bay Goal to finish his sentence.

Strangely enough, we kept in touch and finally, after his sentence, he was extradited to New Zealand to answer charges concerning offences he had committed in Wellington before coming to Australia.

The time came when we graduated from bed to a wheelchair and for a few hours each day we were able to converse with each other at eye level. Oh dear, what a surprise! My bed mate Number One, next to me, was 23, fine in stature, with a shaved head, earrings, and tattoos. Number Two bed mate was a Maori, very handsome, dark skin, with the whitest of white teeth, teamed with a beautiful smile. He appeared to me to be a gentle giant, with a softly spoken voice, and he was visited by a regular parade of beautiful girls he had met before going goal.

We also had a very prominent High Court Judge who had suffered severe side effects after having major surgery. Sadly the Judge did not recover his physical health, however I would visit him during the day and we would have some interesting conversations concerning law and order.

There was a miner injured in a cave-in at a Lithgow mine; it took days to retrieve him. He recovered reasonably well, and walked out of the ward on crutches with splints on his legs..

A young fellow who had damaged his neck in a diving accident worked extremely hard with his rehabilitation and went on to be a member of the Para Olympics team, winning Gold.

A young school teacher from Woomera Rocket Range had been injured in a car accident. She had a two-year-old boy at the time. Although she did not recover her mobility she became a well adjusted Quadriplegic and later created a little history by giving birth to a beautiful baby boy. A wonderful achievement for a woman in her condition.

The impact these people had on me during this long period in hospital was overwhelming, and when the time came to leave the safe, sheltered, and secure cocoon of the hospital and face and prepare myself for the world of reality, I was terrified.



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I treasure their bond of friendship and the understanding times we spent together, sharing our highs and lows, our feelings and emotions, and our concern as to what the future held for us.

Despite all the associated trauma, it was an enriching experience in another stage of life's journey.

A tower of strength

After so many months, hospital had become my security cocoon, the patients my extended family, and the nurses my lifeline. When the time eventually came for me to be discharged from this life I had grown accustomed to I was filled with mixed emotions. I was terrified at the thought of departing the hospital, and unprepared and frightened as to how I would manage at home and once again be capable and confident to look after my family.

My husband was wonderful, very caring and supportive, as were my family, friends and neighbours, who organised between them a routine to make my day easy and uncomplicated.

My son, in his own way, quietly performed his daily routine, helped with the household chores, and assisted me in every way possible. It was his second year in high school, and together with the pressures of school, he was still coming to terms with the accident, the loss of his sister, and the new adjustment to our day-to-day living. He was so strong and brave, he was my salvation, a tower of strength, and I was his first priority. We worked together, physically and emotionally, supporting each other through this critical time. He gave me the strength, the purpose, and the will to set a goal to achieve the achievable. He would hurry home from school, reassure himself all was well, attend to my needs, prepare his school work, and practise his trumpet for the brass band.

Baseball was also a regular part of his life, and the only way he was able to attend training, and the game, was with the help of neighbours, or travel by taxi to training. It was a tremendous concern knowing I had to rely on so many people to assist me with transport to these various venues.

My husband suggested we could eliminate these problems by buying a car. I was so adamant against this; to even think about driving a car terrified me. The car was eventually purchased (without my approval) and duly sat in the garage, never seeing the light of day for many, many months.

Finally the time came when I thought it was an appropriate moment to discuss the situation with my son. How did he feel about me driving the car and him being the passenger? Would he feel confident, relaxed and safe? Was the memory of the accident too vivid in his memory to allow this to happen? I asked for an honest answer.

"You can do it, Mum" he said. "We will do it together, slowly, slowly, and with a couple of refresher driving lessons you will gain your confidence. I'll be beside you and we will support each other".

Without his love and encouragement it would have been a totally different story and I am sure the car would be still sitting in the garage.

I had kept my driver's licence current and approached the RTA to have instructions for a disabled driver's licence. All went well, and once again I was able to transport my son to his many activities.

Several years later I taught him to drive, and when he received his license he said to me: "I knew we could do it together." The tables were turned, he became the driver and I became the passenger.

How blessed I was to have my son. Without him and his undying love, support and encouragement, I would never have attempted to drive a car again. He has matured into a wonderful family man with a wife and two beautiful children.

At last, I had returned to the real world and the role of a mother caring for her loving family.



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The Lodge

Although recovering from a major accident, I was asked by the Director of Nursing at the Lodge for disabled people to assist with patients who had suffered similar injuries, but sadly had not recovered to the same extent that I had. I was delighted and happily accepted the invitation, and so began my involvement with young men and women, together with several middle aged residents who unfortunately had suffered extreme injuries.

They were wonderful people, with broken bodies but with beautiful, alert and inquisitive minds, and were prepared to accept help and advice to enhance their day-to-day living. Helping the residents of the Lodge was most rewarding, and I assisted the staff with the meals, attended to their appearance, make up, hair, correspondence, and anything else that might make them feel more confident within the surrounding community, and increase their self esteem.

In addition, I was involved in the Lodge library, which was housed in a rather quiet private room where we could talk to the residents, discuss their problems, write their personal letters and correspondence, pay their accounts, and listen to any troubles as their friend and confidante.

Although the library was a room of many uses, the stock of books needed upgrading and so requests were made to many publishers and distributors for donations of books and magazines. These books and magazines could be of any variety or title, educational or fictional. The response was fantastic, and before long the shelves were displaying a vast selection of interesting titles.

Talking books were introduced for those who could not use their hands to turn the pages. Books and magazines with fine spines enabled the residents to turn the pages with a special page turning machine, or a special stick with a rubber fitting which they held in their mouth. An Art Teacher volunteered to come on a weekly basis and conduct art classes, resulting in some of the residents being part of the Painting by Mouth group.

With a coat of paint, rearrangement of the furniture and cataloguing of the books and magazines, the new library was a welcome and functional asset for all. Several organisations donated their superseded computer models to the Lodge and this developed a keen demand for computer knowledge from the residents. This was followed by an approach from the TAFE College concerning the introduction of computer classes for the disabled. Although knowing the difficulties they would face with operating the keys, they were anxious to learn, some with hand splints holding sticks, some with mouth sticks, and others with very limited wrist and finger movements. It was a slow and rather frustrating learning curve at times, quite a challenge for both instructors and students, but by the end of the term many of the residents had successfully graduated with certificates as accomplished computer operators. This opened up new possibilities for residents who had previously been totally dependent on the staff or volunteers to help with their private and personal correspondence. Now, through the computer, they were independent and able to control their own private affairs.

The original computer class was so successful that other residents were encouraged to participate in the new classes. Some play cards, chess, solitaire, and can network with each other's computers to play very challenging games to stimulate their minds. This provides a wonderful transformation and sense of achievement and satisfaction for all the residents.

How things have changed over the years for the residents; they have on record all the reading material in a well organised library, and are well equipped with personal computers in their rooms. They are able to get unlimited back up when needed, create intricate forms and beautiful presentations, and above all are part of the computer world which has opened many doors of communication. Once in an adverse position, they are now in a very positive position, holding their heads high, with a proud sense of achievement.

They are very special people and I am so happy and honoured to have been part of their lives for over thirty years.



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A day to celebrate

On April 3, 2009 Cohn and I celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary.

Quite a contrast to our wedding day where we had the trauma of constantly altered plans, the last-minute purchase of the wedding ring, and our separate honeymoons. This separation immediately after the wedding was not what I thought marriage was all about and not the very exciting beginning I expected from married life.

We have made up for this separation on many occasions with several celebrations, dinner with family and friends who were guests on our wedding day, and especially my bridesmaid Pauline, who has been part of my life for over 65 years.

For this very special day my husband gave me a beautiful gold chain, symbolising the golden years we have had together, gold because it is everlasting and a chain because it is unbroken.

Together we have experienced love, happiness, sorrow and always a bond of strength for each other. We have been blessed with a beautiful family, wonderful friends and many years filled with treasured memories.

Barbara McDonall

Member Bankstown Older Women's Network Writers' Group







LIFE STORY - Hikmat Rihani



LIFE STORY

by Hikmat Rihani

Dedicated to My Family



LIFE STORY - Hikmat Rihani



LIFE STORY - Hikmat Rihani

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Thank you to my darling daughter Julie for reading over my work and correcting my punctuation.

Lastly a big thanks to my wonderful grand baby Jacob, who showed me how to scan photos so I can add them to my book. He also helped me with some typing questions and showed me little tricks on the computer.

Hikmat Rihani

A note from the Author's desk

This is a collection of events that are only a small part of my life. They are written for my dear and beautiful family.

Hikmat Rihani



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An early arrival

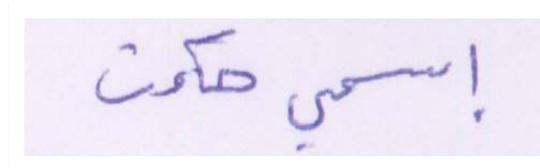
The radio was tuned to the BBC as the woman, seven months pregnant, went about her house duties in the Syrian city of Hama. Suddenly there was a news flash: "Thirty-five people are missing, feared dead, after a Comet jet airliner crashed into the Mediterranean. The plane - a British Overseas Airways Corporation jet - was on its way from Singapore to London."

This distressed the woman so much that she went into premature labour, and several hours later, on 10 January 1954, I was born. When my father came home from work to find he had a new daughter he said "Early birth brings good luck to the family", and sure enough on that same day he received a pay rise. It was a sad day for many, but it turned into a great day for my family.

The country of my birth

Syria is an extremely ancient land, with a rich cultural heritage. Some of the oldest known civilizations are there. The capital of Syria, Damascus, was the first land inhabited on Earth.

The first alphabet was developed in Syria, where the official language is Arabic. In written form, it reads from right to left, the opposite direction to English. For example my name, Hikmat, is written:



Arabic is a very important language for Muslim people. People who can speak, read and write Arabic are very lucky, because the Muslim holy book (The Quran) is written in Arabic. In the Syrian education system learning a second language, such as English, French, or Russian is compulsory.

My early life

I am so grateful to be named 'Hikmat', as that term means 'wisdom,' which I believe reflects my personality. I am the fifth child in the family, born healthy and strong, even though premature.

