FLYING SOLO

A MEMOIR

My journey of resilience: Navigating life with MS, overcoming family grief & loss, along with some awesome travel adventures!

TESSA COLLIVER

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Dedication

To my Mum and brother Sam.

Words cannot fully express my thanks for all your help & support over so many years. I don't know where I would be without it.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Natalie Stockdale, The Memoir Writer for her professional assistance and care in developing this manuscript.

Without Natalie, I would never have gotten started! I highly recommend The Memoir Writer for anyone wanting to share their story.

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Foreword

What a ride. I've sat here tonight laughing one minute and in tears the next, but overall humbled by Tessa's tenacity and positivity. I will never truly know what it's like to walk in her shoes, however this memoir has certainly given me a new perspective.

I've known Tess since our earliest school years, as classmates in almost every grade from Reception through to Year 12. Over the years, I have watched her move through more grief and loss than most people should ever have to carry.

But what stays with me is not only the weight of those experiences, but resilience in its truest form. The kind that doesn't announce itself loudly but shows up day after day—in the face of grief, in moments of uncertainty, in living with MS, a condition that reshapes life in ways few can fully understand.

This memoir is not simply a story about grief & illness. It is a story about what comes after. About learning to live with heartbreaking absence. About finding meaning when the path forward is unclear. And about the quiet strength it takes to keep going when life has fundamentally changed.

Tessa reminds us that even in the hardest moments, there is still a life to be lived and adventures to be had. It's about learning to say yes to the challenge, when it would be so easy to say no.

It is truly an honour to be asked to write this foreword, and an even greater privilege to call Tessa my friend.

Carpe Diem! (Seize the Day)

Michelle Geater-Johnson
22 April 2026

Author's Note

Having just turned 48 in February, I might seem a bit young to have written a memoir. But my timeline has never been typical.

I have lived with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) for over 30 years, since I was 16 years old. For a long time, it came and went - symptoms would flare up, I would have treatment and then go back to "normal life". But even from my early 20's, there have been little adjustments that have made my "normal" quite different from my peers.

And those differences are now even more evident after so many years living with MS. For example: driving a car modified with hand controls, using a walking stick, not being able to work full time or attend night-time events due to MS fatigue - which means I unfortunately miss out on a lot of celebrations and community events.

That said, in writing this book I really wanted to show those more recently diagnosed that MS does not mean your life is over and I hope you find my overseas travel adventures inspiring! Also, there are now so many highly effective treatments available, which unfortunately wasn't the case for me.

I would also like friends and family to understand more about the challenges of life with MS and how hard it has been for me to get back up and keep going after every new challenge that has come my way.

The reality is that I just don't know what my life will look like in another two, five or ten years. There have been a lot of changes over the past 12 months alone in terms of my mobility and issues with MS fatigue having a greater impact on my life.

So I want to tell my story now.

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

Chinese Proverb

Chapter 1: Sunny Hill

I grew up on our family farm, “Sunny Hill” located 5km out of a tiny town called Arthurton on the Yorke Peninsula, South Australia. I lived there from the age of four until I left home for university in Adelaide at 18.

My dad, Gary, was a typical, hardworking farmer who worked alongside his father, who we called Pa. Like most farming families, the seasons shaped our lives with Dad hardly seen during seeding and harvest due to the long hours. But he always made time for his kids and watched us play sport and attended school events.

When I was young, I used to love going with Dad in the truck to the silos at Wallaroo during harvest. Even though we often had to wait a long time in the lines, it was always special to have that time with him and get an ice-cream once the grain had been delivered.

My mum, Dianne, was a city girl from Adelaide. She met Dad at a dance at Port Vincent and that meeting was the beginning of her life with Dad and eventually, being on the farm. Mum didn’t work outside the home until I was in high school, but she was always very involved in the local community, volunteering and helping in the school canteen and the Arthurton Netball and Tennis Clubs.

Mum coached my F Grade netball team (in around 1988) and I didn’t really enjoy it because I felt like she was harder on me than anyone else. But we did win the premiership that year which certainly made up for it! And although I played netball until 1995, that was the only premiership team I ever played in.

Mum was also involved with the Adelaide Children's Hospital (now the Women’s and Children’s Hospital) local auxiliary. She was & still is an excellent cook, always baking biscuits and cakes for trading tables and school or church events. We used to joke that all of the best things went out of the house and we only got the leftovers.

I have some great memories of times in Adelaide at my grandparents’ house and big family Christmases and birthdays with my Mum’s three siblings and my two cousins. Dad was an only child, so it was quite a contrast with “Colliver” family events – although Pa was one of five.

Two younger brothers completed our family unit. Nathan was born in April 1980, two years after me. Then Sam came along in August 1985, so there was quite a big age gap. I have a photo from when Dad took Nathan and I to meet Sam as a newborn in hospital and I am grinning from ear to ear, so I was obviously pretty excited!

When he was around seven, Nathan got a Peewee 50 motorbike, and that provided hours of entertainment for me and my friends as well. Nathan had such a huge personality. He was cheeky and very funny. Even now, decades later, people who knew Nathan still talk about him with affection.

For a long time, Sam just tried to keep up, because he was the youngest of our group of local kids. One of the ways he did that was starting martial arts with Nathan, and they both continued that for many years.

Martial arts also became a regular part of my week and catching up with my friends, Jenelle and Brigitt - as they each had a brother who went as well. For years, Friday night was “martial arts night” and I would say Jen and Brigitt were two of my closest friends throughout my teens. I also remember a couple of “martial arts” camps with all of our families, especially one at “The Gap” and our tent being dismantled while we were still in it. And a tomato fight!

Every summer, we would pack up half the house and take the caravan to Port Hughes, about half an hour away. Two other local families, the Allens and Clasohms always went as well, and those January holidays were the best. Jetty jumping, swimming at the beach and endless time with our friends. I have many wonderful memories of those days at Port Hughes.

But there was always an undercurrent.

Nathan was born with a serious heart condition and in 1987 he had major surgery at the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne. I remember this being the first time I truly understood that his condition was so serious because Mum and Dad never wrapped Nathan in cotton wool. He really did live life to the full. Which was such a blessing.

Because on 2 February 1993, tragedy struck our family when Nathan died very suddenly.

He was only 12 years old and had just started Year Eight. I was three weeks shy of 15 and beginning Year Ten. Sam was just seven years old. It was a huge shock to everyone and absolutely devastating.

My parents were totally unprepared. Nathan’s specialists had assured them that if there was any problem, Nathan’s health would deteriorate slowly and there would be time to get help. But there wasn’t. There was only shock, grief, and a big, gaping hole in our family unit.

We were lucky to have support. Friends showed up. Meals were provided. Many tears were shed. But then the world did what it always does… it kept moving.

Also, this was before mental health became more of a priority and living in a rural area, counselling certainly wasn’t readily available. So, there was none of that. We all just tried to move forward as best we could.

I turned 16 in February 1994 and was delighted to get my Learner’s permit for a car and later, also got my L’s for a motorbike just so I could drive by myself right away. Living on a farm, driving meant freedom & off I went on Dad’s Yamaha 175. I had a good group of friends and life was full of possibility.

Then in July, I first experienced some very strange symptoms that marked the beginning of my journey with MS.

My Year 11 class was working on a history assignment outside in the local cemetery. It was cold, and I couldn't hold a pen properly to write. At first, I thought my fingers were just numb from the weather. I assumed once I got back inside, they would warm up and everything would be fine.

But it wasn't fine.

Back in the classroom my hands still wouldn't cooperate. I also noticed a strange buzzing sensation and ended up in the first aid room. No one knew what to do with me. One of my parents picked me up, and Dad organized for us to see a local GP who lived near our farm. I think she mentioned Multiple Sclerosis even then and said I would need to see a Neurologist.

I had to wait weeks before my appointment and my hands remained stubbornly numb. In the meantime, I spent most of my school days in the typing room because while I couldn't write, I could type.

That was an isolating experience, but I have always been comfortable on my own, and I don't remember it being a big issue. Fortunately, my social life on weekends continued as usual.

Eventually I saw the Neurologist and was admitted to the Royal Adelaide Hospital for a week where I had my first MRI, a lumbar puncture, and my first high-dose IV steroid treatment. The most confronting part of that experience was being in the Neurology ward with stroke victims and people who had just had brain surgery.

I also remember my friend Karen making that week bearable. She was already living in Adelaide, at TAFE, and she was there waiting when Mum and I arrived for me to be admitted. She was a ray of sunshine for me that week – and I remember that doctors actually let me go out with a cannula in my arm and we had dinner and saw a movie – The Sum of Us.

