

## Tracy's Story

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Tracy told her story during an interview. This is the transcript.

I am an artist with my own gallery. I live in Auburn in the Clare Valley with my husband, my two sons who are 11 and 20, and my daughter who is 21 and gave birth to our first grandchild in January. I really love it here. I feel I have come full circle and often say to my husband "I'll be quite happy to stay here now."

As a child I had wonderful experiences travelling around Australia. When I was nine years old I moved to Lae in Papua New Guinea with my parents and twin sister. My other siblings were in their late teens at the time and stayed in Australia. I came back to Australia when I was 18. Living in PNG gave me a real respect for indigenous culture. It was a unique upbringing and I am still close to many friends who I went to school with there. It's a network of friendship that has gone on beyond the years.

I was engaged to be married to my childhood sweetheart when we were run off the road on our way to a family picnic. It was one of those accidents that just happens. I was in the back seat and the car had no seatbelts. In those days you didn't have to have them legally fitted. I was the only one injured. My back was broken and a piece of bone came off and severed my spinal cord. I was flown down to Sydney to Royal North Shore Hospital where I was told I'd be spending 12 to 18 months - that's how long people with spinal injuries stayed in hospital 26 years ago.

My fiancé was a wonderful man. He was a fisherman and the youngest person in Australia at the time to ever get a professional fishing licence. He hadn't had a lot of schooling but he loved the country and fishing, that was his life. When I had my accident he came to Sydney and got a job as a brickies labourer. He hated the city but came to the hospital every day to visit me. The social workers used to come every week and counsel me for when he'd leave, because "they never stay". My parents flew to Australia from New Guinea and so they could take me home because they were also waiting (anticipating) for him to leave, but we were both pretty determined to stay together and he

didn't leave. He loved me and he was staying until it was time to take me home.

I got out of rehab within eight months. As soon as I learnt to put my pants on and look after my self-care needs I was out of there and I didn't stay the recommended time. My fiancé took me home to a little flat and we got married not long after that.

My back healed with my rib-cage sitting on my hip bones so I was very hunched over. It was like an elbow sticking out of my back. The bones knitted and I used to live in a lot of pain and then I met this wonderful surgeon who re-broke my back. Up until that point they said I couldn't have children because there was just no room to carry them. But the surgeon did an amazing thing when he re-broke my back, he welded it all up then regrafted bone and the only time I ever get back pain now is if I sit and do something for a long time while in the same position.

That surgery changed my life. The surgeon told me I had the strongest back in Australia. But rehab was traumatic and horrible. I'm actually half way through a book and I've written a chapter on this, because it was so demoralising and I'm sure it still is in part today, even though I know things have changed somewhat. The experience did make me more determined to succeed.

I was at the Spinal Unit at Royal North Shore in Sydney. There was one other person living with paraplegia there at the time and he only had one arm. I didn't feel like I had a right to feel sorry for myself because I was lighting other people's smokes, as I was the only one there who had two good arms that could move. The others were living with quadriplegia.

This was a very hard time for me emotionally – my parents were really concerned about me and I felt I had to be okay for everyone else so people didn't worry. I kept my brave face for a few years after my accident.

At the time I had a box I called "it's okay" and whenever something shitty happened to me I'd put it in the box, so instead of jumping up and down and

saying “It’s not okay, but it will be”, I just said “It’s okay”. Then one day I went to put a very small thing in the “It’s okay” box and everything I’d put in there for the last 5 years came spewing out and I got really depressed. I didn’t get out of bed for six weeks - I couldn’t face my chair. So I learnt early on that it’s okay to not be okay. It took me a lot longer to learn to talk about it. I would just give myself permission to have a bad day sometimes, because it’s not always pleasant. It has been 26 years and sometimes I hate it and that’s okay.

I started work in the social welfare field. I’d had my first two children and decided I was going to go to university and help everybody. I had to be superwoman. I’d drag the kids to uni with me and they’d sit under the desk at lectures. I was on every advisory committee. I was out there to change the world and it burnt me out.

When I got work in the field a client of mine committed suicide. He'd used a wheelchair for 20 years. I then understood how someone could do it for 20 years and then decide they weren’t going to do it anymore. That really made me look at how I handled things; that it was okay to not be okay and that it was important to talk about it.