Throughout my life my parents have been my inspiration and the ones I have always looked up to. I feel I am really fortunate to have been brought up in a happy, loving and stable home.

Growing up, we did not have the entertainment that is now easily accessible such as T.V, telephones, computers, walking or talking dolls etc., but that did not stop us from being happy as children; my eldest sister used to make dolls for all of us, which kept a smile on our faces. We were always very content and appreciated whatever we were given, in fact I had a wonderful childhood that I will never forget.

When I reached the age of thirteen my life dramatically changed in various ways. At that stage I was experiencing a transition of my life, I was moving from being a child to a young teenager.

Back in my early days, once a girl reached her teenage years, she was expected to learn how to do household chores, and this was a hard and challenging process for me. I wasn't adapting at all well, and let out my frustration and anger crying in bed.

Then I started high school, and my life started to take shape. I was very successful and happy. Then when I reached Year 9 I met my brother's friend, Houssain, who literally took my breath away from the moment I met him. As our eyes met there was a spark, and I felt he was the man of my dreams.



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Becoming a woman

I was thirteen when I became a woman, and I was petrified. I didn't know what was happening; I didn't know what to do or who to speak to. This subject just was NOT spoken about. I had never heard or seen anything like this before; I was in complete shock.

I cleaned myself up, then went to my bed and started to cry. After an hour my older sister came to comfort me and I told her my situation, She was so happy. She kissed and hugged me, then she explained to me that I had just become a woman. I didn't understand her happiness. I was so, so confused.

Even though my sister explained to me what was happening to my body, I still felt very depressed. I cried for months, basically shutting myself off from everybody. I didn't attend school for a week. I didn't want to change. I was NOT ready.

I felt I had to keep this a secret, and it was very difficult for me to adjust. When I returned to school, it was time for scripture class. I attended Islamic class, once a week, when we learned how to read Koran. In our religion a woman is not allowed to touch or read the Koran if she has her period. What would happen if I was asked to read the Koran and I couldn't? I was too embarrassed to tell my teacher, so my older sister told her for me. Once the teacher knew this, she didn't pick me to read. This is when I understood why not everyone was chosen to read the Koran.

After a while, I knew that I couldn't let this take over my life. So I decided to accept this change and taught myself how to cope.



photo Hikmat, age 15 years

Houssain

My oldest brother was studying economy and politics in university. He and his friends were going skiing in Lebanon, and they decided to take their sisters. My sister and I jumped at the chance. We were so excited.

We had the time of our lives on that skiing trip. We met a lot of different people and a lot of our friends were also there. This is where I met my sweetheart. He gave me a Ski Kart to ride. His name was Houssain and he swept me off my feet. He was a real gentleman, very polite and funny.

After the skiing trip we all continued to go out with each other. The only way I was able to meet with my new man was if we all went out in a group. We got along really well and we were falling in love with each other.

One year later, Houssain went to my parents' house and asked for my hand in marriage, the traditional way. Before my parents made a decision, they asked their friends about him. They accepted when they found out he had a good reputation.

After our engagement he decided to go to Australia, to try and earn a living before getting married. I decided to leave my school, at the middle of year 10 and study dress making. Once this course was done, I felt I was ready to marry. I knew all the home duties, knitting and sewing simple dresses. So I then followed him to Australia.

My husband and I planned to work in Australia for 3 years, save some money, then head back to our home country. However, years passed by and we have remained happy and very stable in Australia, doing what we love.



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Married life

My husband and friends were waiting for me when I arrived at Sydney airport on 12 October 1971. I felt nervous, confused and excited and already missing everyone I had left behind. I cried my heart out for my mum and dad, all my brothers and sisters, neighbors, relatives and friends. I was sad because I wasn't sure when I would see them again. I was scared that I was starting a new life in a completely different country. I didn't know what to expect.

My husband took two weeks off work so we could honeymoon. We stayed at Katoomba for two days, and the scenery was absolutely breathtaking. I saw the Three Sisters, the incredible mountains and listened to the history of the Three Sisters. We went for a ride on the sky cable – you feel so insignificant in those amazing surroundings. It was so tranquil, peaceful and the air felt so clean.

We had lunch at this beautiful revolving restaurant. I'd never seen anything like it. The food was so delicious and different to the Arabic food I was used to. I was truly being spoiled, I felt like the luckiest woman alive.

I was missing my family so much but my husband was so good to me. He looked after me, he spoiled me and kept my mind very busy, by taking me out and having a good time. He made the transition a lot easier for me.

A month after our honeymoon, I started a casual job at a chocolate factory with a girlfriend of mine, who I grew up with. We were working on the front line, packing chocolates into small bags. While I was working there my boss, aged 50 years, was getting married. Everyone at the factory was asked to donate 20 cents. I was so innocent and naive then – I thought only young people got married.

The lifestyle here in Australia was very different for me. I'd be walking in the street and I would see young couples and older couples kissing and showing their affection in public. I never saw that before. I used to get embarrassed for them and for myself when my husband did it to me.

The weather was also very different for me. It was spring. I would go to work in the morning in the sunshine and by the time I left work, it was pouring rain. The weather in Sydney was four seasons in one day.

Once Christmas came and the casual position at the chocolate factory was finished, I got a job with Hutton's. I was on the front line there too. There I would weigh the sausages and put them in plastic bags. I enjoyed working with these girls; they were all Italian and we didn't understand each other, but we all got along and were very happy.

A couple months later I started to feel nauseous from the smell of the factory. It turned out I was pregnant with my first child. So I left the job at the meat factory. I took with me the words I learnt in Italian.

Two months later I was starting to get big, so I went to buy a maternity dress. When the lady in the store told me that she needed someone to do the alterations for her, I said that I would love to do it and she showed me all the latest equipment, ready for me to use. I was so happy. I enjoyed doing this type of work. It wasn't hard, so I worked through my whole pregnancy.

A working mum

On 30 October, 1972 I gave birth to my beautiful princess Fida. I couldn't believe I had just become a mum, I was so overwhelmed with joy. I wished that my family were here to see my beautiful baby girl and share my happiness.

I remember during the contractions I was alone and scared and calling for my mother. It was a very difficult and painful time, but the moment I saw my baby the pain was forgotten. Having a baby is miracle, it is a beautiful feeling that I can't describe. Thank God for giving me the grace of life.

By the time my daughter was eight months old I thought I would love to have a big first birthday party for her, so I decided to go back to work. One of my girl friends loved my baby so much, she agreed to look after her when I was at work.

I got a job as a machinist at Ford Sharrington at Kingsgrove, which used to make very high quality suitcases, briefcases, etc. It was excellent pay, a fun working environment and it was there that I learnt to speak English.



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I met the nicest Australian lady there, one of the older ladies called Daphne. She used to say "You have a mother in Syria and I am your mother in Australia". She was so kind and loving.

My husband worked as a welder. His job paid well but he used to come home every day with a bleeding nose from the heat of the welding.

We both worked very hard, saving for a house, but we were still living the good life. We were extremely happy. We always went out to glamorous parties, went on day trips and picnics, just to name a few.

I worked at Ford Sharington for two and a half years. Then I decided I wanted to have another baby. My mind, body and soul were ready. Because I enjoyed my job I didn't leave straight away. I left when I was 4 months pregnant

When I held my beautiful, precious baby Julie for the first time, I felt that I was carrying the most beautiful gift from God. Our hearts were filled with joy. We were so happy we had another daughter, because now Fida had a sister. I was happy and proud that I had two girls.

My husband I believe that Julie brought us good luck. When she was born, my husband quit smoking and got a job with Australia Post. He didn't have to do welding anymore.

As the time came close to Julie's first birthday I wanted to have a big first birthday party for her, like I did for Fida, so I decided to go back to work. My sister in-law offered to look after my girls.

I began to work at Brodie Lighting. Again I was on the front line packing assorted light globes into a box. The bosses were happy with me because I was a very good and hard worker, and two months later I was promoted. I would then give two other girls, working on the line, the assorted light globes to pack.

I felt I was living the dream life. I had the perfect husband, the perfect children and a job I was very happy with. We went to many Lebanese parties, attended Christmas and New Year parties and we were still able to save so we could buy a house.

Because my husband and I worked Monday to Friday, Saturdays we would cook and clean and make time for close family friends to visit. Sundays were just for the family.

Every Sunday we would go for long drives, go on picnics and visit different parks. We would play with our girls the whole day; my husband and I would play like children. I believe we were the perfect family.

After working for Brodie Lighting for 4 years, I decided to have another baby. When my precious baby boy, Ali, was born I said to my husband, "Thank God. This is all I want, three beautiful children." We and our families were overjoyed.

Shortly after Ali was born, we started house hunting. My life was filled with happiness. Everything I wanted from life, I had. We were the happiest family on earth.

Our luck turns

October is my favorite month for three reasons. Firstly it's our wedding anniversary, secondly my first child was born, and thirdly we bought our house.

My life was honestly perfect. I was very lucky to have such a good husband and three beautiful, healthy, disciplined children. And now I had a beautiful home to call my own. We weren't rich, but we were very comfortable. We were always dressed in the best. The love that we all had for each other was so powerful that we were envied by other people

I was a very active woman. My husband worked hard and I would do all the home duties. I was very clean and organized, a perfectionist. I liked to have everything done before my husband got home from work so we could enjoy the evening together.



LIFE STORY - Hikmat Rihani

In October 1983, as I was throwing a heavy queen-sized blanket over the balcony to air, I felt my left shoulder dislocate. It was extremely painful, but that night as I was supporting with my sore shoulder a bunk bed for my husband to screw into place, it popped back into place and the pain was gone.

A month later, while I was at the doctor having Ali checked after an asthma attack, I told him what had happened to my shoulder and he examined it. He found a lump, and immediately booked an appointment for an emergency x-ray. As soon as the doctor saw the x-ray he rang Dr Hudson, the specialist in Campsie, and booked me in to see him that evening.

After ordering a CT scan, Dr Hudson told me that I needed surgery to find out what was going on, and that I would be admitted to Canterbury Hospital in four days.

Being October, I had my wedding anniversary and my daughter's 11th birthday coming up. So before going into hospital I bought my husband and daughter a gift, cleaned the house to my standard, and took care of any bits and pieces so everything would be left clean and organized.

