

Finding a way

Stories of inspirational women



2017



Our cover
"Finding a way"
artwork by Janis Morgan.

The artist's work explores the journey of elder women from intersectional communities.

Thank you to our partners



Forward

Finding a way – stories of inspirational women

Eight inspirational women’s personal journeys including achievements, challenges and lessons are presented here – in their own words.

The stories highlighted the value of resilience, connectedness, diversity and understanding in southern metropolitan Melbourne.



Connect Health & Community and Women’s Health in the South East with intersectorial partner organisations, Rotary- Bentleigh Moorabbin Central and Moorleigh Moorabbin, Moongala and Bentleigh Secondary College for International Women’s Day 2017, came together to produce an innovative health promotion initiative to recognise and celebrate the achievements of remarkable women. We created the “Finding a way” project.

Deborah's Story



**“If you know the song
“from little things big
things grow” then you
will know all about the
Gurindji people.”**

The award “Inspirational Aboriginal Woman” was in recognition of my work in the Aboriginal community, particularly in assisting with the setting up Willum Warrain Aboriginal Association and ongoing current work within the Aboriginal Community.

I am a Gurindji woman, and if you know the song “From little things big things grow” then you will know all about the Gurindji people. I think my drive and passion comes from my mother, Grandmother (who was part of the stolen generation), Great Grandmother and my ancestors.

In my role as an Aboriginal Community Health Coordinator, I am responsible for implementing the Victorian State Government’s Aboriginal health and wellbeing plan (Koolin Balit) on the Mornington Peninsula and Frankston areas. I am passionate about improving the outcomes of Aboriginal families and have a particular focus on Aboriginal Early Years from conception to five years old. In 2016 I was fortunate to have my work recognised by Professor Kerry Arabena and in 2016 and I was invited onto the Inaugural First 1000 Days Australia Council.

I keep very busy as a member of numerous committees and networks, including: the Aboriginal Health Alliance, Koolin Balit Southern Metro Region Aboriginal Health Committee, Best Start Committees Frankston and Mornington Peninsula, Peninsula Health Aboriginal Community Advisory Group Frankston Child and Family Committee and the Local Aboriginal Network.

I am proud and passionate to be an Aboriginal Ambassador for BreastScreen Australia and a volunteer Community Liaison Officer for Breast Cancer Network Australia.

Evelyn's Story

"I was finally diagnosed
with Post Traumatic
Stress Disorder"



I guess I have never thought of myself as inspirational and had no idea who had even nominated me for and award. I was even more amazed when I was actually one of a number of women who were presented with an award.

I arrived in Australia in 1968 from Lancashire England after being demobbed here following my 4 years in the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF). I married Graham, an Aussie, in 1970 and our daughter Tracy was born in 1975. Tracy was named after the cyclone which was very apt as she lives her life in a nonstop whirl.

After a number of years I began to have flash backs until eventually I found I couldn't cope anymore and sought help from a psychiatrist. The next few years were sheer hell and I spent months in and out of a psychiatric hospital where I was finally diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder(PTSD).

It may seem odd to say it was quite a relief to have a diagnosis it help me realise I wasn't mad. Life became almost unbearable and I became close to suicide many times and I learned first-hand all about the stigma attached to mental illness.

One day while I was in hospital, I fell to the floor. While some of the nurses just stepped over me, something clicked and there and then I became determined I was going to beat this and gain my self-respect. My decision was to learn to live again to try and make a difference.

I have been involved in many committees, including a member of Victorian Community Advisory Group founded by Health Minister Marie Tehan. Across Australia and New Zealand I have presented at The Mental Health Services Learning Network (ThMHS) Conferences.

Now living in Rosebud I continue to be active in community health and wellbeing. I and am a member of PACE (Peninsula Advisory Committee for Elders All Abilities Advisory Committee) for the Shire and the Community Advisory Group and Community Advisory Committee for Peninsula Health.

I have learned so much about life (and death) and no doubt I shall continue to do so. A sense of humour and the ability to laugh at myself will keep me going and endeavouring to advocate for those less able.

Hayat's Story



"After 25 years in Australia I went back to studying."

Hayat, in Arabic it means life. I was born in Lebanon, I studied French literature, and I worked as a primary school teacher.

My husband, my sixth month old boy, and I migrated to Australia in 1981, escaping civil war and seeking peace and safety.