I think disability just becomes part of who we are, but for me it didn’t define who I was. I think I was going to be who I was anyway and I’ve just had richer experiences, because in some ways it’s been a real privilege to meet people who I wouldn’t have met otherwise and hear stories that have inspired me to keep going, even if I hadn’t had a disability. It probably does make you more resilient ... you toughen up a bit.

My first husband died when he was 34. He got cancer and we had a really rough trot in the last year of our marriage. He passed away and I moved to South Australia. My twin sister lives here and my two kids and I moved in with her and her partner and they looked after us ... we lived with them for nearly a year. My twin helped us through a really tough time and it was two years after that I met my current husband, Bill. We got married and I had another child, Thomas. I was just blessed to have two wonderful men in my life and three gorgeous children.

I've reinvented myself as I've needed to. For example, I got really ill during my pregnancy with Thomas and spent a lot of time in bed. I was in my thirties and looking after a little one was hard, so I started a home-based internet business. I've never been one not to work. I can't imagine not working. I have a philosophy that there's plenty of time to do nothing when I'm dead and that life is for living. I can't imagine being bored. I want to be self-reliant; I want to make my own money; and I want to feel a valued member of my community. I have my own self-worth. Being able to contribute is important to me.

I've always believed that you get back from the community what you give it and that has nothing to do with having a disability. My husband shares the same philosophy. When we move to any different town, and we've moved a lot, we join the local committees, the development committee, and the school councils because it's important to make a contribution and give back.

I also wanted to make a difference in the disability sector. Years ago I got involved because I needed to do it for my own survival at the time and now I've found myself with a role on the Minister's Disability Advisory Council. I felt strong enough to get involved again after a long break. I know myself really well now; I know when I need to take time out. I know when I'm strong enough to take on a cause or a new job or a role and to give it justice and I felt it was time to go back to being able to make some sort of valuable contribution to that area again.

I'm proud of who I am despite my disability. I haven't let it define who I am. I'm not a victim of my circumstances. I'm really proud of that. I've met lots of people who are victims of their circumstance, but in some way I've avoided it because it scares me. I tend to avoid people like that. It reminds me of the saying: "Life's too short to spend time with people who suck the happiness out of you." I love life.

I'm a strong believer that access is a right not a privilege and I think it's everyone's right to continue to fight for that. I think it's important for us to be leaders. It's okay to stand up for ourselves and it's becoming easier to do that.

I'm always grateful when I go into a disabled access room or there's a car park somewhere, somebody before me fought for that.

We can be victims of our environment and our circumstances. I was very lucky to have parents who encouraged me not to run away from adversity or difference because of the way I grew up. My parents taught me to be brave, not to shy away from change and to make tough decisions, even when it might not always feel right.

I've always done some form of art. I grew up with an easel in the living room instead of a TV so I was always surrounded with it. Mum used to paint and she gave me a boxed set of pastels when I was 18. I had some lessons and it's always been something I've gone back to, even when I had the children and they were little. I'd always do bits and pieces of art but never in a professional sense.

Art allows me to express myself in a way that is sometimes confronting. No wonder there's so much valuable research on art for therapy because sometimes the most valuable pieces we do are the ones that make us cry.

I hear people saying a lot: "I'm not creative." And I always tell them, "I think we're all creative; we all need to find a way to express ourselves creatively, whether it's cooking or gardening, or some sort of craft or art. It's really important to express ourselves in some creative way."

I've operated my own gallery in the region for a number of years now, specialising in contemporary art and showcasing other South Australian artists. I love talking to visitors about the art in the gallery and have met some special friends this way.

I also think it's important to share knowledge and enjoy working with students at the Auburn Primary School to encourage their artistic expression. I have also worked with art groups, individuals and other schools.

People often say I've been lucky but I haven't been - I've created my luck. I have worked really hard. I don't sit around or lie around and do nothing. I'm not "lucky" for what I've got, I've worked really hard for it and I deserve it.

My family has its own challenges, but we work hard at maintaining being happy and I know I'm really blessed to have such a great supportive family. My advice to others is: "Choose to be happy". I'm looking out of the window now and I can see this amazing gum with a plum tree below it that's full of pink blossoms and it's just gorgeous. We live in this beautiful country where we have free choice.

Just choose to be happy - look for the good in everything. It's really easy to find the negative and the bad in things; it's a lot harder to find the good. Get excited about the little good things and don't put as much energy into the big bad things.

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