Four days after the operation, a Doctor from the laboratory came to see me. He said "Please sit down, relax. I need to tell you the result of the operation". He then asked me several questions, one being "Do you know what you have?" I replied, "No". Then he said "You have cancer".

The Doctor then went on to explain that this kind of cancer is called a Sarcoma. The tumor is rare and it was in an unusual place, on the bone, in the joint, on my left scapular. I was the first person in Australia to be diagnosed with this type of cancer.

I felt my whole world was caving in on me. I was so scared and I felt weak. I didn't understand why it was happening to me. I thought cancer meant death. I broke down in tears and told the doctor to leave. The social worker came, and I asked her to leave, too. Then my husband and brother came and I told them the diagnosis.

My brother hugged me and told me not to cry, then he broke down in tears. My husband was in shock. He hugged and kissed me then looked up and said "God! You took my father, my mother and my brothers. Please leave me my wife." With all my heart I prayed that he would find a woman who would be good to him, who would look after him and my children.

Soon after, the specialist Dr Hudson came to see me. He told us the operation was successful and the tumor was completely removed. My husband was paralyzed with fear, he was speechless. My brother asked Dr Hudson if this type of cancer is dangerous. The doctor replied "Yes". Then there was complete silence.

The fight to survive

I went home 11 days after surgery. Because I was young, fit and I had so much support and love from my husband and brother, I recovered quickly. I wanted to fight this. The love I had for my husband and children made me strong.

I had to make frequent visits to the specialist. Three years later, after a routine visit, the C.T. scan showed a growth in the same place. My specialist sent me to another specialist to get a second opinion. Both specialists agreed the best outcome would be to operate, then undergo radio therapy.

I was admitted into hospital once again. The specialist explained how they were going to perform the procedure; he also warned me that if this procedure was unsuccessful, they would have to amputate my left arm.

The operation was a success as far as removing the cancer was concerned, but it totally disabled my arm and the pain was intense. My arm mobility was very limited. After undergoing physiotherapy and rehabilitation, the mobility in my arm was still limited but a little better.

Once again, Dr Hudson referred me to another specialist, Dr Raghavan, at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, who referred me to Westmead hospital to begin radio therapy.



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It was my baby boy's first day at school. I wasn't able to kiss him and wish him luck on his first day, as I had done for my daughters. This hurt my heart because I felt that we both missed out. Instead I began my first day at Westmead Hospital receiving radio therapy.

Radio therapy is commonly used before scheduled surgery to shrink tumors to a more operable size. It is also used after surgery to ensure removal of any remaining cancerous tissue and to prevent the onset of further cancerous growths in the future. The actual session of radiation therapy is not painful, but the side affects and reactions can be. Other side affects are associated discomfort, nausea, vomiting and burning of tissue. I had all the side affects listed.

I found it incredibly hard to cope. My husband and children gave me the strength I didn't know I had to keep fighting and to be strong. I wanted to beat this. I wanted to live.

During the six week treatment, my son had a severe asthma attack and was admitted into hospital for five days. I found myself having my treatment at Westmead hospital during the day, then going to Bankstown hospital to be by my baby's side. By 10pm I would go home, try get some rest and do it all again the next day. I felt like a robot. I needed someone to look after me, I was not well but I didn't want to show weakness to my family. All I cared about was my son's recovery.

The journey to recovery

Once the radio therapy was completed my long, agonizing journey to recovery began. The pain in my shoulder was worse. The scar was constantly burning. I had many specialist, physiotherapy and psychiatrist appointments. I was now in remission.

This had to be the worst time of my life. I felt that the pressure of everything that was going on was putting a big strain on my family, that I was making everyone miserable. This time it took much longer for me to recover.

Five long agonizing years later I finished the fight of my life, for my life. I was no longer in remission, I had recovered, but I had lost my self confidence, my personality had changed, I had become impatient and short-tempered. My next fight was to regain my self confidence and be the person that I was before.

I believe I have always been a survivor. Firstly I survived a premature birth. Then I came to a beautiful country and started a new life on my own and made it. Then I beat the fight with cancer.

I have since stood by women who were suffering cancer. Using what I went through and remembering what I needed to get through this horrible time, I gave love, guidance and support.

I thank God daily for giving me the life that I have. I was blessed with strength and real love.

We have a saying in Arabic: "Health is a crown on healthy people's heads; only sick people can see it." I remember being depressed, worried and feeling sorry for myself. I always thought the cancer had spread, although it hadn't. I had too much time on my hands, so I would try and find something else wrong with me.

The solution came when I was listening to the Arabic radio program and heard the teacher, Moushira, from Bankstown TAFE, saying that a course was going to be held for Arabic-speaking women, and on 7 August, 1987 I started the Community Information Course. It was held over 12 weeks, and it was the start of my real conquest of cancer through occupying my mind by learning and studying

This course enabled me to deal with many situations that arose with the council; it also taught me to speak up. When I applied for a crossing for children catching the school bus, the council adopted this recommendation on 12 April, 1988. I would not have had the courage to do this before.



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A journey with my grandson

One July Sunday my grandson Jacob and I went to Taronga Zoo. It was very cold, but because we were together, enjoying ourselves, we didn't feel the cold.

First we caught the train, and then we took the ferry at Circular Quay. While we were on the ferry I took photos of both of us, as well as the Opera House and Harbor Bridge. The scenery was breathtaking, the ocean was so blue and the air was invigorating. The joy on my grandson's face gave me a lot of pleasure, everything was beautiful.

When we arrived at the zoo, we started to look at the animals. The first animal we saw was the giraffe; they were eating leaves from tall trees. We then saw sleeping koalas, the giant elephants, and watched the gorillas, which were very funny. We also saw emus and kangaroos. I took beautiful photos of Jacob hugging the wallaby.

We then caught the sky cable, which took us over Taronga Zoo and we got to see all the amazing animals again. It was an exciting journey that my grandson and I did together, a great day.

My very special birthday lunch

My birthday on 10 January 2009 was one of the best birthdays I have ever had. That morning when I woke up I was very excited. I felt that "Today I'm going to be spoiled".

My daughter Julie and her son Jacob had organized a lunch at the Italian restaurant at Bankstown Sports Club and had invited me, my sister, my other daughter Fida and daughter-in-law Magdalene. My sister, visiting from Kuwait, was a wonderful addition to my birthday. We hadn't spent a birthday together in many, many years. I was so happy she was here in Australia.

We had all organized to meet at the sports club at 11am. So after having a light breakfast, my sister and I got dressed in very nice outfits, put on a little make up and did each other's hair. We were joking and laughing the whole time. It reminded us of when we were teenagers.

When we arrived at the Sports Club, everyone was waiting for us. Everyone looked really nice, and they were all happy that we had arrived. I felt so special, and because we didn't do this very often, I was very excited.

When you look up at the walls of the Italian restaurant it is like sitting out-of-doors in Italy. Murals depict balconies with washing on the lines, grapes hanging, mini statues and soft Italian music playing in the background. The atmosphere was great; there was a very good vibe.

We all ordered mini pizzas. The pizzas weren't your ordinary pizza. The crust was light and fluffy, and the topping was so flavorsome. It was so delicious.

Once we finished the pizza we had dessert. They put a candle in my dessert, then sang happy birthday to me. It touched my heart. I felt so special and incredibly happy.

This was the most special birthday I ever had. I really appreciated what my daughter Julie had done for me, and the fact that my sister was able to enjoy this with me made it an incredibly amazing day.

Hungry for knowledge

I felt strong again. I didn't feel sick anymore. I was keeping my mind extremely busy. I always enjoyed studying and now more so. I was hungry for an education.

The next course was N.O.W. (New Opportunity for Women), a full-time course. This ran for 18 weeks, four days a week, from 10am to 2:30pm, which was suitable for me and my children. This required the participants to



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undertake studies in Maths, Science, Confidence building, Communication, Drafting, Computer awareness, Job seeking skills, Economics, and one week's work experience at the Arabic welfare centre.



I still attended my check-ups every 6 months, but my mind was too busy to think about my illness, I stopped worrying about my health problems and continued to study. On completion of every course I felt more and more happy, satisfied and proud. I felt alive.

Surviving cancer has shown me how to cherish the feeling of good health. It was definitely a growing experience. I didn't grow older from my problem, I grew wiser.

Hikmat Rihani

Member Bankstown Older Women's Network Writers' Group







SELF PORTRAIT IN WORDS - Diane T Brown



*SELF PORTRAIT
IN WORDS*

By Diane T Brown



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Introduction

I started out writing a piece about what it was like to be a girl, but it soon became an emotional journey rediscovering the important events and people that made me the woman I am today. I have tried to present the facts honestly, with the minimal amount of emotion and sentimentality and without analyzing, judging or upsetting anyone. This account is for my daughters, granddaughters, nieces and goddaughter, those wonderful, liberated women of today. In reading my story I hope you will gain a new understanding of a different generation, as well as recognize the uniqueness of womanhood that bring us our joys and strengths.



SELF PORTRAIT IN WORDS - Diane T Brown

An Irish Saying?

“Is it a boy or a child?” When I was young this was a popular saying in my family when a new baby was born. I have been told this was a humorous Irish saying and was usually followed by a laugh. My feminist viewpoint raises a suspicion that there may have been a deeper meaning in this simple question, spoken out of context, more than fifty years ago. Could it have meant a boy was not a child? Was a boy more or less than a child? Could a girl only be a child? Was a girl less or more than a boy if she was called a child? Could this have come from the same era when a naughty girl was told to “behave like a young lady” and a naughty boy was “just being a boy?” Thankfully, the true meaning is lost and it would be a brave person who would dare to ask a new parent that question today.

A sister for Margaret

My father may have been playing cards at his parents' Parramatta home as he awaited my birth. No one can remember, but we do know that in those days fathers were not allowed near the labour ward. Childbirth was strictly women's business. There were no ultrasounds or other tests to determine the health and sex of the expected baby, so the family had to wait with much anticipation for the birth. The news of my safe delivery finally came through – I was a healthy baby girl, born at Paddington Woman's Hospital on 15 March 1949, a sister for 3-year-old Margaret.