We were not considered refugees and we had no government support. So in the beginning I struggled so much because of the changes in my life, the barriers were many; here I am in a strange country, different language, new culture, no family, no friends, no job, and no family support.

Now I had to rely on my husband in many ways which made me feel dependent, after being an independent woman.

Unfortunately, my husband got a back injury and stayed out of work for 15 years, so this was a new challenge I had to face for my family. During this time my self-reliance grew as I had to look after him and my children by myself. I completely forgot about Hayat that educated young girl who became a house wife with no life of her own.

After 25 years in Australia I went back to studying, got two diplomas in community welfare work and case management, and volunteered in a community organisation where I was eventually employed.

My goal is to support and empower women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds to improve their lives by studying, working and connecting with others from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. I know from my personal experience that it is not easy to adapt to the new life, especially if you have no knowledge about support services. I know just how easy it is to become depressed and unable to live a normal and fulfilling life.

In 2009 I started a lady's group, this group helped women in breaking isolation barriers down, study and work, and overcome depression.

Some may consider me as their role model, their mentor and but most importantly for me, their friend.

Intha's Story

"For five months I was shell shocked."



My husband and I together we were an invincible team. We worked on projects for Bali, South Africa, Bangladesh, Timor Leste, and with organisations including The Lighthouse Foundation, Rotary Oceania Medical Aid for Children (ROMAC), Operation Cleft. I regard myself foremost as a Special Education teacher who follows a humanistic philosophy of teaching. I had a wonderfully supportive husband who made my dream his dream.

In 1997 I was given the 'boisterous all boys' class to teach, and discussed with my husband and a good friend the idea of teaching students meditation. They said it would be an enormous challenge, due to the connotation by westerners that meditation is based in the Indian religion and traditions. Though I was supported I still faced opposition, but my dream of teaching meditation was born with this class.

The boys enjoyed pockets of time during the week of 'doing nothing' or playing 'dead fish' or listening to 'calming music'. Mindfulness Meditation was soon part of the curriculum and culminated with construction of our Mindfulness Meditation Indigenous Cultural Centre.

Based on research and a curriculum designed by me, our students are confident in their knowledge and practice of Mindfulness Meditation and spread their knowledge beyond the gates of their school. Amongst all my work at Bentleigh Secondary College I consider the Mindfulness Meditation Program to be my best innovation, as it develops students' body, mind and spirit.

So here I was, enjoying being with my family, loved teaching, being a Rotarian, life was so great. Then unexpectedly, my husband died, no hint, no clue, my worst nightmare unfolded in a foreign place - Tanzania. No one to share the ordeal with, I had just endured walking for over 25 hours, with no water or food, to get to him. I wandered around my hotel room, abandoned, lost for words, 'forever' was gone, 38 years abruptly ended.

I think of our last day together on Kilimanjaro, standing in the crisp dawn air, how much he loved it. He knew the mountain like the back of his hand. Now a shell of my former self: who to phone and how to break this tragedy to my sons? I feel as though I am separated from my body; it is my clone doing all the necessary paper work, talking and making arrangements. I can't sleep, my mind plays tricks on me.

I could not work and food had no taste. I have faced many challenges in my life but this one was the worst. I was guided to a psychologist. Her visits provided some strategies in dealing with the day to day questions and thoughts and managing lifelong memories that play over and over in my mind.

My husband had always supported women's rights. Winning an International Women's Day award, brings recognition to both our work. May we continue to 'light tomorrow with today's' humanitarian work.

Jennifer's Story



"I truly believe that my ability is stronger than my disability."

I was born with cerebral palsy but have never let it define my life. I actually don't consider my cerebral palsy a disability rather a life-long challenge. I get up every day with my goals in check and tackle each one with determination and a smile.

One of three children, my parents always treated me the same as they did my sister and brother. I went to a mainstream kindergarten then primary and secondary schools just like everyone else. I made friends and enjoyed all the things that other children did when I was growing up. I didn't see myself as different to other kids and I didn't want to be treated differently.

When finishing secondary school I went on to successfully completing a secretarial course at a TAFE College. Unfortunately others saw my disability as a hindrance and I found it difficult to get paid employment. Not one to be discouraged, I decided to focus on doing volunteer work in my community instead. My volunteering began at Cheltenham Community Centre where I volunteered as an office assistant for 7 years and for the last 6 years I have volunteered my time at the Mordialloc Community Centre.