The steroids worked and my hands gradually returned to normal. Not long after my hospital stay, we took a family trip to the Northern Territory, to Darwin then Uluru, and back to South Australia on The Ghan train. I kept a diary on that trip and my steadily improving handwriting was visual proof that I was getting better.

Looking back, I think Mum started finding out more about MS, but I wasn't interested. I just wanted my life to go back to normal. I certainly don't remember being at all concerned about what MS might mean for my future.

In a strange way, I think being young when MS first arrived was to my advantage. I didn't have any responsibilities outside of home and school. I also wasn't diagnosed straight away, it was more a case of wait and see.

I finished Year 12 and although I didn’t quite get the necessary grades for Journalism, which was my first preference, I was happy to be accepted into a Bachelor of Arts degree (Communication Studies) at the University of South Australia.

At the end of 1995 I was introduced to Kirsty by a mutual friend (Brigitt), and we connected straight away. We were both staying overnight at Brigitt’s house and while a thunderstorm raged, we just talked and talked, bonding over our shared experiences of grief.

Kirsty was the first person I ever met who had also lost a member of her immediate family and that was the beginning of a friendship of over 30 years.

Chapter 2: Miss Independent

In 1996, I moved to Adelaide to start university, and those years were mostly fun. Great friends. A busy social life. The feeling of possibility and excitement at what lay ahead.

Unfortunately, I had a second flare up (or relapse) of MS symptoms during my first year. This time affecting my leg strength and walking which was a bit disconcerting. But once again, the high dose IV steroids worked their magic, and life went back to normal.

It was also confirmed that I was dealing with MS but back then, even the first generation of disease modifying treatments (DMTs) were not readily available, so I was just told to see a Neurologist if/when I had more symptoms.

I don’t remember being particularly worried or stressed about it. I was having far too much fun living away from home and enjoying all that city life had to offer.

Not long after my IV treatment, Kirsty decided to move out of the share house where she had been living, and it was decided that we would be flat mates.

Oh, the memories of that time – our unit was within walking distance of The Norwood Hotel on The Parade, which was a favourite venue for Saturday nights, and I remember having a very busy social life. Kirsty’s boyfriend lived in Pt Augusta and she quite often travelled to visit him but there was always something happening with uni friends or friends from home like Jen and Brigitt.

After about 18 months, Kirsty moved away from Adelaide and I got a place of my own at Rostrevor. But that time as flat mates really cemented our friendship and I have some great memories of late-night chats, road trips and many a good night out. While we did lose touch for a while in our 20’s, we reconnected in 2006 and have both ended up living back on Yorke Peninsula.

At the end of 1998 I got another big shock when I was informed that my parents had decided to separate. Even though I had been living away from home for three years and definitely had my own life, I was absolutely devastated.

But life goes on. I had been volunteering in the Fundraising Office of the Women’s and Children’s Hospital while I was at university and eventually, they employed me full-time as the Receptionist and Database Officer. It was during my first year of work that I had a third MS relapse and the second affecting my legs – just a little reminder that the MS was still lurking.

It was also very inconvenient as I didn’t feel safe driving into North Adelaide for work and managed to convince a friend (Wal) to get me to and from work for a few days.

Then over Easter I enjoyed a trip to Melbourne with Mum and Sam, even though it was a bit tricky not being able to walk far. Strangely, that flare up improved without any treatment - which is the only time that has ever happened in 30 years!

Mum met Leon, now her husband of 24 years, in early 2000 and moved to Kalgoorlie to be with him. Sam and I flew over to have Christmas with them both and Leon has been in our lives ever since. I honestly can't remember first impressions, but Leon is a great bloke and I'm so glad that he and Mum found each other.

At the beginning of 2001, I moved interstate for the first time and headed west. I spent some time in Kalgoorlie and Mum was keen on me staying there but I decided Perth was where I wanted to be. It so happened that friends of Leon's had a furnished unit I could stay in until I got a job.

I ended up becoming the WA Administrator for Bakers Delight Holdings and that was a really enjoyable time as all but one staff member in the office were from interstate so there were countless "work dinners" and it was a very social group. But even then, MS was having an impact.

I remember one of my new colleagues invited me to go out the same weekend I was finally unpacking my belongings that had been in storage while I got work sorted. But I was just exhausted and so had to decline and of course I didn't want anyone at work to know I had MS.

I had a fun time dating in Perth – going to singles events and getting into "internet dating" websites. I had a very specific routine on weekends – get shopping and errands done early then go home to rest so I had the energy to go out that night. It was all great until I had my heart broken by a guy who was about 14 years older and that stayed with me for quite a while.

Around mid-2002, I saw a position advertised for an Administrator to join the VIC/TAS Office for Bakers Delight in Melbourne. Feeling restless, I liked the idea of another move – so I applied for the job and ended up heading to Melbourne.

On the way, I had some time in Adelaide and was proud to go with Dad to Sam's Induction Ceremony when he joined the Royal Australian Air Force. Then he was off to Wagga and I headed for Melbourne.

My Aunty Heather had organized for me to stay with her friend Cathy when I arrived, until I found a place to live.

This was both confronting and a godsend as Cathy had quite advanced MS. But she introduced me to a great GP and her Neurologist. This resulted in me finally beginning a Disease Modifying Treatment (DMT), eight years after my first relapse. Whereas these days treatment starts immediately after diagnosis to minimise damage to the nervous system.

I was horrified to learn that back then, all of the MS treatments were injections, and the choice was between injecting yourself just under the skin or having to see a doctor for a weekly injection into muscle. I chose to self-inject and it was actually very easy with an automatic device. I stayed on that first treatment (Rebif) for 17 years, injecting myself three times a week.

I remember going to see my GP because I had been feeling lethargic and just generally a bit unwell but wasn't sure what was going on. I still remember that conversation as the doctor started talking to me about depression, how it is a very common condition and perhaps I would like to try an anti-depressant medication. My response was immediate – I don't need that!! But when I went home and thought more about our conversation, I realized that it was probably a good idea to try medication.

Looking back, I am so glad that I admitted to myself that I did need some help because the anti-depressants made such a difference to my daily life and helped get me back into a more positive way of thinking. But I do think medication is only one piece of the puzzle and over the years I have had sessions with various counsellors and/or psychologists to help me deal with difficult times. Which has also been very helpful.

Melbourne was also a step forward in terms of being more comfortable with talking about MS. I remember having an appointment with my neurologist and being in tears because I was finding it difficult to navigate disclosing my MS at work, as the stiffness in my legs was becoming more visible.

Dr Sedal suggested that I apply for a "Go for Gold Scholar-ship" through MS Victoria to do something proactive about it. I liked the thought of taking control of the situation, so I put in an application to design and print a set of three brochures for the workplace.

My application was successful and announcing that I had won a Go for Gold Scholarship was a great opportunity to "out" myself at work in a positive way. Bakers Delight were really supportive, and I remember being asked to do a couple of presentations so that everyone could understand more about MS.

While I enjoyed working at Bakers Delight (and especially the morning tea treats that were brought into Head Office every day), after around six months I decided it was time for a change and a return to the not-for-profit sector.

I ended up at Baptist Community Care as the PR and Fundraising Officer and despite the work I had done in developing the workplace brochures about MS, it was still something I didn't want to disclose at the interview stage. But also unavoidable as I had added the Go for Gold Scholarship to my CV.

Luckily, Amanda (the PR and Fundraising Manager) took a chance on me and that job introduced me to grant writing – which I quite enjoyed and even had some early success!

However, I found winter in Melbourne brutal, especially for my legs. The cold made everything stiff and slow, and winter seemed to last forever so I decided a warmer climate would be better. I wasn't ready to move back to South Australia, so I made plans to move back across the country to Perth.

Amanda helpfully connected me with her counterpart at Baptist Care in Western Australia. I met Rob when I arrived in Perth and was offered a position working in a fundraising and public relations role.

This time I already knew a few people from my first stint in the west and Kim, a former colleague and friend from Bakers Delight WA, even let me stay with them until I got work sorted and I ended up renting their unit. It felt like things were falling into place.

In a lot of ways life was great. I certainly enjoyed the climate in Perth (except for the bursts of heat in summer – not realizing that intolerance to heat is a symptom of MS) and really enjoyed my job. I remember Sam having a couple of trips to WA with the RAAF while I was in Perth and it was great spending time with him as an adult – as he had still been in high school when I moved interstate.

During this time my MS flared up again and I had to have IV steroids twice while working for Baptist Care WA – but this time I could have the treatment as an outpatient which was an exciting development! I also had a terrible experience with "Chronic Daily Headache" (yes, it is a real condition) which took a while to get under control. With the benefit of hindsight, I can now see this was my body screaming at me to cut down my working hours from full time to something more manageable.

