

## Louise's Story

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Louise wrote her own story.

### Background

Twenty years ago I had three finger joints replaced because of osteoarthritis pain. I was working part-time as a hairdresser and my medical specialist told me I could go back to work when I wanted. He also told me he considered me to have a 75 per cent disability which meant I could go on a disability support pension. I was furious and said "never". I could hardly believe he had said that to me. Me disabled? Though I had to re-learn how to cut hair because of how you hold the scissors, I continued to work for another 10 years. It was the rest of my body that gave up, not my fingers.

### Retirement

I closed the doors on Christmas Eve 1999. My husband and I went down to our beach shack in Middleton for our usual holiday break. The day before we were due home I suddenly thought "I don't have to go home". I was retired. I was so fortunate that my husband John agreed and thought he would start winding down his business. He began going back to the city from Tuesdays to Friday so that we could have long weekends at the shack.

I spent my time bushwalking, bird watching and finding orchids in the forests. I became very involved in the community with all the things I loved doing. My passion has always been people so I took-up volunteering. The U3A (University of the Third Age) was the one thing that got me going, then the hospital. I trained to work in Palliative Care. I got to know all the coffee shops along the south coast and where the whales were to take those who were in the last stages of their illness. I also did foot massaging at the hospital. I was very involved in my church and taught Sunday School for nine years. I joined the gym at Goolwa to keep me mobile and strengthen my core.

### Revisiting disability

It was at the gym in June 2009 when I was struck down. I was just standing and watching a Pilates class when my head started to swim and I could not open my eyes. I was vomiting and sweating profusely. It was thought that I had vertigo as I was so dizzy. After some time an ambulance was called and I was taken to hospital where a CAT Scan showed bleeding in my brain. Thank God for those nurses who knew me because they called the air ambulance and I was taken to Flinders Hospital. All this happened within the space of three hours. I was in and out of consciousness so there was no sense of time for me. It could have been days for all I knew. When I came to, there was John sitting by my bed. He had to drive up to Flinders Hospital so I am not sure what he was thinking seeing me take off and not knowing when he would see me again, if ever. He still won't talk about it.

I didn't have high blood pressure so was just under observation. Later that day when the specialist came to see me he was amazed he hadn't had to drain the blood from my brain as the body was doing that itself. He also told me it was serious and the bleed had been very large. "OK Louise" I thought to myself, and then I asked the doctor: "Does this mean a nursing home?" He couldn't tell me. The fact is, I didn't have an aneurism or a clot so my brain hadn't been denied oxygen. The neurosurgeon could not tell me what had caused the bleed. Now, three years later, after being monitored using MRI twice, I'm told it could have been a 'cavernous malformation of the brain'. Have you ever heard of that?

### **Acknowledging acquired brain injury**

I was asked to attend the book launch of a member of the Goolwa Marina and I went along with my friend who has a brain injury. The book was called *Out Of Calamity: Stories of Trauma Survivors* and the author was Roger Rees. I chatted to him about the book and even bought it, but it wasn't until later that I realised I too have an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI). I realised that I have to claim it to be able to relate to others with ABI. It was quite a shock when I realised this.

### **Returning to life**

I was sent home six days after being in hospital and told only to 'rest'. Within weeks I returned to work at the South Coast Hospital. Art therapy had begun through the Palliative Care Unit for those who were in grief through losing a loved one. My friend Faith was working with grief and I knew a bit about it so I became very involved. Today the South Coast Hospital through Palliative Care has about 10 women working through their various disabilities and using their art to tell their stories.

The story hasn't finished yet.

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