During my time at the Mordialloc Community Centre I have worked in customer service and for the last two years I have been coordinating a senior's computer and mobile phone program, helping older people master vital technology to improve their lives. I absolutely love working with the seniors, they are all so friendly and treat me with dignity and respect.

In particular, I enjoy sitting down one on one and teaching them how to navigate their mobile phones. It gives me a lot of satisfaction to see them face the fear of modern day technology and conquer it. I also take time volunteering at my local church on Sunday morning's where I assist the audio visual team.

Outside of volunteering, you'll find me at my local gym where I try to get a couple of times a week. Keeping as fit as possible is important to me and it helps me to manage the many challenges that come my way on a daily basis. Boxing is favourite activity of mine and I love nothing more than punching out my frustrations into the pads of one of the gym trainers. It is so much fun and that feeling of achievement when I have smashed my previous time or number of punches in a row is invigorating.

I truly believe that my ability is stronger than my disability and I feel grateful for what I have achieved in my life so far. I am blessed to live in a wonderful community and be surrounded by a loving family and beautiful friends.

Sally's Story

"My childhood was like most kids of the time but mine had a secret."



Sally

At nearly sixty-six, no one has ever given me or tried to give me a book on how to act, behave or dress my age. And I think I would hit them over the head with it if they tried.

I am a girl, yes, but with a transgender component to that. This is how I see myself now after coming out, well really making my first public appearance on the day after my fifty-eighth birthday.

One of my earliest childhood memories is wearing my sisters' bathers in our wading pool under the shade of the huge jacaranda tree in the front yard. I now own my own home and have planted a jacaranda tree in my own front yard as a symbol of I'm home, I'm free.

My childhood was like most kids of the time but mine had a secret, I liked or needed to dress in girls clothes. Talking with my sister about those times we discovered that it was not spoken about in any way within the family unit. Life just went on. In my mid-teens, I'm guessing at Dads' insistence I ended up in front of a psychiatrist. I can still remember the words he spoke to mum and dad in front of me from behind his big ornate desk "I will cure him".

My early twenties was, well, a wipe out. I had found my way to Torquay. Surf, rock music, fast modified cars, alcohol and drugs. A time where everyone lived for the day. No one cared about your history and mine was safely tucked away. I didn't dress for those five years. By the late seventies I had cleaned up my act. No more hard drugs but I still enjoyed a smoke and I still drank but not the \$100 nights anymore.

I was married twice. As the first one fell apart I dressed more, she found my stash of clothes

and left. The second knew all about me and we talked a lot. We got married and then she tried to rule and change me, So I left.

I wasn't out in 2006 when I arrived in Wonthaggi, where I still happily live today. I found work and completed the Disabilities course at the local TAFE. This gave me a good job and a constant income. Lots of driving meant I was getting home tired and to relax I started dressing a lot. So, there I was in a strange town, knowing only a handful of people, dressing and drinking. I was becoming depressed and to ease it I dressed more and drank more. It was becoming a real problem and I was thinking about suicide as an answer.

The day after my 58th birthday. The day I shut the front door from the outside, dressed. I remember shutting the door, pushing open the door of the pub I was going to, making some friendships that still carry on. I can't remember the drive home.

The support group called Seahorse helped me stand up and helped me find myself. I went to coffee shops and shopping malls with them and found a new freedom. A huge part of this time was meeting and making friends with other trans girls. Many are still close friends today.

Two years ago, I decided that I was going to live my life all the time as Sally. The only times I wore boy's clothes were to work and that took two nurofen to ease the stress to wear the uniform and to this day to visit my near ninety-eight-year-old mum... I legally changed my name in May last year and I retired in June last year. I am out to the whole of my home town and life freely as I wish.

I am me, I am Sally

Terry's Story

**"Coping with a disability
can easily come to
dominate one's life"**



I was born with cerebral palsy, but have always tried not to let it define or limit the choices I have made. I even got to the age of about sixteen blissfully unaware that my disability made any real difference to my life.

Fortunate in my choice of parents - they gave me the best possible care while not singling me out for special treatment, among their five children. My father was a paediatric surgeon and a mother, a musician and teacher. I was educated in three Loreto schools, in Melbourne, Portland and Ballarat, being a boarder in the last two.

As a child I was always falling over in the playground or corridors, and had to learn how to pick myself up and get moving again. Often I was tired from the effort of doing what other consider ordinary things like walking. I was sent to Portland mainly for the small class sizes at that school, and indeed I did catch up on educational ground I had lost in Melbourne. However, I was often homesick and it proved cold there.

