

Melissa's Story

Melissa told her story in a recorded interview. This is the transcript.

Hi, I am Melissa. I was involved in a trauma accident in 2003 where I went to board a train, and unfortunately the door closed as I was stepping on, and I fell between the train and the platform. So the train kept going. I'm very lucky to be alive.

I was taken to Melbourne's Alfred Hospital, and placed in an induced coma because it was a very touch and go situation. I lost my foot in the accident, but I had a lot of other injuries as well. I lost my right foot, my left calf muscle, broke my pelvis, ruptured my bladder, and sustained a heap of other injuries. I spent about eight days in a coma, because infection set in and they kept losing me.

After they amputated what was a below knee to an above knee, eventually the infection subsided and I went on to start to get better. I had 27 medical or surgical procedures, and remained in the hospital for three and a half months. From there, it was a matter of heading to rehab where I was for about seven months, getting well enough and learning to walk. When I got to rehab I only weighed 42 kilos because I had a lot of muscle wastage while I was in hospital, and I didn't really know what my life ahead was going to be like.

I say that for two reasons.

Firstly, I'd never met another amputee so I didn't know anything about living with amputation; and secondly, because I was shown a photograph of what a prosthetic leg looked like while I was in hospital, and it was a really old-fashioned kind of wooden leg, with a big harness around the waist and two straps. I'm a pretty tiny petite person, so the thought of wearing one of them was a big *no-no* and I'd pretty much resigned myself to being in a wheelchair, which was okay, I was fine about it, but I just knew I wasn't going to wear one of these big, heavy-looking wooden things.

I got to rehab, and I was really lucky to meet a group of other amputees, and the first guy I met was really funny—he's actually one of our care support volunteers now. Clarry came up to me and he said, "How ya going Lucky, nice to have you here." I'm thinking to myself, "This guy's crazy; he's calling me Lucky? I've got one leg that's really badly damaged, and one that's completely missing!"

I didn't know at the time that Clarry was an above knee *and* a below knee amputee, and the reason that he called me Lucky was because he thought that I was lucky that I still had one left. I think, going through the whole period, that having a bit of a sense of

humour about things makes things a little bit interesting, but it also brings life into what is otherwise a pretty traumatic situation.

When I got to rehab, I still had a million questions. What my life was going to be like? Would I be able to drive a car again having lost my right leg? Would I be able to go back to work? All these unanswered questions. So I spoke to my rehab physiotherapists and consultants and I'm sure I used to drive them crazy. I was talking to Jacinta (one of my assistant physios in rehab) one day, and I said to her, "There's all these amputees in this place, surely there's got to be information services out there?" And she said, "Well no. I've been working in this unit for about three and a half years, and there's nothing."

To cut a long story short, I went back to my job (I was a sales manager for Montana Wines), driving with my left leg, had my car converted, and continued my employment with them. But I was really frustrated and a little distressed that there wasn't any information out there for people who had either experienced limb loss through trauma or any other reason (medical infection, etc.)

I absolutely loved the job I did, but it wasn't enough anymore, and I think when you get a second chance at life, you want to be able to make a bit of a difference, and really use that opportunity to the best of your ability. About thirteen months after my accident, Jacinta and I founded an organisation called [Limbs 4 Life](http://www.limbs4life.com) (www.limbs4life.com) to provide amputees with access to information, resources and peer support.

My accident was in 2003, and in October 2004, the organisation was formally incorporated in Victoria, with a skills-based board of management who had a myriad of different levels of experience in the not-for-profit sector, the community sector, but also people who had worked with amputees—a really nice mix. I'm very proud to say that we are coming up eight years, and we have 85 peer support volunteers who work around three states of Australia.

We believe that the Peer Support Program, which is our flagship program and is offered to every amputee (either pre or post amputation), provides the best kind of support for a lot of people because when facing something that they know nothing about, often it's the fear of the unknown that leaves them emotionally distraught. We give them the opportunity to meet with another amputee who has regained their independence, and is functioning, happy, working, or just operating within their local community. We think it's a really positive outcome.

There are a lot of people that obviously haven't had access to that information. I was really lucky while I was in hospital, to meet another amputee and it changed my whole

head-space. In 2007/2008, over 9500 people lost limbs to amputation. The major cause in Australia is diabetes, and there are a number of other causes like vascular disease, cancer, and infection (by such things as meningococcal virus).

There are probably about 100 children each year born with limb deficiencies, and also there are people like me who have trauma injuries, trauma accidents, and workplace accidents. When we realized there were that many people that never had access to very much information at all, it was shocking, because in a country such as ours, that is a rich country in many ways, those sort of things should be open and accessible to everyone (whether that be the opportunity to participate in community, or go to sporting events, or go out for dinner and have some fun).

I was really disappointed to find that there was a big gap within the community, so we set out to fill that gap. We incorporated in 2004 and it's now 2011 and we have an amazing bunch of amputee volunteers who dedicate their time to try to make life better or a little more acceptable for people who face limb loss. We are very particular with our Peer Support Program to match new amputees with people who have faced a similar situation. We do that through age, through gender, through reason for amputation.

Having lost a leg to a trauma accident, I don't know what it's like to live with diabetes, or to go through limb loss through cancer, so someone who's lost a leg to cancer will go and visit another person in a similar situation. We match people with similar amputations, whether that be a below knee, above knee, a below elbow, partial hand, partial foot etc., because I don't know what it's like to live without an arm, but I do know what it's like to live without a leg. People have the same sort of questions, and they might get frustrated or confused about how they're going to manage to do something, and I think that's where the program kicks in really well—that's how we can help people.