Mum often told me she felt bad that day, as she had not produced a son for her husband, whose two older brothers had already sired the much desired “son and heir”. She said she could see the disappointment in his face when he visited her in hospital after my birth, but she also added that his disappointment didn't last long and he was as “proud as punch” when he saw me.

“You won't ever have a son unless you stop riding that motorbike and buy a car”, my uncle warned his brother (Dad had a motorbike with a sidecar; Mum would ride pillion behind him and my sister would sit in the enclosed sidecar nursing me).

There must have been a skerrick of truth in what my uncle said, as my Dad eventually progressed to a family car and the next two babies were boys. Mum had achieved the perfect mix: two girls followed by two boys to carry on the family name. Even dad's siblings only managed one son each.

I was named Diane, “spelt the French way and pronounced the English way”, as my Mum would tell everyone. She was a dressmaker before she married, and I know she delighted in dressing my sister and me in the frilly outfits she created on her treadle sewing machine.

My family

Charles Hutchins (my mother's father) was an Australian Gallipoli veteran born in Western Australia. He met Rose Edith Elsley (my mother's mother) in an English hospital where he was convalescing during World War I; they married and she made the long sea voyage to Western Australia to live. Their only child, Marjorie Doreen Hutchins, was my mother.

My Mother also married a soldier, Terence Michael Morris, during WW II when he was stationed in Western Australia. Dad was sent back to New South Wales as the war was finishing and Mum was five months pregnant with their first child when she flew to Sydney to join him. Later her parents also moved to N.S.W. and after Pop's death Grandma came to live with us permanently, only moving to a nursing home in her final years when her health failed.

Grandma did a lot of the cooking and had her own special foods, such as unsalted butter, Brussels sprouts and fillet steak. We were all allowed and almost expected to have our own food likes and dislikes. My sister Margaret ate peas and I ate beans. On Fridays we all had fish and chips but Grandma had curried eggs in a white sauce. I once complained about the smell of Brussels sprouts and cauliflower cooking in the kitchen, and from then I never tasted



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them until I was twenty six. All our unique and individual food preferences must have made mealtime a major exercise, but somehow they defined each of us as an individual.

Grandma Morris, my Dad's mother, was a gardener with a taste for colour. Arranged around the courtyard outside her back door was a wonderland of painted garden ornaments, pots and plants; even old work boots were painted up to make colourful new homes for her plants and cuttings. The uneven concrete had a crazy pattern and was painted a rainbow of bright colours. One day I visited while she was painting the slatted garden furniture. Each slat was a different colour, and I could see her joy in doing it

My Dad's older sister, Aunty Bessie, ran her own business, a haberdashery shop which specialized in babywear and school uniforms. I loved to go to Aunty Bessie's shop. In the back room I would sort out buttons, hand sew the hems of the school uniforms and eat fresh tomato sandwiches from the local milk bar. Aunty Bessie paid me in pocket money and heaps of praise. More importantly, she showed me that a wife and mother could be a businesswoman too.

My Dad's other sister, Aunty Meg, was an independent young lady who owned and drove her own car in the days when that was not the norm. She displayed an aura of confidence, expressed her opinion (in the nicest way) and could slip through the stereotypical restraints that seemed to define my immediate family.

Family life

As I grew up in the nineteen fifties I came to recognise, but never question, the social differences of the sexes in our home. Boys could do exciting stuff – build billycars with Dad and ride them down the steepest hills, get as dirty as they liked, and never have to make their beds or wash and dry the dishes. Girls could do good things too, like having a dolls' tea party, helping Mum cook desserts in the kitchen and learning to knit and sew, but these gentle domestic pursuits didn't quite seem as exciting as riding a billycart or target practice with a real air rifle.

When I was growing up my Mum was an attentive wife and mother who wanted to run our home to the same timetable and high standard of her mother. That was a little easier then, as her mother was there to help. Everything from the smallest handkerchiefs to the crisp white bed linen would have to be ironed. She would not allow my Dad to put a nail behind the bedroom door to hang his coat on; everything had to be hung up in the wardrobe, out of sight. We even had our individual cutlery; subtle differences, like a chip on a knife handle, would denote the owner of each piece. My sister and I knew each piece and would make sure the table was set correctly.

Mum had her moments of frustration, like the occasions when a beer at the pub after work would extend past our 6 o'clock dinner time and Dad would come home late. With four hungry kids and Grandma complaining that dinner was spoiling, Mum would lament "If I die and come back, I want to come back as a man".

Come back as a man! I couldn't think of anything worse! One would have to be very good at cricket, do night shifts and work on the weekends to support the family. A man can't stay home and be with the children. Manhood is governed by so many rules and they have an image to maintain. They cannot come and go as they please. They cannot leave their mates at the pub and go home for 6 o'clock tea if they haven't had their shout. How could our Mum think of being a man when she was already the queen of the world I knew!

My Dad's tea would remain on an enamel plate over a steaming saucepan being kept warm for his return. After eating his dried up food without complaint he would sit in his favourite chair, and sometimes he would ask me to sit on his knee. The smell of cigarette smoke on his clothes and beer on his breath was reassuring. He would say he was in the doghouse and only we kids loved him, but we all knew that he only had to endure Mum's disapproval for a short time before the household returned to its usual calm. Mum had a saying "Never let the sun go down on an argument".



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A problem child

That old-fashioned saying “children should be seen and not heard” sometimes extended to the dinner table in our home. I don't think that would have worried me much as I was described by my mother as a “painfully shy” child. In today's world I would have been whisked off to the psychologist and diagnosed with social phobia and selective mutism.

Mum was concerned that I was not developing the same speaking skills as my older sister so she took us both to elocution lessons. I remember practising my poems at home, but when it was my turn at the public recital I got a big lump in my throat, started to stutter then broke down in tears. Mum said I would be older and do better next time but I don't remember trying again.



I missed out on a lot of school days, as I had asthma. I would get a best friend at school, get sick, and then return to school to find she had a new best friend. It was hard for me to develop and maintain friendships and my education was difficult as well. In those days there didn't appear to be the asthma treatments and preventative medications that we have today. Mum and Grandma treated me the best way they knew, and my wheezing and breathless attacks must have been as terrifying for them as they were for me. I remember them giving me ‘hospital strength brandy’ in a little glass to settle me down.



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I was taken to a chest specialist for allergy tests and Mum then said I was only allergic to cats and dust. Mum also said there were two types of asthma; 'allergic' and 'emotional'. As we didn't have cats or dust in our house, and I was a very 'timid' child, I was labelled as having 'emotional asthma'. I now felt that I was to blame every time I had an attack! I tried my hardest not to become sick, but when I did I was told that I had "brought it on" and "had to settle down". Many days I set out walking to school and wheezing. There was a pot hole in the road about halfway there and I thought if I could make it that far I could keep walking and make it to school. Sometimes my wheezing would get worse, I would have to turn back home and Mum would be cranky with me.

St Luke's

St. Luke's Catholic parish at Revesby was the cornerstone of our spiritual, educational and community life. We revered the religious sisters and included the parish priest, Father Carr, in many aspects of our family. On special occasions he would come to our home to bless it.

Dad would turn up for every working bee when the new school was being built. Mum would spend endless hours cooking and sewing for the fundraising fetes. I was very proud of my parent's involvement in the parish activities and especially my mother's crafty donations.

Mum would make sure we all lined up (from the youngest to the oldest) for Holy Communion every Sunday. The rules required us to fast (not eat anything) from midnight the night before. One Sunday morning I forgot and ate some left over Milo that I had in my school bag to mix with my school milk ration. As we were on our way to the altar for Communion I suddenly remembered my transgression, but it was too late! As I walked back from receiving communion the sun must have come out from behind the clouds and the sunlight shone through the stained glass windows. I thought I was in big trouble; if Mum didn't know about the Milo snack, I was sure God did! Thankfully, He wasn't too angry with me, there was no bolt of lightning. I would have something to tell the priest at confession next week and it would probably require at least three Hail Marys as penance.

Every night when Mum put us to bed she would pull the crisp linen sheets and woolly blankets over my head, then fold them back and tuck them in really, really tight. I felt very safe and secure as she would say, "Good night, sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite", and "Don't forget to say your prayers". The little girl within me wishes she could tuck me in one more time.

Hay

One morning when I was eight years old my mother was not there to get my breakfast. I was very upset. Dad gave us the news, "You have a new baby brother". Things changed from then as Mum spent a lot of time sitting on the lounge, breast feeding Michael. Mum and I never got to make dolls' dresses from her left over dress material any more. I decided to spend more time hanging around Dad when he was home.

Dad worked on the railways and took a job transfer to the country town of Hay in the Riverina. He now worked day shifts, Monday to Friday, so we would see more of him. I was about eleven years old and the change in climate was good for me. My asthma attacks almost disappeared.



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To Dad

I remember

brown paper kites that weren't

'made in Japan', and riding a bike, no training wheels just Dad

lending a hand.

I remember

evening swims in the river before pollution

and swimming pools. You teaching four kids to swim

then taking on

half the school.

I remember long car trips with family

sing-a-longs.

"If I should ever

fall in love again" must have been

your favourite song.

You know

I still can swim,

I can drive

and I still can ride.

I can remember

so much more.

I am glad

you found the time.

Those years at Hay offered more freedom and variety for play. I had lots of girlfriends now; Winsome and Robyn were two of them. I learnt to ride a bike, and after rain I would ride out of town with my girl friends to collect mushrooms from the long paddock and stockyards. I had bantam chooks and a rooster called Peter. I commandeered all the old paint tins and started a collection of succulents and geraniums; all grown from cuttings. I even learnt how to catch yabbies and tadpoles in the irrigation channels.

A working mother

Mum got a job working in the corner shop, so Grandma was in charge when we got home from school. It appeared to me she doted on my two brothers and waited on them hand and foot, but she would tell me what to do in a domineering way and, as a teenager, I resented that. I preferred my mother to be home because then Grandma would turn back into a grandmother and not be so bossy. To this day, members of my family say Grandma and I didn't get along as we were 'too much alike'. I didn't believe that was true then and I still won't believe it today.