Between the ages of 15 and 16 I had several surgical procedures to correct problems with my legs and hips – and then my father died of a brain tumour. The family was devastated – and this is about the time I began to face up to the difficulties that lay ahead, including practical living and employment.

I was at Loreto Ballarat, an excellent school, for years 11 and 12, and then enrolled in Social Sciences at RMIT, graduating with a degree plus a Diploma in Librarianship. For my honours year I did some subjects at Melbourne University and had

the pleasure of living in a university college. The following 15 years or so were the most 'normal' and enjoyable part of my life. I worked in several different libraries including those of the Arthritis Foundation and the Catholic Education Office. Then I faced a time of ill health and further surgery related to my cerebral palsy – notably after breaking my hip and upper arm.

I had the good fortune to join the community of St Martin's Hawksburn in the late 1980s. That was to have a profound and lasting influence on my life. Many of the members of this vibrant Anglican parish have become and remain lifelong friends. After joining the Anglican Church in the early 1990s, I took a more active role in parish activities. These have included serving on various committees: food relief, and home and hospital visiting. In more recent years I have been Pastoral Care Co-ordinator, and am part of the small committee concerned with assisting parishioners needing support.

Coping with a disability can easily come to dominate one's life, especially when there is an accident or injury. However, with confidence and some effort, one can keep it in perspective by focussing on the needs of others as well as one's own. I know I have been lucky in the kind of family I have, and the sense of humour I acquired along the way, but I have discovered many unexpected benefits in the kind of life I have had so far.

Wendy's Story



“It turned out I had had a stroke!”

Before I had my stroke, I led a very active life. I worked in secondary schools, teaching physical education, mathematics and psychology, and was head of several year levels from 1982 to 1996. In 1992 I went overseas for a year and worked with Education Through Recreation in Switzerland, France and Austria. I was the Sports Manager and Games Manager for the Australian University Sport (AUS) for two years, and then held the position of Manager: Academic Services at the University of Melbourne (1999-2005).

I went to the Kingdom of Tonga in 2005 to work for Australian Volunteers International (AVI) and the Australian Sports Commission as the team/event mentor for the Tongan Amateur Sports Association and the National Olympic Committee. Back in Australia I went to RMIT as the Manager, Mathematics and Geospatial Sciences and then to the School of Design at RMIT as Manager - but unfortunately I had a stroke!

I woke early to water the garden one day, and fell over. I didn't think too much about it, but I kept on falling and I thought I better go to bed. It was 6 December 2009, and I was to go a friend's place for Christmas drinks - but I didn't go. They phoned, but I just couldn't get to the phone. Nothing worried me so I just kept sleeping.

The next day someone came to the door, but I couldn't answer it so they left. I later found out it was two people from RMIT who came around to see why I hadn't gone to a morning meeting. Later that day I got a phone call, and I don't know how I got to the phone but I did, but I was unable to speak. It was a friend who said she would call an ambulance and come around. I had had a stroke.

Wendy

Of the week after that, I have no recollection, though I do recall that my Mum and Dad came, and my brother was there too. I was in the Alfred, and was later moved to Caulfield Rehabilitation Hospital for 4 months, where I learnt to walk and move my arms, speak and make sense.

I left rehab and was an outpatient for the rest of 2010, but wondered how I would cope without working. I couldn't continue with full-time employment, so I decided to work as a volunteer. I found opportunities Connect Health & Community, Peers Inspiring Peers and Wesley Mission, and I volunteered for all three.

I couldn't talk as well as I had hoped I, worked on the computer at Connect Health & Community on Thursdays. For Peers Inspiring Peers I travelled around with people who had had an acquired brain injury (ABI) like myself, and we would meet other people learning to live with ABI. The group would decide what we would discuss at a particular session, for example stress, loneliness etc. For Wesley Mission I visited a lady who suffered from agoraphobia, and we would just talk on a Friday afternoon.

My mother moved into residential aged care at Vasey House, and I visited her regularly during 2014-15. I had to give up my voluntary work to concentrate on my mother - and I had to spend another three weeks in rehab after surgery on my hand and leg.

I have moved and now live in a different suburb so I don't do as much of the volunteering that I used to do.

Eight inspirational women's personal journeys including achievements, challenges and lessons are presented here – in their own words.