Dad ended up coming over to Perth for Christmas 2005, and it was just lovely. We went out for a fancy meal on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day was spent at my place, just the two of us. That was really special and a time I will always treasure.

In early 2006 I realized that as long as I lived in Perth, I would always spend a lot of time and money travelling back to South Australia as that was where Dad and my brother Sam & (his now wife of nearly 20 years) Olivia were all living. Mum and Leon were then at Maralinga, used as a nuclear testing site from 1956 to 1963, where they were caretakers for six years before eventually settling at Quorn (also in SA).

I decided it was time to move back to Adelaide. I didn't know it then, but I was heading into the hardest, darkest period of my life.

Chapter 3: The Worst of Times

I arrived back in Adelaide in April 2006, just as Dad's health began to unravel. He was eventually diagnosed with Graves' disease, which was causing problems with his vision. He had a very real fear of going blind. For a man who had always been hard-working and independent, the idea of losing his sight was certainly confronting.

At the time, I didn't properly understand how Graves' disease can affect a person hormonally, or how depression and anxiety can be part of the illness.

Tragically, Dad's mental health also spiralled downward and on Monday 10 July 2006, he took his own life.

There are moments that sit apart from the rest and that phone call is one of mine. The shock. The disbelief. The feeling that surely this can't be real and nothing will ever be the same again.

I was 28 and had always been close to Dad. I think that bond was formed as a child when Nathan had times in hospital and Mum stayed with him, so I was at home with Dad. We also shared a similar sense of humour and view of the world.

The grief was intense and I remember feeling physical pain, like my heart was breaking. I cried so much in those first few weeks that I'm surprised I had any tears left. The one blessing was that me, Sam and Olivia and Mum were all at the farm together.

I will never forget Dad's funeral. I decided that I would give the Eulogy, and I think that is the hardest thing I have ever done. My secret was to not wear my glasses, so all the faces before me were blurred. And I had Sam beside me for moral support.

We played Stairway to Heaven to finish the service and it's a song that will always hold a lot of meaning for me. Even all these years later, I still sometimes skip it when it comes up on my driving playlist because I just can't deal with the memories in that moment.

Meanwhile, life slowly returned to a new normal. I was still staying with Sam and Olivia but then got a job at The Queen Elizabeth Hospital Research Foundation and found a place to live at Henley Beach.

Then the MS returned with vengeance.

In January 2007, as I was still trying to adjust to life without Dad, I had a severe relapse. My legs were really bad. It was difficult to walk and I probably shouldn't have been driving at all, but I was creeping down back streets to the local supermarket.

> *"Grief is the price we pay for love. The more you love, the more you grieve"*
>
> Valarie Kaur

Once again, I had IV high-dose steroids and my legs improved. I remember that Kirsty organized a little birthday celebration for my 29th birthday and my first without Dad – just lunch at her place with Brigitt & Jen.

I am still grateful for that thoughtful gesture all these years later because I never would have organized anything myself, but it was good to mark the occasion, and it was a reminder that life does go on. A small group and not in public was perfect.

Then not even six months later, I relapsed again, and it was terrifying. Again, my legs were badly affected. I was facing a very real fear of not being able to walk or drive and being confined to a wheelchair at 29.

Once again, I had IV steroids and my neurologist suggested that I have my car fitted with hand controls just in case the loss of sensation in my feet was ongoing. So I found a driving instructor who could teach me how to drive with hand controls.

I was grateful that I had experience riding motor bikes when I was younger, as the accelerator was the same. This was very helpful because at 29 I was basically learning to drive all over again and even had to pass a driving test using the hand controls.

While it was very difficult at the time, I'm glad I went through the process because the hand controls have allowed me to keep driving and more importantly, maintain my independence.

I was fortunate to be able to work from home until my legs improved but I also remember it being a very lonely time. Unfortunately, it has always been my nature to retreat and deal with things alone rather than reach out for support. And to be honest, that hasn't changed much in 20 years.

My legs did get better, but it took longer than it had before. I also didn't get back to 100% and on reflection, I don't think my legs had ever fully recovered from a relapse years ago when I didn't have the steroids but recovered anyway (in my first job) - which is the only time that ever happened.

Looking back, it's frustrating that no-one suggested I see a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist to improve the movement in my legs as my walking was quite badly affected. Although I did start aqua aerobics and saw an exercise physiologist after breaking my ankle in 2010 – so better late than never, I guess!

The mental impact of this time also caught up with me and I remember being referred to see a psychiatrist, who I did not connect with at all. But I eventually found a counsellor who was very good and that really helped me move forward.

But I would say it took me years to heal from this time – which is still the darkest, most difficult period I have ever experienced.

Turning 30 in February 2008 was a turning point and I decided to start working as an independent grant-writing consultant. I was delighted that The Queen Elizabeth Hospital Foundation became my first client and my little business was up and running.

Chapter 4: A New Normal

Working for myself really suited me – especially being able to manage my own hours and workload. As a grant writer, I have worked with some remarkable people over the years. I especially remember Nancy and Enzo from Dialysis Escape Line Australia and their resilience despite long-term kidney failure and finally, successful transplants.

I worked with DELA for many years and have mainly worked as a grant writer since 2008 – with some other part-time roles along the way.

The arrival of my niece, Lily, in November 2009 was a special time and I still remember going to the hospital that night for a cuddle! I also remember being scared to hold her because she was so tiny (although a very healthy 8lb something). It was so lovely to live nearby so I could see her regularly and be amazed at how quickly she grew.

Now that life was more settled, I began to “dip my toe” into overseas travel. My first overseas trip was to Vanuatu with Mum back in 2007 for a “Women’s Wellbeing” conference, which was a great way to begin.

Then in 2010 I went to Thailand with Kirsty which pushed me out of my comfort zone but was still very enjoyable and I did fly back to Adelaide by myself. This was followed by a trip to Bali in 2012 with “the Arthurton Crew” and my confidence was slowly growing.

Travel was becoming a way to prove to myself that MS would not limit me.

Overall, 2010 was an interesting year – I managed to break my ankle at home, just minding my own business and even though I couldn’t put any weight on it, I refused to admit it was broken because that would be too inconvenient.

It wasn’t until Kirsty came to visit me about a week later that action was taken. She took one look and organized for a doctor to come and visit me at home that day. And of course, the doctor said that it was probably a fracture so I should go and get it x-rayed. Luckily the week delay in seeking treatment had no impact and after a long wait in the Emergency Department, I had a “temporary cast” put on and was told not to put any weight on it,

I definitely should have mentioned my balance issues due to MS as I broke that cast within 24 hours and it was back for another wait in the Emergency Department. This time they gave me a fibre-glass cast and I was in for six weeks of trying to hobble around on crutches. Between my balance issues and being a bit overweight at the time, that was a real struggle.

But I got through it and the one good thing to come out of that was at a checkup with my Neurologist, she asked if I was doing anything to rehabilitate the ankle – which I was not. She suggested I try some water therapy sessions through the MS Society, and I was also referred to an Exercise Physiologist. And oh, my goodness, what a difference that made to my walking and mobility!

I also felt confident enough to have another go at "internet dating" and met someone I connected with. But unfortunately, that was fairly short-lived and once again, I felt quite disenchanted with the idea of trying to meet someone. I think that's when I subconsciously decided that it was much safer to stay single than put myself out there and be hurt again.

Meanwhile, my confidence to travel overseas was growing. In 2013 I flew to Singapore by myself to meet up with "the Arthurton Crew" where their cruise was finishing. And I loved it! I remember taking myself over to Sentosa Island for a unique and wonderful experience swimming with pink dolphins.

I also went off to explore the Botanic Gardens (where I received the text announcing the arrival of my second nephew, Zach) and the wonders of the Marina Bay Sands. We also had some lovely group dinners, including a memorable evening in a private dining room at our hotel. I was hooked on travel!

Then in September 2013, I did my first big solo overseas trip to the USA – as my Mum's cousin Ian had always said if I wanted to visit, they would love to have me stay. It was also a great opportunity to catch up with my cousins, Amy and Kirsten, who I hadn't seen for many years.

I broke the long flight by stopping in Hawaii for a few days although that didn't save me from the jet lag! Then I flew to New York City, where Ian picked me up and we drove to Old Chatham in New York State, where he and Sharon were my generous hosts.

From there, we did a few day trips. Niagara Falls was one of them and it was a full-on sensory experience - the sound of the water gushing over the falls and the constant pounding that you feel through your feet, was just amazing and something I will always remember.