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Now both Mum and Dad would go for a drink at the club after they finished work. Grandma would prepare dinner and get very, very cranky if Mum was not home at 6 o'clock to serve it up. Some nights Dad, Mum and Grandma would go to the darts competition at the local pub. Grandma also insisted on going out with them on other occasions. Mum would lament "It was Terry Morris (my Dad) and his two wives". There appeared to be an underlying tension between the two women that I never fully understood. To this day I try to remember my mother and grandmother wrapped in a warm embrace or even exchanging a kiss on the cheek. Sadly, for me, no image comes to my mind.

My mother's return to work caused me a problem at school. Sister Joan taught me in sixth class and one day she made all the children in the class stand up. She then let all the children whose mothers stayed at home to sit down. Only two children were left standing; Patricia and me. Patricia was excused as her mother didn't have a husband and she needed to work to support herself and her daughter. Sister Joan also explained that Mrs Harbon's children (who were not in our class) would grow up well as their mother was a teacher at our school and was helping the nuns to educate us. That only left me standing! Now Sister Joan told the whole class that my mother should be at home looking after her husband and children. This was extremely distressing for me. I did not want to be put in that position again, so before I left for school each day I would beg my mother not to go to work and be there when I got home from school. Mum would get cross, "Don't be stupid, you are such a clingy child. Grandma will look after you after school". She never asked me why I started to behave that way and it was only in her final years I told her this story about Sister Joan.

In her last year I realized that I could carry no scars or emotional baggage if I was to love and support Mum in her time of need. We had short and long chats and I often I had to bite my tongue as I reminded myself of a Jewish saying; 'Why did God give us two ears but only one mouth?' I did listen twice as much as I spoke; that is how I got to know so much about my mother, her thoughts and her memories!

The nuns hardly ever left the convent and school grounds but they seemed to know all the dangerous things happening outside school. After Mass one Sunday my parents were approached by one of the nuns. Apparently my sister, Margaret, had been seen holding hands with a boy at the football. My brother, Graeme, and I eavesdropped as we pretended to play around the bell tower, but we already knew of our sister's 'romance' with the non-Catholic boy at the football. Mum was horrified and she and Dad knew they would have put an end to it. On the way home in the car, Mum whispered to Dad, "Don't talk to Margaret in front of Grandma. I don't want her to know about this". Margaret was in a lot of strife and she cried a bit. Boyfriends were more trouble than they were worth, I thought.

Sex education

Around about my twelfth or thirteenth birthday Mum gave me a book to read. Actually, it was only half a book as the binding was ripped and it only had a front cover. The index was in the front so I knew I got the part about girls and the missing half was about boys. Mum had two sayings "Ignorance is bliss" and "What you don't know won't hurt you" and I guessed they applied to sex education too. She asked me everyday, "Have you read that book yet?" until I eventually sat under the shady grape vines in our backyard and read it. I didn't really understand it; it was obviously published by the Catholic Church. I do remember that a man and a woman got married, the husband had a seed and the wife had an egg. When the husband gave his seed to his wife they made a baby.

It was all very confusing and I wondered if the boy part of the book would have been easier to understand. At least I now knew that girls had periods; I would now check my belly button regularly. I gave the half book back to Mum, told her I had read it and she said, "Good".



SELF PORTRAIT IN WORDS - Diane T Brown

Career choices

My Catholic high school was co-ed so I saw the different expectations parents and teaching sisters had for male and female students. It appeared to me that a boy could become a tradesman, doctor, dentist, solicitor or anything he decided on and their parents could afford. If a girl was bright she could become a teacher, nurse or join a religious teaching order. The pretty, outgoing girls of the town could marry well (maybe a grazier's son from a sheep station) and enjoy their husbands' successes. Those girls who were neither bright nor pretty (and I included myself in that group) were still expected to pass the Intermediate Certificate at the end of the third year of high school. They could then work in a shop or office until they married. It appeared that I was destined to be a shop assistant! My life choices were simple and my expectations were low.

I did consider becoming a nun. Those devoted "brides of Christ" painted a romantic picture with of their stories of 'holy vocations'. Sister Joan rejoiced that she had been called to give up dreams of an earthly marriage and children of her own to make prayer and teaching us her life's work. I wrote letters to the Virgin Mary and Saint Therese and put them in the prayer box at church, then waited for a sign or that little voice within to call me to the convent life. Nothing happened.

A late bloomer

Unlike my sister, I was what my Mum called a "late bloomer". I didn't worry about not having periods, but not having breasts and not wearing a bra (like some girls my age) was disappointing. My sister would have days off school and work, moan a lot and my mother and grandmother would give her hot water bottles for her tummy. It was all very secretive and I was in no hurry to suffer like her.

My mother was worried about me, and she took the opportunity to express her concern when she took me to the doctor for a check up after I had a bout of 'scarlet fever'. She was seated opposite the doctor's desk, and I was standing up beside her, when she told the male doctor that I hadn't had my periods yet. I was surprised that my Mum would talk about periods and even more surprised when the doctor stepped out from behind his desk, put his hands up my skirt and into my panties. His reply, to my mother, was "Yes. She is very immature". I felt a silent scream inside me, "I am here! Talk to me! Don't touch me unless you ask!" Nothing was ever said about that doctor's visit.

Public school

Mum and Dad would say, "What are we going to do with Diane?" I was almost fifteen, yet they didn't seem to want me to finish school and get a job; instead I was sent to Hay War Memorial High School (a public school and the only available option in town). My parents thought that I was still 'too immature' to leave school and they were talking about returning to Sydney in the near future. Graeme was now at high school level and would need work opportunities soon; Michael was in primary school and Margaret was dating a local boy. Mum told Margaret, "Don't get too interested in him as we will be leaving town soon".

Public school was an academic disaster for me as I had to take science and economic subjects. I hadn't even heard of Biology, never been in a science lab and didn't even know what beakers and Bunsen burners were - let alone the economic theory of 'supply and demand'. Other students were there to get their Leaving Certificate and go on to university; I was just there, marking time and feeling even more dumb and stupid.

At the end of the year my parents told me I had to get a reference from the Principal as we were moving back to Sydney. I was embarrassed to ask as I had failed my exams, but I did eventually go to the office and get the reference. Mum said it was very good but I thought the words "quiet and unassuming" really meant "too shy and lacks self-confidence".



SELF PORTRAIT IN WORDS - Diane T Brown

Working life

After we returned to our Revesby home, I went with Mum to job interviews. I tried out for hairdressing, millinery, photo colouring and badge enamelling jobs. After a few rejections, Mum said I would have to go the local public high school if I didn't get a job by the beginning of the school year. Fortunately, I got a job at Soul Patterson's Chemists in the city and the worry of going to a new school was alleviated.

With our return to Sydney my asthma attacks also came back and when I had too many sick days off work I would be given my notice and then had to look for a new job. Dad said I should get a job in the public service as that would give me job security. I started work at the Taxation Office in the city and was on probation, pending a medical examination. I still got sick and now I had to make sure nobody knew I had asthma; doctors' certificates had to say 'acute bronchitis' and not mention the words 'chronic' or 'asthma'. I now had an asthma puffer so I could sneak a bit of Alupent to ease my wheezing.

One would realize by now that I was a very 'needy' teenager, and would often push my family members to their limits, to find out where I fitted into my family. Some might say it is the challenge of the middle children to find their places within the family. I asked my Mother, "Was I a mistake? Do you really love me?" Mum's answer was, "Of course you were planned. Of course we love you. Don't ask such stupid questions!" I didn't ask again, but when I think back I may have just been fishing for reassurance, a complement and a hug.

My parents rightly expected us to pay board each week. Mum got the board money as part of her housekeeping money and every Friday I would tuck the notes inside the outer chocolate wrapper and give her the block of chocolate. She loved that and I liked to make her feel special. She still remembered the Friday chocolate bars when she was in her eighties.

Leaving home

After a few broken romances I met Adrian at a dance in Hurstville. We embarked on the usual process of dating, going steady and engagement that young couples in love usually observed in those days.

I had been told that some girls got married 'just to leave home'. I would not be one of those. Before I married I would prove to myself that I could live alone and I was a mature, independent woman. After I turned 21 in March 1970 I found a flat at Sans Souci to rent; all I had to do was tell Mum and Dad. I thought they would be pleased at my initiative, but I was wrong. Mum cried and said she was 'shamed' that I was leaving home before my wedding day; Dad said, "Don't upset your mother!" It was an intense, dramatic time for everyone as I packed up my personal possessions. I was allowed to take my 'glory box' and the writing desk I had bought myself but Mum said I had to leave everything else behind. It even came to a confrontation over my special non-allergic pillow; that had to stay.

Mum was more relaxed and changed her approach some years later when my brother Michael was going to share a flat with his mate Ray. She offered to set him up with towels, blankets and linen, but told him he couldn't bring his dirty washing home. He didn't move out, it was too comfortable living at home. This was one of the favourite stories she would always tell when the topic of leaving home arose in conversation. In one of our quiet, private talks I asked why she never talked about me leaving home. She said that she could still remember the shame that she had felt at my decision, but attitudes were different a decade later when it was my brother's turn to think about leaving home.

Living on my own was a bit scary at first, and I was very sad because of the disagreements it had caused. I got a basic cook book and taught myself about the different cuts of meat and anything else I would need to know in the kitchen. I wanted to be a good cook, like my mother and grandmother, when I married Adrian.



SELF PORTRAIT IN WORDS - Diane T Brown

Leaving a marriage

After a year of marriage Adrian and I had our first beautiful daughter, Nina Therese, followed by cute little Tanya Marie, fourteen months later. Being good Catholics, we practised the Rhythm -Billings method of contraception; we did all the training, filled in the charts, took temperatures and abstained for most of the time. The experts told us the method never fails (only the couple fail) but I can assure them the method can fail and now had two beautiful daughters to prove it.

I was a wife and mother but I now needed to go to work to help pay our bills and buy a block of land to build our family home. Working wives needed their husband's help in the house, especially with two children. Unfortunately stresses from within and from outside our marriage threatened the fragile patriarchal order which couldn't be maintained. It was a changed world and marriages built on expectations from another time were doomed to fail.

Adrian's mother was very attached to her two grand-daughters, and that made her a fierce foe when our marriage came to an end. The new Family Law Act was supposed to make divorce more amicable and custody fairer but instead it clogged up the courts with the backlog of couples wanting a 'no fault' divorce, often funded by legal aid.