I got really motivated to do this because I was conscious the night of my accident and when I came out of the coma, I was pretty aware of the extent of the injuries that I had. I'd lost two thirds of my blood supply, amongst a lot of other things, and I remember speaking to people while I was lying on the tracks waiting for the ambulance and I knew it wasn't good. So, being placed in a coma and then waking up at the other end, and knowing that you're alive is pretty bloody amazing! So for me, that in itself was almost enough. I knew my leg was gone, and I didn't know when I came out of the coma the full extent of my injuries, but the simple fact that I was alive, was just enough to really breathe a whole new life force into me.

I'm not going to say it was all a bed of roses, there were some days that were really hard—like learning to walk again, it's a tough call. I've always been a bit of an internal optimist and I remember getting to rehab, and having my first team meeting and they

asked me, “What are your goals?” I said, “Oh, wear high heels again, and wear short skirts and just get back out there,” and they said, “Well, Mel, what about learning to walk?” And I said, “Oh well, just give me one of these, gizmo leg things, and it’ll all be okay!”

But I had no idea the amount of work I would have to put in to learn to walk again, and it probably took me a good year and a half before I actually felt confident, comfortable and safe, ambulating and walking around my community, because even though I went back to work eleven months after my accident, there were still challenges every day.

Basically you’re starting from scratch. It’s not every day that you might have to learn to walk on grass or up a hill or down a hill, and while rehab equips you incredibly well (and I had the most amazing physiotherapist who used to take me to shopping centres and challenge me on escalators), you’re still faced with new things all the time. It’s an ongoing challenge—I like to think of the word *challenge* rather than *battle*, because you might *go* into a battle, but you *face* challenges, and I like to think that I can overcome them.

I was really motivated to get my life back, and I call it “my normal”. I say that to a lot of people, after you’ve gone through something traumatic, you want to get back to your *normal*, and that normal might just be meeting friends on a Friday night and having pizza, or playing netball. Playing netball for me is going to be a real challenge nowadays, but I would have the option if I wanted to—to play in a wheelchair, or take up something a little bit different. I think you’ve got to focus on the stuff that you *can* do, rather than the stuff that you can’t.

And there’s ways of substituting stuff. I used to jog, I used to run, I used to live down near the beach where I had my accident—and I don’t live down there anymore because I couldn’t get into the house. I can’t run anymore, but I play golf now, and I have a new found passion for it. So, while it’s not jogging, I get great pleasure out of challenging myself on a big open paddock with a stupid little white ball. It really comes down to being able to achieve everything I need to in a day.

For me to put a high heel on (and when I talk about high heels, in amputee terms a high heel is an inch and a half shoe, compared to a three or four inch heel like I used to wear), they were so hard to walk in and I couldn’t get all the things done I wanted to in one day. So, I had to say to myself, “You know what; I think that’s something—princess—that you’re going to have to just suck up!” I have never worn flat shoes in my life—I still hate them with a passion—but in order to be able to do all the stuff I need to, I need to wear flat shoes. That’s probably one compromise I’ve had to make.

You can still be feminine with a prosthetic leg even though they're not the most attractive things. I actually opt to go what they call 'commando'—so I don't have a cosmetic cover over my prosthesis, and the reason I do that is because it's practical for me. You can get some amazing looking cosmetic colours, but it also has a bit of an impact on how you walk. So, because I'm not going to be an amputee just for a couple of years—I'm going to be like that for the rest of my life—I think that endurance and longevity is more important. If I was to wear a cosmetic cover I could probably bluff a few people, but at the end of the day, I'm really okay with who I am and the fact that I do wear a prosthesis.

I figure, "What's the point?" and it would also impact on my endurance and my ability to be able to walk as well as I do (or as well as I can, even though that's not great) but you want to be able to have the best possible way of walking that you can, so that it doesn't impact on the rest of your body. I could get a heel height adjustable foot for my prosthetic side but the impact on my sound side would be really intense, and I'd probably get one-eighth done of what I needed to. I'd have to concentrate really hard on my walking, stepping down from curbs, etc., and that becomes mentally exhausting. So it's not worth it—it's a big pay-off!

There are a couple of things that I am proud of as my achievements.

There was a milestone for me in 2006 when I was chosen to carry the baton for the opening of the Commonwealth Games Queen's Baton Relay. It was a more personal thing for me because at the time I had to walk 450 metres, and I couldn't walk 150, so managing to do that was just the most incredible achievement. It was amazing, and I still get goose-bumps when I talk about it because it was such a buzz.

Secondly, in 2010, we (Limbs 4 Life) were awarded with the National Disability Award for Social Inclusion at Parliament House, and from an organisational perspective, that's a reward for all the effort you've put in. We don't do this to get things back, and it's never been like that, but to be acknowledged by peers and pillars of the community, and just to get that kind of feedback, "You guys are doing a good job," etc., that's really rewarding.

For people in a similar situation I would tell them: "Sometimes it's really hard, but I think you've got to be really patient with yourself." It's really easy when your mobility is impacted upon overnight like that, to get really frustrated because one minute you're running around, or you're doing this or doing that, and then the next minute all of it is gone, especially in the case of a cancer or trauma situation.

With diabetes, it's progressive and it's slow, not that you ever get used to it, but you've probably got that time to maybe help yourself accept it. Although that's not always the case, because often body image does impact upon a lot of people, but I think it's a matter of giving yourself time to get used to it, and you can't be impatient with yourself—you've got to be good to yourself like that.

And sometimes it's baby steps, and sometimes you might have good days and bad days, but it's just a matter of sort of rewarding yourself along the way.

For more information about Limbs 4 Life visit the website at www.limbs4life.com, or email info@limbs4life.com. You can also freecall 1300 782 231.

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