Ian and I also did a day trip to Montreal, although we quickly discovered that for me, walking on the cobblestones was out of the question. Happily, we were still able to explore most areas, and I remember eating delicious baklava in a little café.

Sharon took me for an overnight trip to New York City by train and what an experience that was! We went to the "Top of the Rock" at the Rockefeller Centre with amazing views over Central Park and the Empire State Building. Although I also remember it being quite hot and we had to take regular rest breaks as I found walking in the heat very difficult. But somehow, I managed.

I also spent time with Amy and Kirsten in Atlanta, which was most enjoyable. Then Amy and I travelled together to New Orleans, Las Vegas, San Francisco and Los Angeles. I particularly remember that our flight from New Orleans to Las Vegas was cancelled and we ended up getting tickets for another flight but after getting our bags back it was a very tight timeline to get to the boarding gate.

And unfortunately, after all the walking I had already done and standing in line to get the new tickets, my legs just gave out. Another reminder the MS was always lurking!

Luckily, we were able to get hold of a wheelchair and Amy pushed me to the gate at a very fast pace. We got there just as the flight was finishing boarding – but we were on our way to Vegas with a short stop-over in Denver.

Las Vegas was certainly an experience I will never forget. I found it so disorientating and annoying (more walking!) that the check-in desks were right at the back and you first had to walk past banks of slot machines. But of course they were – all the better to get you gambling before you even checked in.

We finished the trip in Los Angeles, and I was so impressed that Amy hired a car and drove – if you have ever been there, you'll know what I mean – the freeways and traffic are just crazy. I finished the trip with another stopover in Hawaii as I wasn't quite ready for a 14-hour flight.

Overall, that trip was such a great experience that I booked a 'Round the World' ticket on a special deal for 2014 only a couple of months after arriving home.

But first, it was time to move back to Arthurton.

Chapter 5: Full Circle

After 17 years of city living, in November 2013 I moved back to the Yorke Peninsula, to Arthurton. I had inherited my grandparents' house and initially planned to sell it. But as I spent more time coming back and reconnecting with old friends, something shifted. I decided it was time to "go home".

I could work from anywhere as a grant-writer and it was very satisfying to be able to assist local clubs and organisations with funding applications. I think my first jobs locally were a few grant applications to get the netball courts in Maitland resurfaced and a couple for the new Arthurton War Memorial, which were all successful.

I headed off on my Round the World trip in September 2014 and that was an amazing experience! My first stop was Dubai, where I caught up with an old school friend (Kristie) and visited the tallest building in the world – the Burj Khalifa. My next stop was London where I saw all the sights, including a day trip to Bath, Windsor Castle and Stonehenge.

I caught the Eurostar (train) to Paris for a 24-hour visit that included lunch with my Uncle Robert, which was lovely and of course a visit to the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame cathedral on the "hop on, hop off bus". Then it was back to London on the train to start the next leg of my trip.

My cousin Kirsten met me in Boston and we had a great time – going on a "Duck Tour" and visiting an Ice Bar where everything was made of ice. I then flew to Chicago and sampled real deep pan pizza (a local specialty) and saw the sights – my favourite being The Bean. My next stop was Seattle and as a fan of Nirvana in my teens, a highlight was definitely the Nirvana exhibit at the Museum of Pop Culture which I have since learned, closed in September 2025. So glad I got to see it!

From Seattle, I headed north for a couple of days in Vancouver and was very fortunate to have an introduction to my cousin Kirsten's friend who lived there (Nadia). We had a lovely day exploring Stanley Park, which is just amazing! My last stop was Los Angeles before the long flight home and I visited Madame Tussards, some of the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Santa Monica Pier and Venice.

I remember landing back in Melbourne and thinking "Wow, I just flew around the world all by myself, not bad for someone who has been living with MS for 20 years!". And yes, there were definitely some challenging moments on the trip, including being so hot and tired that I just sat down on a footpath in Paris – and was offered a banana by a lovely lady walking past.

I also remember my automatic injecting device breaking while I was in London but I contacted the UK equivalent of the MS Society and they very kindly posted me a new device, free of charge. Overall, I think that trip worked wonders for my confidence and ability to adjust and adapt as necessary.

Back home in Arthurton I was put in touch with Vanessa by a local journalist who I spoke to about my experience of losing my Dad to suicide. Vanessa was keen to establish a suicide prevention network for Yorke Peninsula and I remember meeting with Vanessa and telling her that I was happy to be involved but I didn't want to take on the responsibility of being a committee member.

Well, as it turned out, by the time we held the meeting to formally establish the committee for 'Stamp Out Suicide Yorke Peninsula' (known as SOS Yorkes) in early 2015, I somehow ended up as Secretary. Vanessa and I worked well together, and as a group, we certainly achieved a lot over the seven years I volunteered as a committee member.

Some of the highlights were being involved with a Mental Health and Wellbeing calendar that was coordinated by Uni SA's National Enterprise for Rural Community Wellbeing; going to a Lived Experience conference in Brisbane with Vanessa, Ann & Amanda; holding a Men's Health Night with Wayne Schwass and John Platten as guest speakers and many more events - both local and in Adelaide.

I even stepped into the Chair role for two years after Vanessa retired in November 2019 which was a very fulfilling experience. I was especially proud of the '2021 SOS Yorkes Mental Health & Wellbeing' calendar that I coordinated.

Overall, I think SOS Yorkes really helped me heal from the loss of my Dad and I certainly met some amazing people along the way. Although I retired from the Committee in 2021, I am pleased to see that it is still going strong and think the current "Blue Tractor" project is a fantastic way of raising awareness.

2015 was another big year in many ways and especially the arrival of the 'Boss Dog' into my life. Boss was a feisty Jack Russell Terrier who I adopted from a family at Port Hughes. The adoption itself was a bit of a comedy. The leash they gave us broke on the way to the car and Boss took off across the Port Hughes Golf Club course. His old owner just shrugged and said, "Oh, it's fine, he'll come back when he's ready."

Olivia had come with me to hold Boss on the way home and we just stood there waiting for this little white dog to decide he was finished with his golf course adventure.

And that little dog changed my life.

Before Boss, I didn't walk much at all. My motto was very much, "Why walk when you can drive?" and over the years, MS had given me plenty of reasons to avoid walking. But I knew that Boss would need daily exercise, and if I was going to be his person, I had to walk him.

Every morning after breakfast, we went for a walk. Not far at first. Just 10 minutes and around 500m. Then gradually a bit further. Sometimes, we walked three or four times a day and at my fittest, we were clocking up around 4km over several walks each day.

With travel now a priority, in September 2015 I returned to the US and met up with Mum and Leon in Las Vegas. We took a tour of the Grand Canyon Skywalk, and that night we saw Mark Knopfler (from Dire Straits) play live. And afterwards, we walked all the way back to our hotel, which would not have been possible before Boss came into my life and got me walking!

While I was away, Boss was able to stay on the farm with Sam and his family, which was very reassuring. And Mum had him a few times as well. This gave me the freedom to do a "big trip" each year, and I certainly made the most of it.

In 2016 it was back to Bali for an organized group tour, then a South Pacific cruise on a Royal Caribbean ship, "Legend of the Seas" in 2017. Then in 2018, a trip to New Zealand, the highlight being a 5-day tour of the South Island. By then, I was very comfortable travelling by myself, hence the title of this memoir - Flying Solo.

During these years I also had some interesting work opportunities come my way despite living in a rural area. In 2018 I met Pete Nicholls, CEO of Parents Beyond Breakup through a group project we were both working on, and he expressed interest in my grant writing skills.

As it turned out, he was in desperate need of an Executive Assistant and asked if I would be interested in the position. Even though Pete is based in Sydney, he was happy for me to take on the role and that was the beginning of a great working relationship and friendship. I especially enjoyed combining "passion with purpose" as PBB was (and is) an organization very focused on male suicide prevention.

That was a great time in my working life and I travelled from Arthurton to Sydney quite frequently at one stage. Unfortunately changes in the organization combined with COVID made it hard to continue, so once again, I went back to my grant writing.

Another big development during those years in Arthurton was getting involved in the "May 50k" the annual fundraising event for MS Research. In 2019 I noticed on Facebook that someone I knew had signed up and I thought it sounded great.

By then, I was walking Boss around 4km each day, so I decided to challenge myself to walk 100km over the month.

Then my friend Michelle decided to sign up as well and had the idea of creating "Team Arthurton" and invited others to join. That first year we raised over $10,000 and Team Arthurton has participated every year since.