Due to a couple of ill informed decisions on my part and a smart, experienced barrister hired by Adrian's family, the custody case dragged on for almost two years before a judge decreed that I could not have full legal custody of Nina and Tanya; I would have to be content with weekend access. I could not financially or emotionally keep on fighting. Now my heart was broken.

Ted

I met Ted at a Parents Without Partners social. He was the complete opposite to my ex-husband. Ted was born in Austria and had a happy and energetic personality that everybody found attractive. Our romantic and passionate relationship didn't make us a perfect match. I knew he missed his three children and regretted the end of his fifteen-year marriage. He coped by living and partying hard as well as other vices; he had his dark side as well. I missed my daughters and had prolonged sad and tearful times that I can now recognize as a severe depression because it happened again thirty years later. He was determined to party his upsets and cares away and I was on a roller coaster of emotions as my daughters came and went. We had many break-ups and make-ups until we both realized that we could never live together and we called it a day.

I have my joyful and intelligent son, Dylan Michael, from that relationship and for that miracle I am forever grateful. When Dylan was a month old we moved into a rented flat in Punchbowl and we somehow survived on a carefully managed pension; I was happy and he was the most contented baby I had ever known. I would survive on my own as a single mother. I no longer needed to cling to the dream of a perfect marriage or live in a miserable one to make my world complete. I knew I was wiser, the world was not always a 'just' place, I was a good person and I would never be a victim again.

I often wondered what my mother thought about the feminist movement of the sixties and seventies, and if she was even aware of the changing roles of women in those early days. Women in the public service no longer had to leave work when they married and they could earn the same hourly rate as a man doing the same job. There was still a shortage of promotional opportunities for career women but the tides were turning and there were more choices. University education was no longer exclusively for the wealthy. I never took an active role in the feminist movement but I read and observed enough to understand it was much more than women marching and burning their bras!

Mum did go back to work as a tea lady in the late seventies. She told me she learnt a lot from that experience. Dad said it changed her. She now insisted on having her own bank account and pocket money that she could spend as she pleased. No more being content with the left over money from her carefully budgeted housekeeping.



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Terry Brown

I was dancing with a perfect stranger at Revesby Workers' Club when I asked him if he was married. He looked like he should have been, and I thought a direct question would get rid of him quickly if he was. He told me had been separated for just over a year and that he had a son, Duane, who was two and a half. When I told him that my son, Dylan, was a year old he suggested we take the two boys to the beach on Sunday, and I agreed. That is how I met Terry Brown.

We had a great day at Wattamolla Beach, followed by many more, and as our relationship slowly developed, our four children were always part of the picture. Terry took permanent custody of his son Duane when his mother had difficulties. I cared for Duane when Terry was working, and the weekends included outings with the boys and my daughters.

We married the year after we met. It was a simple civil ceremony in the corner of the lounge room, followed by cake and champagne with our family and friends. Terry may have thought a formal union was not necessary, as we were committed to each other, but it was my desire to tell the world we loved each other and were going to be a partnership for the rest of our days.

I was the romantic one, but when I look at those wedding photos today (with our four children from our previous lives) I know we didn't survive on romance. We survived by being two mature individuals who loved each other and wanted to work towards the same goals for our future and our jig-saw family. Not many young people going onto a first marriage can truly say that. There was no king, queen or princess in our relationship, we were both equal, and that is what made it so special. Our marriage vows said it all: "In such a satisfactorily shared life you will retain your individual identity, not viewing yourselves as a couple so inseparable that you have no existence apart from each other".

Stay-at-home Mum

We worked hard to pay off the three mortgages that were left on Terry's house after his divorce settlement. The first mortgage was paid off after I worked at a local factory for four months and Terry took every afternoon and night shift he could. Then we agreed that I would stay home with the boys to give them the best home life we could, and we went into the milk vending business. Terry delivered milk to homes at night; I collected accounts, took orders and delivered to the shops while the boys were at school and Terry did his day job.

It wasn't all work and no play. We always had fun holidays that were spent caravanning on the coast. In 1986 we sold the milk runs and set out on a four month trip around Australia in a caravan and a 4-wheel drive vehicle. That was an exciting time, the only sad part being that I couldn't take the girls as they were now in high school. The next year we went to Cape York on a five week trip. The boys were schooled by us when we travelled and returned with no damage to their educational progress.

When Nina turned sixteen her father and step mother asked us to take her permanently, and after that Tanya moved into our home as well. Those were some of the happiest and most fulfilling times for me as a mother. Some mealtimes I would just sit at the table and listen to the noisy group, talking, eating and sometimes fighting and think how lucky I was to have all four of them so close.

Our parenting involved listening to their ideas and dreams so we knew what they needed. Sometimes we didn't agree with their plans, but we were always pleased that they discussed them with us. We probably made many mistakes but we always tried our best, just as our parents had done. No topics were taboo in our household. I learnt a lot from my children!



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Further education

Describing myself as a 'stay at home mother' is not quite correct, as when the two youngest children were in primary school I enrolled in an art course, part time at Padstow and Liverpool TAFE colleges, after which I applied for and gained a place at the Cumberland Collage of Health Sciences (University of Sydney).

My first semester studying Diversional Therapy (Recreation) was a bit of a shock as I was not prepared for the study time and field work it involved. I had to get used to spending time away from the family. Terry was supportive and would cook dinner and supervise the boys' high school home work, but I hated not being able to do it. Terry also taught the boys to iron their school uniforms. They looked a bit awkward ironing, and then I realized they were ironing left handed, because their Dad was left handed.

I was stressing and trying too hard to get top marks for perfect assignments until a fellow mature age student, Maureen, said, "I'll tell you a secret, Diane. You don't have to get an A+ for every assignment, you only have to pass". She was right, so I relaxed a bit and still managed get some distinctions and credits. I believe my success was due to understanding 'concepts' and thinking outside the square. University was about thoughts and discovery, not about rote learning like school had been. The physiology units were hard work, the art and craft units were interesting and the behavioural science units (psychology and sociology) were enlightening. I embraced it all.

I was the first person in my family to graduate from a university, closely followed by my two nephews. I went to the Great Hall at the University of Sydney (dressed in the robes) with Terry and Mum and Dad. The graduation was very ceremonial and exciting, but I knew the important part was what I had learnt, not the piece of paper I had received. Mum and Dad were proud and I bought a silver chain and bracelet with the gift of money I was given. Terry was my hero, he had helped me through those study years, including listening to me practising those seemingly incessant presentations and seminars. Even though he never had a desire to study himself, he knew how important it was to me.

Work and business

I started work in the disability field in 1990. My first full time position was managing a group home for four people with intellectual disabilities. Then I took up a more hands-on position as a programme worker at an adult education centre for people with physical and intellectual disabilities. I wasn't working long when Terry took redundancy and left his trade of thirty years. Painful back and knee injuries made it difficult for him to work as a mechanic, and he was not happy in an administration and supervision position.

For two years we swapped roles; he had a part-time home based business and was 'Mister Mum' the rest of the day. He made my lunch and put my brief case in the back of my car each morning. It must have been an unusual site for our neighbours to see: me in my work clothes and him in his dressing gown as we walked to the car and kissed each other good-bye. We never saw swapping traditional roles as a threat to our egos.

Terry had started to do woodwork as a hobby, making wooden toys and craft items. I designed some of the items and hand painted them in the evenings, and we started selling them at craft shows and the occasional craft market. Soon we realized that we could earn almost as much from our joint creative efforts as I was earning from my job. I left work and we started our art and craft business in earnest. By 1993 we had our decorative art studio and shop, which we called 'Ivy Cottage', at East Hills. I taught some classes and we employed other teachers and retail staff as well. There was also a big demand for tutors and facilitators who were trained to work with people with disabilities, so I ran classes and workshops for them in the community centres and colleges when I could.

In 1999 we closed the shop and studio and kept enough wholesale business and teaching commitments to survive financially. Nina and Dylan gave me a great 50th birthday party the same week as we closed the shop, and



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then we went on a trip to the Barossa Valley with a group of family and friends. Since then we have taken to the road most winters, travelling north in our 4WD and caravan. I love the Australian outback best and Terry loves the beaches, so we visit both when we travel up to Queensland for the winter.

Mum's final years

Mum had serious health problems in her final years and perhaps one of her lowest points was when she went to Noosa with Dad and Michael, for a holiday between her chemotherapy treatments, had a fall and ended up in Nambour Hospital with a fractured shoulder (that couldn't be treated) and a fractured hip that had to be replaced as soon as possible. Terry and I joined Dad and Michael at Nambour, then Graeme arrived — our sole mission was to get the best care for Mum and support each other until the crisis was over. Michael returned to Sydney to organize a 'medical evacuation' to get Mum from Nambour in Queensland to Bankstown in New South Wales.

Mum was very ill and fragile in the intensive care unit and, wanting to reassure her, I held her hand and gently stroked her soft silver grey hair just as her younger son had done the day before. She moaned, tightened up her face and moved her head from side to side in protest. I was surprised and asked the others what was wrong. "She doesn't like her hair being touched," was my father's reply. I found that a bit strange, as I had put rollers in and brushed and styled her hair hundreds of times over the years. "But it settled her down yesterday," I replied. Then Graeme had to spell it out to me, "She only likes Michael stroking her hair, no one else!" That was sad for me, as I didn't think my gesture of love and concern would add to her stress. I cried in a quiet, emotional moment, away from the others.

Terry, always the voice of reason, told me, "That's just the way things are and you shouldn't get yourself upset". I went back to knowing I was comforting her by just being around and that I would have to respect her comfort zones.

I admired my mother for the strength and resolve she displayed towards the end of her battle. Before she slipped into those final days, she grabbed my hand, pulled me close and whispered, "I love you, thank you for being here." "I love you too, and I want to be here", was my reply, and that was the truth. It didn't matter that I couldn't stroke her hair.

Pain

The next few pages will seem self-indulgent to some who have never experienced prolonged and uncontrollable pain. I feel no need to apologize, as this is an integral part of my recent story ... the medical condition that I now live with and the changes it forced upon me have altered my life and relationships forever.

I muddled through the first year, with Terry's support, but as medication couldn't control the pain we decided, in October 2003, that neurosurgery within my brain was the only option. We both hoped for the promised cure, but unfortunately I was one of a small percentage who didn't get any relief; instead I had more medical problems to deal with.