As our 'Captain', Michelle always gets the Team Arthurton group organised and while the team members have changed a bit every year, Michelle is the only team member to have signed up for eight years in a row! Not even I've managed that – as I had to sit out one year due to a MS relapse.

As a team, since 2019 we have raised a grand total of over $64,000 for MS Research which is even more impressive knowing that so many of our donations come from the same people year after year. I am always overwhelmed by the community support in terms of donations and participants.

Overall, I built a steady, comfortable life in Arthurton and I had not experienced an MS relapse since 2007, which I put down to having the high-dose steroid treatment twice within six months that year.

In December 2019, I headed to Vancouver for a 10-days of Christmas Tour that I had booked 12 months in advance. I had never experienced a White Christmas and the tour sounded perfect! I was the only single person in the group, but everyone was lovely and by then I had done so much travelling by myself that it didn't bother me at all.

Vancouver was cold but we didn't see snow until the first stop at Whistler. And it was magical! I also had the unfortunate realization that my woollen gloves and scarf were useless because they just got wet – so I had to make a few emergency purchases.

At Jasper National Park we stayed in cabins that were spread out, and a short walk from the main cabin where meals were served. There was a vehicle that ferried people around but that could be a long wait - so I decided to just try walking, and it was great! I even got snowed on and really enjoyed that experience.

Our tour bus drove through a lot of farming country and I laughed at hay bales capped with snow, like little sausage rolls scattered around the countryside. Lake Louise was also amazing, but I don't think I've ever been as cold as I was on the "sledding adventure" around the lake – luckily the views were absolutely stunning.

We had Christmas in Banff and my one regret is that I never did a snow angel – even though I purchased ski pants for that very purpose. I'm not sure why but I just couldn't bring myself to lie down in the snow.

Then it was back home to 40-degree heat.

In January 2020, the MS came back in full force – with a new, very weird symptom. The sensation was so strange that I thought it could be a heart issue and ended up being monitored in hospital.

While there. I began googling and discovered something called the "MS hug" - a tight sensation, kind of pressure around the mid-section. Which is exactly what it was.

I also started experiencing numbness and weakness in my legs again and that confirmed it – my first MS relapse since 2007.

I will always wonder whether the shock of going from minus 20 degrees in Canada to forty degrees in Australia played a part. It's impossible to know, but I do wonder.

Once again, I had the steroid treatment, although that turned out to be a long process as you could now drink the high dose steroids with orange juice (and still tasted disgusting) but that didn't work for me, so I ended up having the IV steroids as well. And I suffered terrible insomnia as a result.

The next few years became a frustrating process of trying new ongoing treatments (as my neurologist decided it was time to stop Rebif and try one of the newer drugs) and uncertainty. I was having relapses every six to twelve months until I started having Tysabri by IV infusion every four weeks in May 2023.

On the work front, I received an email from Ben Wundy in early 2021 asking if I might know anyone who would be interested in taking on the role of Executive Officer for Fat Farmers: Rural Health Initiative. I thought it sounded perfect for me and it was settled.

I started in April 2021 and found that Fat Farmers really resonated with my passion for men's mental health in rural communities and I loved how they went about it – bringing groups together for fitness. I thoroughly enjoyed contributing to its growth and sustainability.

I met some amazing people during that time and even had the privilege of travelling to a few locations on Eyre Peninsula with Warren Davies – the Unbreakable Farmer. We had some great conversations, especially about AFL! I also enjoyed the City to Bay event each year and getting to meet so many members of our Fat Farmers groups from all across the state.

But my MS was causing me problems and fatigue was increasingly becoming an issue. By early 2024, I finally admitted to myself that I wasn't the right person for the Executive Officer role if the organisation was going to grow and expand the way I knew it could.

I made the difficult decision to step down and resumed my grant writing work from home. In 2024, I also decided it was time to move away from Arthurton to be closer to shops and services, because my mobility is only likely to decrease as I age.

I didn't want to wait until life forced my hand. I wanted to decide on my next chapter while I still had a choice.

Chapter 6: Sea Change

I found the perfect house in Wallaroo, only 30 minutes from the farm but on the coast. “Perfect” in the sense that the house layout will enable me to maintain my independence for as long as possible. Also, it is usually around 5 degrees cooler at Wallaroo in hot weather, which is a wonderful bonus when my intolerance to heat seems to get worse each year.

In December 2024, I broke my wrist rather spectacularly and suddenly I needed a lot of support. I was lucky to have Mum, Sam, Kirsty and my new neighbour Geordie but it was very frustrating. Especially not being able to drive. Boss was able to stay at the farm for a couple of weeks while I had surgery and recovered enough to take care of us both. So that was a big relief.

When I was finally able to start driving again in late January, it felt like I was finally getting my life back. Then Boss’ health suddenly went downhill - fast.

After many vet visits, he was diagnosed with a serious blood disorder on 3 March 2025 and I made the difficult decision to say goodbye. That was heartbreaking as he had been my constant companion for 10 years.

I remember my nephew Seth once asking if I ever get lonely living by myself. I told him no, because I have Boss. That really sums up what he meant to me.

I honestly didn’t think I would get another dog, because it was so heart-breaking saying goodbye, but the house felt too quiet and I really missed having a furry companion. I also lacked the motivation to do any walking.

Then just a couple of weeks later, I saw the most adorable-looking little dog on the Animal Welfare League website and put in an application to adopt him. I then had a chat with his handler by phone and we made a date for me to drive to Adelaide to have a “meet and greet”.

Paula (his handler) warned me that I might not be able to take him home that day. But it was obviously meant to be! We all took a walk together and then had some time playing with his toys and offering lots of “magic fritz”, Paula left us alone to see how he would go. When she returned, we kept chatting, and to her complete shock, Buddy came straight up to me, jumped up, gave me a kiss, and then rolled onto his back, ready for a belly rub. Paula was very surprised and said that she definitely wasn’t expecting that!

And that was the day Buddy came home.

He has needed some help to overcome his issues with reactivity but he has come a long way and he is such a lovely little dog with me. I still think about Boss sometimes, but Buddy brings me back into the present. He gives me something to care for and a reason to get out of bed. And keep up the walking!

Watching Buddy grow more confident has been really beautiful. He now comes to me for attention and belly rubs like he has always belonged. When he first started sitting on my lap, he was so awkward and that made me sad because it obviously wasn't something he was used to doing.

Daily walks remain non-negotiable and are always good thinking time. Last year I finally started using a walking stick as my mobility and fatigue issues had gotten a bit worse and I am very conscious that Buddy and I have gone from three walks a day down to two. In fact, my days are now very much structured around mornings being my "high energy" time – so that is when I try to get work done and anything that requires much walking.

Ironically, I pay a price for staying mobile in that I need to see a podiatrist every four weeks as my "funny walking gait" causes painful corns on my toes and under my foot. Which also means I spend a fortune on padding and silicone toe sleeves, especially during summer when I'm mainly barefoot at home.

Since having Buddy I have very much become a morning person, which would have shocked my younger self who loved sleeping in until lunchtime. These days, I am up between 6.00 and 6.30am and Buddy & I are usually out walking around 7.30am.

I am still working part-time as a grant writer and last year I became a member of MS Australia's Lived Experience Expert Panel. I most enjoy the opportunities to contribute to MS research and advocacy, sharing my years of experience living with this disease.

I have a small but cherished friendship circle and always enjoy a coffee or lunch catch up. Unfortunately, MS fatigue has made evening events impossible. And as I don't have the usual "points of connection" like working in an office or playing sports or having kids, I really appreciate it when others reach out to connect.

I don't know what the future holds but barring a breakthrough in MS research, it is likely that my mobility will continue to get worse.

And in that respect, I am very grateful to Kirsty and my neighbour Geordie who gave me a little push to apply for NDIS funding last year. That has been a real gamechanger.

Fortunately, my brain seems to be unaffected although fatigue definitely has an impact on my concentration and therefore, capacity to work. The fatigue also means I'm no longer comfortable driving to Adelaide and back in a day. And the idea of even interstate travel just seems exhausting – which is hard when I used to travel so frequently.

The reality is, MS keeps bringing new challenges.

In February 2026 I had a much-delayed appointment with a Urologist and that was a real eye-opener. By delaying the appointment by around five years (which is terrible) I had unknowingly put myself at risk of kidney damage and renal failure.

This delay has also meant that the only treatment option available has been learning to self-catheterise, to manually empty my bladder completely. I have found this to be very challenging and although I am finally getting the hang of it after a very frustrating couple of months, I will most likely need to do this daily for the rest of my life.

So if I can give one piece of advice it is to always put your health first and do not delay tests and referrals. There are definitely MS symptoms that are embarrassing and hard to talk about, but it is so important to discuss these with your GP and/or Neurologist.

Also, I know far too many women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer in their 40s, most without any family history. If you are not already aware, please know that mammograms are free for women aged 40 and over. Do not wait until you are 50!

Not surprisingly, these recent challenges have also had an impact on my mental health and a conversation over lunch with a friend reminded me of the importance of regular check ins with a professional therapist – which I have previously found to be very beneficial. This has motivated me to complete a 'Mental Health Care Plan' (which helps reduce costs) with my GP and book an appointment with a psychologist.

Ultimately, I don't know what the future holds, but I am so grateful that after 30 years with MS I can still work part-time, walk my dog, drive a car and live independently for now. The reality of MS is that things can change quickly, but hopefully I will continue to adjust and adapt as necessary. Just as I always have.

Thank you for reading my story.

"Not every day needs a win.

Sometimes surviving is enough."

About MS

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is the most common acquired chronic neurological disease affecting young adults, often diagnosed between the ages of 20 to 40 and, in Australia, affects three times more women than men.

As yet, there is no cure. There is no known single cause of MS, but many genetic and environmental factors have been shown to contribute to its development. In MS, the body's own immune system mistakenly attacks and damages the fatty material – called myelin – around the nerves. This results in a range of symptoms, but no two people experience MS in the same way. Symptoms can be variable and unpredictable – they can be a one-off occurrence, or symptoms can come and go or change in severity over time.

Symptoms can include:

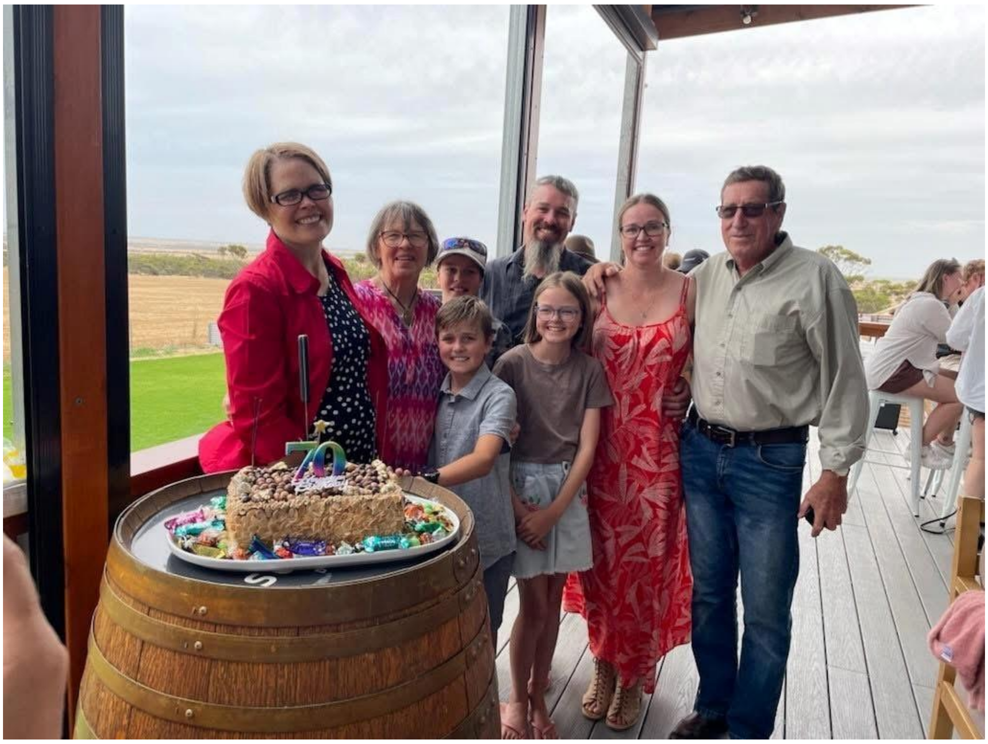
- **Anxiety & depression**
- **Problems with balance and walking**
- **Bladder and bowel issues**
- **Cognitive problems (thinking & memory)**
- **Dizziness and vertigo**
- **Fatigue**
- **Heat sensitivity**
- **Pain**
- **Sensory issues such as numbness and tingling**
- **Swallowing and speech issues**
- **Tremor**
- **Visual disturbances**

MS Fatigue

Almost everyone who lives with MS will experience fatigue at some stage and it is one of the most challenging invisible symptoms. It can be difficult to explain and is different to other people's experience with ordinary fatigue. MS fatigue is a feeling of constant exhaustion, tiredness or weakness, and can be physical, mental or a combination of both. It is distinct from and more debilitating than general feelings of sleepiness or physical tiredness. Unlike ordinary fatigue, MS-related fatigue usually occurs more rapidly, lasts longer and takes longer to recover from. It has often been suggested that the term "MS fatigue" is a poor description of the condition, as it fails to capture the full spectrum of the experience for people with MS.