I could no longer run our part time business with Terry, so it had to be closed down. I now had to rely on him for the simplest things, and our relationship was no longer an equal partnership. I had to resign from teaching most of the art and craft classes that I enjoyed. I had to tell my children that I could no longer look after their very young children while they went to work. I barely remember the two youngest grandchildren being born, as it happened in the weeks following my brain surgery.



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Chronic pain involves so many losses: loss of income, loss of job, loss of self esteem, loss of respect from those who can't understand your condition, to name a few. These losses were more painful than the pain itself. I was also seeing my mother's sad suffering during this time. I wore a 'mask' most of the time and even those closest to me couldn't recognise my sadness and depression.

Mask

If I shed my mask, what would my loved ones see? The sadness, the loss, the grief this pain has brought to me?

Would they only see the face they want to know?

Or would they sense my pain and their understanding grow?

Would they question my daily struggle and label my motives dishonest?

Would they retreat in silence or, worse still, offer religious solace?

Would they look a little closer

into my dark heart and broken spirit?

Would they show some compassion?

With empathy, could they do it?

If I shed my mask

what would my loved ones see? Would it add to my pain

or would they be there for me?

I have learnt many very noteworthy lessons during my 60 years and hope to continue to discover many more. One recent revelation was that no matter how much some people care for me or how close they are to me, they may not know (or even want to know) what I think or how I feel. Some people don't relate in a way that promotes empathy and can't understand something they haven't experienced. It is not my purpose in life to make them understand; I only have to do whatever it takes to live my life to the full, and give to others the love and respect that we all deserve. If I have to say "no" to someone's request, I am not a selfish person; I am just functioning within my limitations, which I know very well. I am a survivor.

Self Description

My path to find the woman I had lost through illness, and the depression that followed, was not an easy one. I can only say that it was one of the hardest challenges I have ever undertaken. It was as if I had shattered into a million pieces and had to be reassembled in a way to make me stronger and more resilient so I would never crack again.

Others might mend themselves with drugs, alcohol, gambling, overworking, overachieving or other constructive or destructive means, but I trust I have done it once and done it right. Terry and I survived that period and he also had to learn a lot about taking responsibility for some of the emotional stress that a blended family can create. I am very glad he did, as life apart from him would be very empty. Joy, fun, love and humour are back in our lives and that is what balances the inevitable challenges we all encounter from time to time.

When I had been reassembled again, I was given eight headings and required to write a 'self description' I can happily live with the woman I am, and I like her, but I can't promise every one else will.



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Physical Appearance I am a 56 year old Grandmother, 163 cm (5' 5") tall, weigh 76 kg, and have fair skin and curly hair. I am comfortable with my appearance and like to wear casual but tidy dress. On formal outings I always make a big effort to dress up to the occasion.

How I relate to others With other people I am helpful and caring. I feel love and affection towards my family members and show my emotions — if I am very happy or very sad. I am always honest but try not to behave in a judgmental way.

Personality I can be quiet and shy with new acquaintances. With people I know well I can be funny and witty in an irreverent manner. I enjoy my own company and being creative. I am not afraid to be different in my art and craft — as long as I like the project, others' personal criticism doesn't bother me.

How others see me Others see me as competent, reliable, and knowledgeable; a good person to turn to in a crisis. I am a good listener and encouraging, but can be confronting when I think someone has a negative view or is behaving badly

Performance on the job I am always professional and punctual at work. I am also patient and generous with my time. I tend to leave preparation to the last minute but always meet the deadlines and take pride in my work.

Performance of daily tasks of living I am a good cook, enjoy cooking healthy food, cooking for visitors and rarely buy takeaway. I keep a tidy, comfortable home but don't always finish major cleaning jobs in one go as I am easily distracted by something more interesting than the job at hand. I will however complete a major clean-up with my partner when it is required. I am an excellent gardener / landscaper. I enjoy relaxing in my backyard and put in all the hard work to keep it in good condition so visitors can enjoy it.

Mental functioning I am open to new ideas and like to research any popular social or environmental issues. I love to talk about current affairs, political issues, religion, medical discoveries etc with others who are interested in discussions. I often engage in "small talk" but prefer to have more meaningful conversations with close family and friends.

Sexuality I am intuitive of my partner's sexual needs. I don't conform to other's rigid views on older people and sex. I prefer my partner to initiate and behave in a romantic way but accept that this will not happen often.

Poetic expression

In 1986 we were camped by the beautiful and remote Fortescue River in Western Australia. A fellow traveller told us that he was just relaxing and enjoying the scenery for 4 or 5 days. Meanwhile I was drawing, photographing and writing about the place. I wrote this in my travel diary that night:

"I thought it was a shame he (the traveller) couldn't use some paint and take his impressions home with him. On second thoughts, most people are content to enjoy the scenery. It must be the obsession of the artist, writer or photographer to study, interpret and record it."

I had always kept a travel diary but had stopped writing just for the pleasure and the fun of it. Having to write a 'self description' got me into the writing mode again and in 2006 I went to a creative writing class run by Silvana at



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the Older Woman's Network, Bankstown. She encouraged me to express my personal stories in words and verse. Even if they silently reside in the memory boards of my computer until it too is obsolete, it doesn't matter. My pleasure, therapy, and I suspect obsession, is in doing it. If it can be shared with others, that is just a bonus.

Wind of Change

I must not cling to past joys that cannot be sustained.

*The blooms of yesterday have now become
distant memories to cherish today.*

The challenges of chronic pain have fuelled a wind of change. New seeds to grow, new blossoms to nurture are blowing my way.

In 2006 I started an art group for the Trigeminal Neuralgia Association of Australia so that others could have an opportunity to express their pain in a creative way, and possibly gain some therapeutic benefits from doing so. We expressed our private pain stories with words and paint for the 2007 Trigeminal Neuralgia Association Conference.

Today is a gift

I learnt many decades ago that to live a happy, contented life it is best to forget about assigning blame, harbouring guilt and distributing punishment. Some of my memories may not match exactly with the memories of others, and some of my reactions will never match with that of others in the same situation. If our individual beliefs, memories and emotions were all homogenised it would indeed be a boring world.

To this day I marvel at the changes and challenges women experience and the triumphs and successes we achieve. The physical and spiritual changes we go through just to bring forth the next generation make us truly special.

If my life can be compared to my mother's pregnancy that brought me into this world, I am only entering my third trimester. That means that only two thirds of my life has been lived, and with good luck and good genes there may be another one third to come. Meanwhile I will enjoy today, my beloved husband, Terry and my wonderful family and friends.

*Yesterday is history,
tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift,
that is why it is called the present.*

Diane T Brown

Member Bankstown Older Women's Network Writers' Group







Introducing the Biographies

About the Biographies

There are many significant stories which reflect the challenging role of Australian women, from pioneering days, to the present.

To name them all, would be a difficult task, and we were asked to select just three for this publication. Our focus was women from the Bankstown area. Some are famous for their achievements, some are not, but all are just as important for being themselves.

Silvana Gruber

Bankstown Older Women's Network Writers' Group Facilitator





June Hatzidoulis - Biography

June Hatzidoulis

June is an Australian who married a Greek. Her life story is one that belongs between the covers of an autobiography.

June's working life began as a secretary, a position which expanded to include bookkeeping.

June then became a Travel Consultant and furthered her career by becoming Travel Manager. As a licensed Travel Agent, she became a member of the Australian Federation of Travel Agents (AFTA), member and treasurer of the Women's Australian Travel League (WATL) and a member of the International Federation of Women in Travel (IFWTO). Through these organizations June attended many national and international conferences. An opportunity arose to further her career as Administrator/Lecturer at the Travel Academy where she wrote and taught courses, all of which were fully accredited by the Vocational, Educational Training Accreditation Board (VETAB).

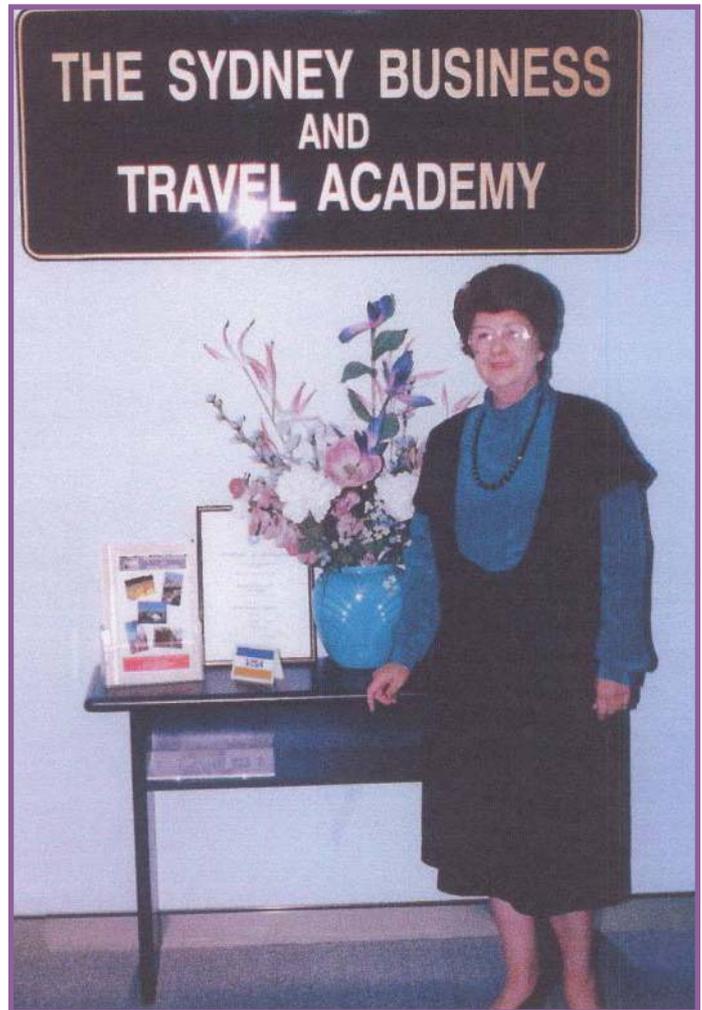
June then became a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Travel and Tourism, a Director of Tourism Training NSW and a member of the Steering Committee of Tourism Training Australia. She has Certificates and Diploma in Travel and Tourism, Fares and Ticketing Land II and Train the Trainer Land II.