Source: www.msaustralia.org.au

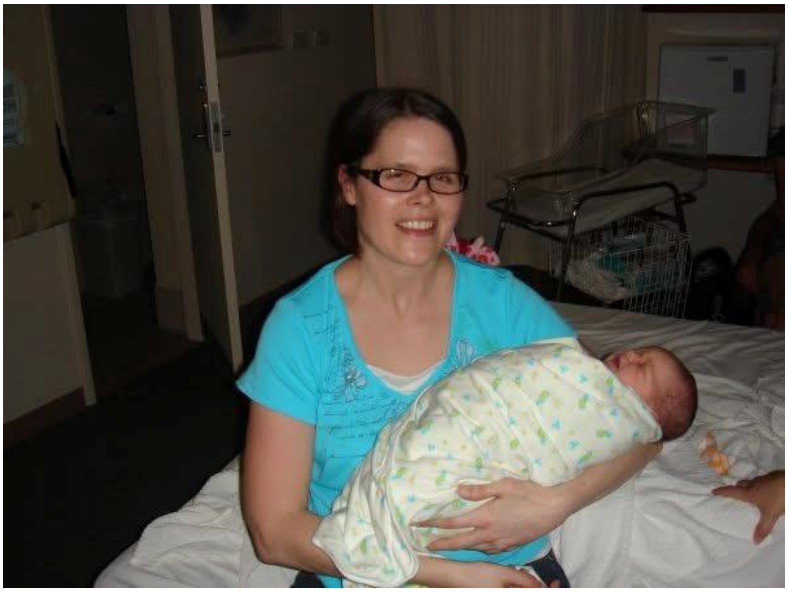
Photo Gallery



Mum's 70th, January 2023

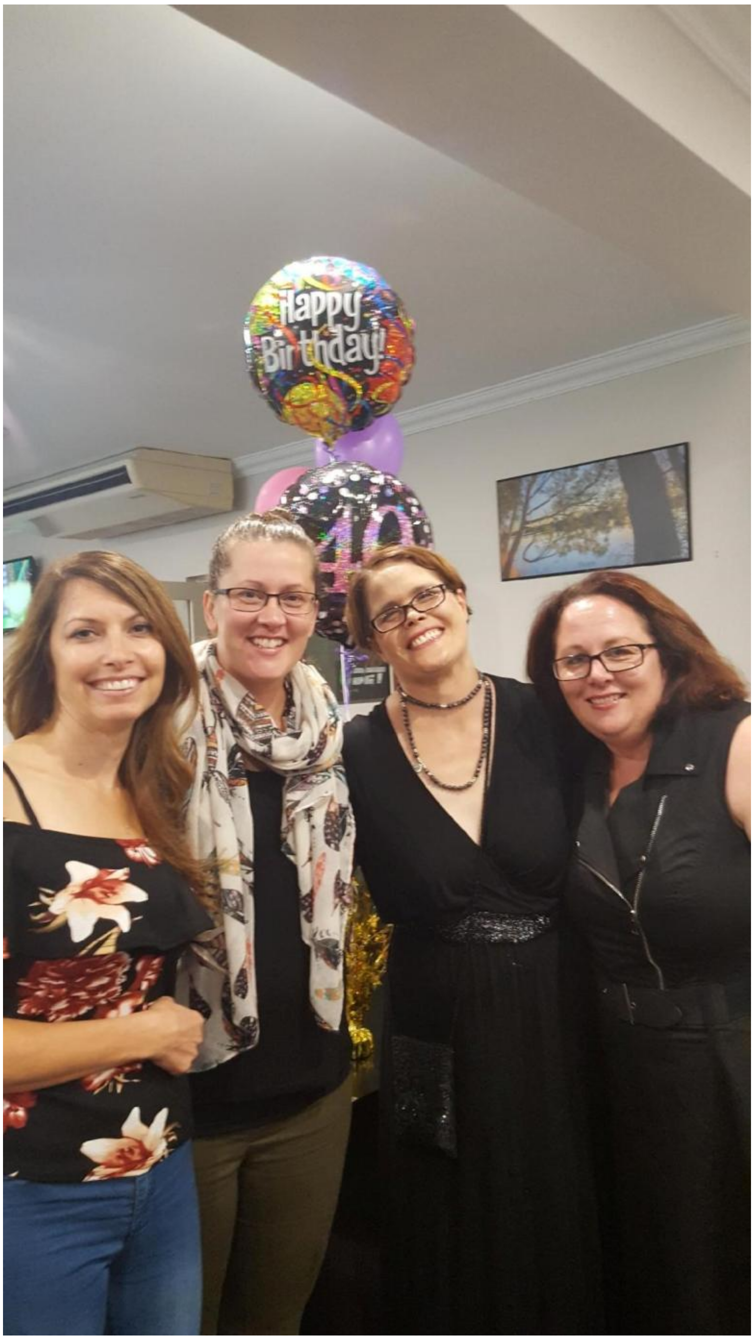
Dad's 50th, August 2001

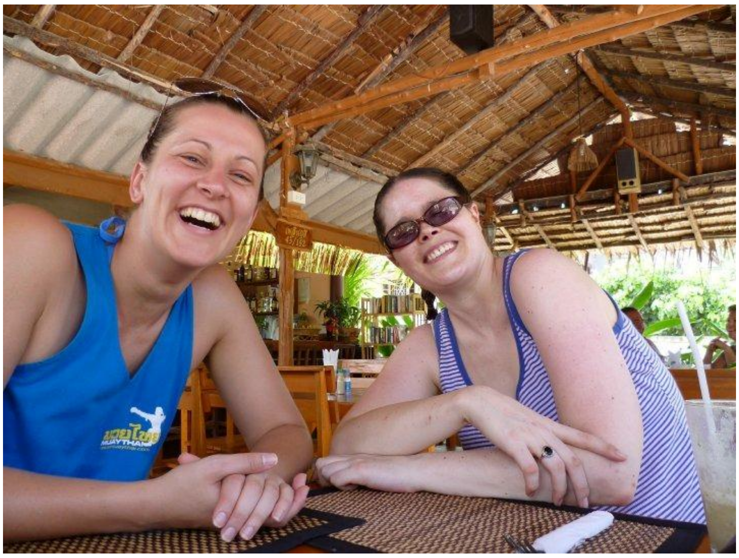
Nathan practising his martial arts, around 1992



First cuddle with Lily, November 2009

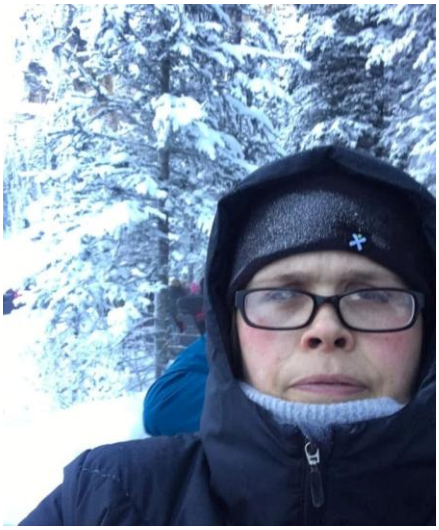
My 40th (Feb 2018) with Brigitt, Kirsty & Jen





Thailand with Kirsty, 2010

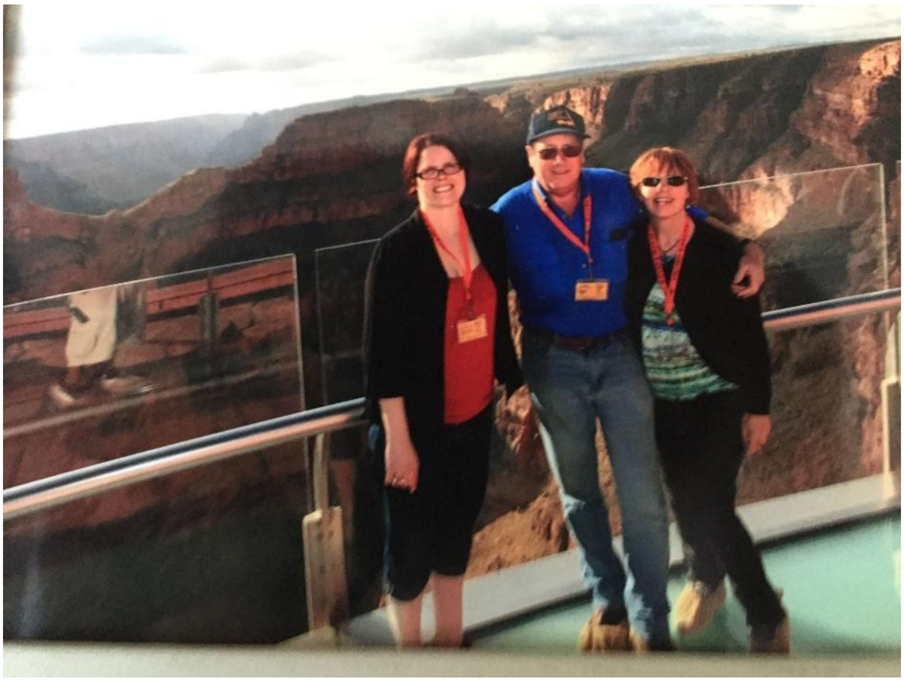
Niagara Falls, 2013



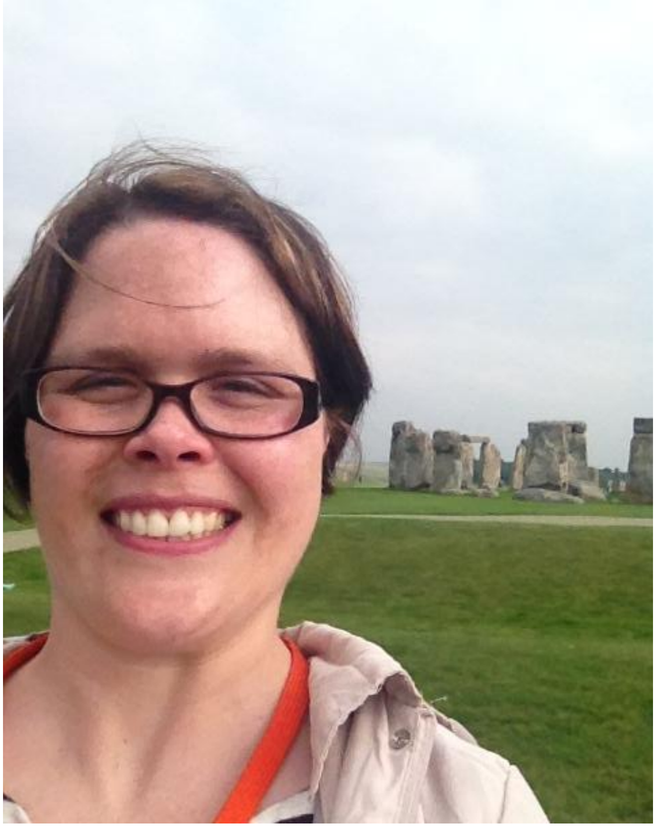
Lake Louise (Canada) December 2019

A kiss from a pink dolphin! Sentosa (Singapore) 2013

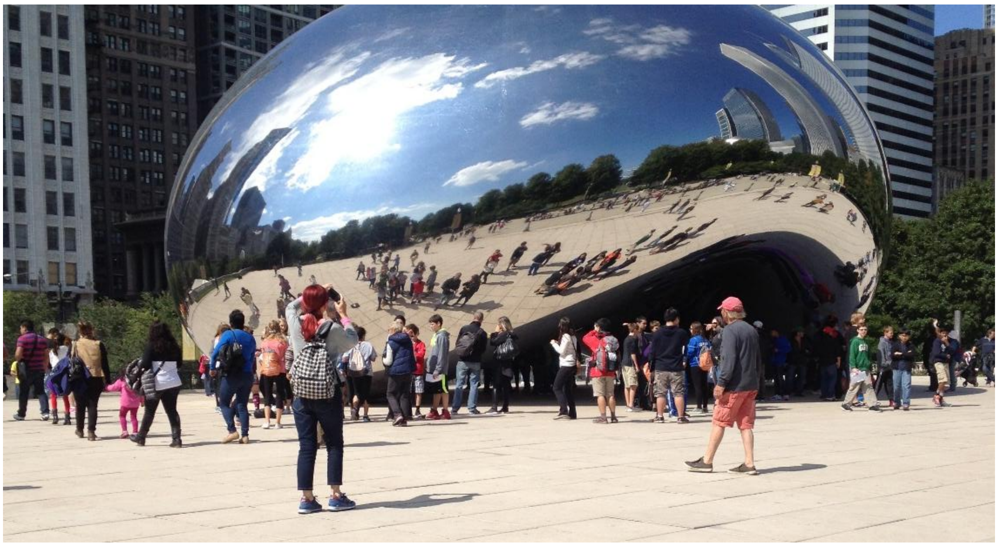
Grand Canyon Skywalk with Mum & Leon, 2015