During this period of June's life she was a Tour Escort for groups to Greece and the Middle East. She travelled to the four corners of the globe and cruised the three main oceans and the Mediterranean Sea.

June retired but soon became bored and built a child care centre, of which she was owner/director for the next five years. After selling the business and leasing the premises she retired again at the age of seventy.

June now finds pleasure in being a member of the Older Women's Network, where she is involved in the Discussion Group and the Writers' Group. She is a past President of the Bankstown/Chester Hill Ladies Probuss, Secretary of the Bankstown Garden Club, a member of Computer Pals and is a volunteer community representative on the Clinical Advisory Council at Bankstown Hospital and the Critical Care Committee.

June's loves are her family, friends and her cat "Coco". As well as reading, writing, using her computer and gardening, June also enjoys live theatre and dining out.



Bankstown Older Women's Network Writers' Group



Biography - The Hon Helen Westwood

The Honourable Helen Mary Westwood, Member of the Legislative Council

Helen is one of the ten children of Harry and Cecily Wray. Her father, an Englishman, worked as a cleaner and also served in the Army. Helen's parents' ambition was that their children would grow into a healthy, happy and well adjusted adulthood; they guided the children, not pushing them into anything, there was no expectation to pursue any particular career. It was a very caring family. Helen was very close to her adopted sister of the same age.

Social life for Helen as a teenager was no different from that of many teenagers from Bankstown; she had male and female friends, she was interested in music, swimming and other sports. After attending Catholic schools, she finished her final year at Birrong Girls High.

At fifteen years of age she began working in various positions, first as a shop assistant, then accounting machinist and clerical assistant before marrying at 17.

Helen's life took a different direction when her second daughter, born when she was 23, was premature and had an audio impaired disability. It was hard to cope and Helen became aware of the lack of services and support in difficult circumstances. This led her to becoming involved in advocacy, succeeding in making changes, improving facilities and services.

In 1976 Helen joined the Bargo-Picton Branch of the Australian Labor Party, then she became the Secretary of the Sefton Branch in 1977. Between 1997 and 1998, she was Deputy Mayor, and between September 2002 and May 2006, she was the Mayor of Bankstown. This was a learning experience for Helen, giving her an insight into the hard work necessary for success. In Bankstown's multicultural environment, she learned a lot from other cultures.

In her role as Mayor of Bankstown she was very well known to all communities for her involvement and presence at many events. People wondered how she managed to be everywhere, and always smiling as if everything was easy.

The Western Sydney Regional Organization of Councils saw her as a Board Member from 2001 and Chair from 2004 to 2005. She was also a member of the Executive of the N.S.W. Local Government Association. From 1996 to 2007 she was a Director of the Board of Waste Recycling and Processing Corporation. In 2001 Helen was awarded the Centenary Medal for her services to Local Government.

Proud mother of two daughters and grandmother of four, Helen considers that having a child with disabilities taught her a lot. She learned many skills, and it also led to her achieving many things in her personal and political life. She considers herself fortunate and privileged to have been exposed to many different human experiences.



The Hon Helen Westwood - *Biography*

Helen was always committed to social justice and community participation. She always believed that Council's resources must be allocated equitably in ways that addresses the local community's needs and priorities. She was always concerned about, disability issues, women's issues, and environmental concerns. These issues have always been a priority, as environmental and social impacts of Council Planning decisions are issues that must be considered.

In 2006 she was made a Member of the Order of Australia for her Services for the Local Government. It was the women from OWN (Older Women's Network) and other organizations who voted for her to receive the OAM (Order of Australia).

She resigned as Mayor in 2006 to become an adviser to State Fisheries Minister, Ian MacDonald. This was a prelude to her nomination on the Labor Party ticket for the Legislative Council. She was the first Mayor of Bankstown to be elected to the N.S.W. Parliament.



Helen proudly wears on her left lapel two badges, the first a blue stone in the centre of a small gold badge and another, the Parliament Pin. They always have to be worn on the left lapel and the OAM at the top.

In 2007 she was commended in the Women of the West Award for her commitment and dedication to improving social balance, equity, opportunity and community harmony.

Helen misses her role as Bankstown Mayor, but her commitment and interest in community issues is where she wants to be in order to make changes in the law, especially where women are concerned.

In summing up her life, Helen states: "I have been privileged and fortunate for life's opportunities!"

References: Internet, NSW Parliament Document

Bankstown Older Women's Network Writers' Group



Biography - Phyllis Johnson

Phyllis Johnson

Phyllis Johnson was a woman who dedicated her life to making our world a more peaceful place for all. Bankstown will always remember her for being one of the founders of the Women's Refuge and Crisis Centre, as well as a promoter of Equal Rights and World Peace.

Phyllis was born in 1917 in Albany Western Australia, in a working class family of five children. She lived through "the dark, dreary days of the depression, where bread, dripping and potatoes and kettle soup (salt and pepper and hot water) were usual meals." Phyllis learned early about poverty and inequality. Washinton Mather, Phyllis's father, was a wharfie and secretary of the W.A. Lumpers' Union. Later he contested the seat of Albany for the Labor Party and eventually became the president of the Waterside Workers' Federation. Her father's life of commitment as an active Unionist provided Phyllis with a model to be a lifelong activist for women's equality and for the protection of women and children.

In 1933 Phyllis moved to Sydney and worked as a typist. At that time, wages of women workers were only 54% of the male basic wage. She joined the clerks union and fought for equal pay and better conditions. She also became involved in many anti-eviction struggles. She had observed many evictions of struggling families from their home and this kind of issue led Phyllis to a lifetime of activism.

Phyllis became interested in the Eureka Stockade History and realized that the historical struggle by the miners in Ballarat was, in her words: "A great and early movement for the working class Rights and Justice"

Phyllis was very much against war. Japan's invasion of Manchuria and the rest of China during the 1930's resulted in the boycotting of Japanese goods, in which Phyllis actively participated. In 1936 she attended her first International Women's Day march, which she celebrated every year for the rest of her life. When Count Von Luchner was to visit Australia, she was instrumental in unmasking him as a Nazi agent.

During World War II she spent a month in Long Bay jail for giving an anti-conscription speech at the Sydney Domain. She ran a weekly broadcast called 'Women for Victory' on radio 2KY. Her public speaking technique and experience, was used when visiting factories during lunch breaks. She was a volunteer on 'The Liberty Loan Industrial Panel' urging contributions from the assembled workforce.

She organized care for pre-school children for working mothers and negotiated the use of local halls in a dozen suburbs in order to arrange programs and provide milk and a sandwich lunch.

In the 1950s and 60s, while raising her own children, Phyllis worked on school committees and continued to be an active member of the Women's Movement.



Phyllis Johnson - *Biography*

In 1970 she was a representative in the campaign against rising prices that was named C.A.R.P. (Campaign Against Rising Prices), and was also a founding member of the Australian Federation of Consumer Organizations. Phyllis recalled: "On one memorable occasion, a delegation of us disrupted a session of the N.S.W. Parliament. I refused to be browbeaten by the speaker and panicked him, that he sought refuge in the gents' toilet!" In 1971 she was a founding member of 'Women in the Community' an organization promoting the Status of Women, eventually becoming President and Committee Secretary.

"I have addressed many Organizations and Institutions. I have spoken for working class families, to Unions, factory gate meetings, women's organizations, vegetable farmers, red meat producers, also at the Conference of N.S.W. Apple and Pear Growers' Association and even Federal Cabinet, and I have never been afraid to do so. I believe in striving to always work for the working people and have no higher goal in my life, and in good conscience can't do less!"

In 1976 N.S.W. Premier, Neville Wran appointed Phyllis to be a government representative (without remuneration) on Nutrition and Pricing, to the Sydney Farm Producers' Authority, the Bread Industry and the Egg and Poultry Collective. Phyllis always believed in speaking out in support of many causes such as consumer health, commodity labelling of chemical additives in food, and protecting the needs of the pensioners. She believed that people were entitled to protection against companies who sought profit at the expense of the consumers.

Phyllis has been recognized with many awards. She received the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal in 1977 and was named 'Woman of the Year'. She also received the Order of Australia 1989, the Syd Einfeld Award in 1993, and the Australian Centenary Medal in 2001.

In December 2008 six people had the honor of receiving the Eureka Medal. Phyllis was one of them, for her long history of activism. She saw the award of the Eureka Medal as the greatest honor she could ever receive: "A recognition of over seventy years of struggle and a long life not yet over."

*Bankstown Older Women's Network Writers' Group
and Silvana Gruber, Bankstown Older Women's Network
Writers' Group Facilitator*

Phyllis Johnson died on Monday 20th July 2009.

*We were honored to have been given permission to
interview Phyllis Johnson and to use the interview and
gathered material for the biography for a woman for whom
we felt great admiration and respect.*



Australian Centenary Medal, 2001



Biography - Phyllis Johnson

Remembering Phyllis

On Wednesday 1 July 2009, 14 women from the Writing Group watched videos of Phyllis Johnson.

The first was a documentary portraying Phyllis at the peak of her political career.

Her dynamic personality was evident, as she spoke of her strong beliefs: equality for women, equity and fairness and her hope for a world with no wars. She also talked passionately about addressing the issue of domestic violence, the suffering of the victims, and proudly spoke of her work in helping to establish the Women's Refuge in Bankstown.

The second video was an interview with Phyllis that I took a few weeks ago. At the age of 93, this remarkable, vibrant woman, was still speaking about her strong beliefs, in the same intense and determined way that had been her style all her life.

"I am a living history" she said, "and I refuse to get old!"

Silvana Gruber

Bankstown Older Women's Network Writers' Group Facilitator

References:

The Guardian 10th Dec. 2008

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Medal Recipients Paper from Parliament of N.S.W. May 2003

And many thanks to the Bankstown Library for their great assistance



Phyllis Johnson - *Biography*



Plaque proposal by Bankstown City Council

Bankstown City Council will investigate a proposal to produce a commemorative plaque in honour of community worker, the late Phyllis Johnson. After a request for the plaque from Cr Linda Downey, Mayor Tania Mihailuk said she would support the proposal.