Paris, 2014



Stonehenge, 2014

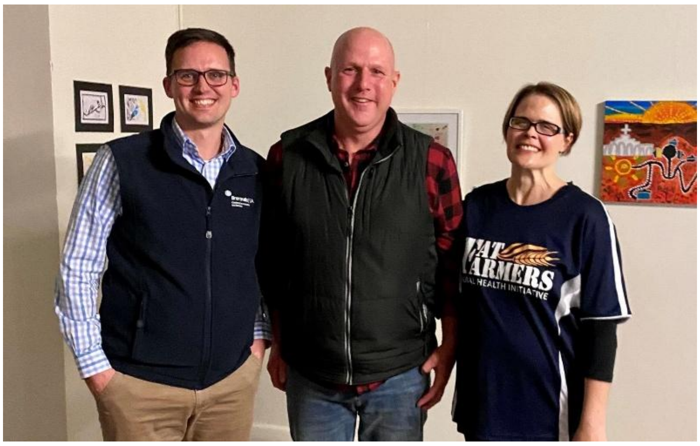


The Bean (Chicago) 2014

Madame Tussards (Los Angeles) 2014

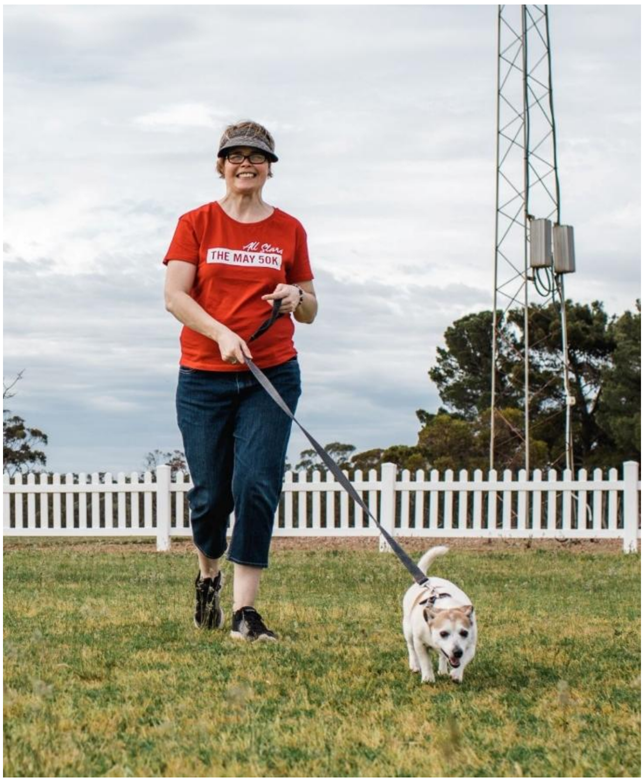
SOS Yorkes event with Wayne Schwass, 2018

With the Maitland Fat Farmers group, 2024

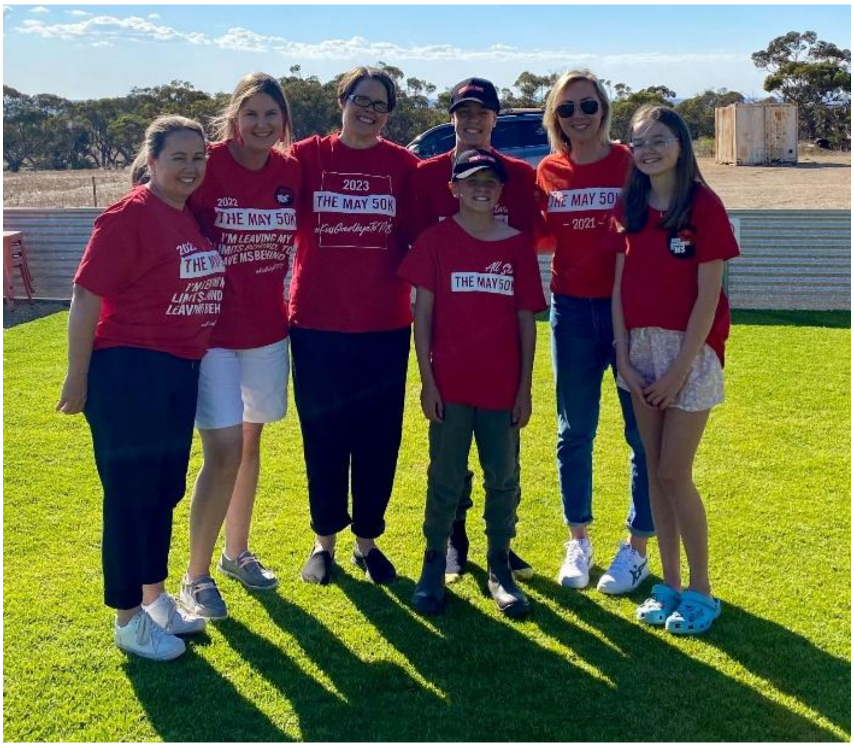


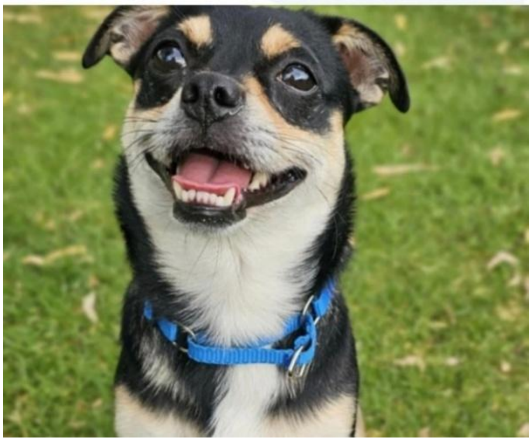
EP Tour with Warren Davies, 2022

Promoting the May 50K with Boss!

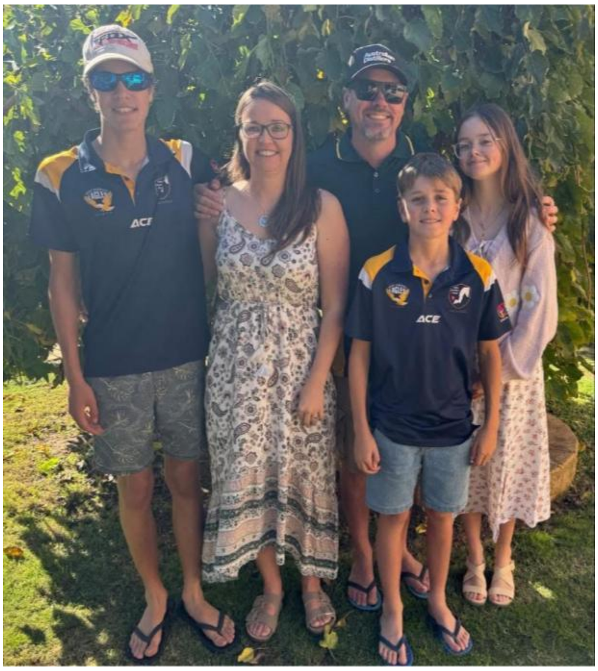


And members of Team Arthurton…





Buddy, 2025



Sam and Olivia with their kids, 2025

With Mum, Christmas 2025

The Lighter Side

Favourite place in the world
Hard to choose. I’ve been to some amazing places but sunset at “Sunny Hill” is hard to beat!

What makes me laugh
My dog.

If I could invite any four people (living or passed) to dinner
Dad, Nathan, Mum and Sam, to have my family all together again, just for one meal.

Something about me that might surprise people
I have two tattoos!

Most useless talent
Remembering trivia.

I am most proud of
Quitting smoking when I was 31.

Coffee or Tea?
Definitely coffee.

Pineapple on pizza?
Yes!

Favourite meal
Locally, a southern fried chicken burger from The Smelter with a chocolate brownie for dessert. Delicious!

My guilty pleasure
Scrolling on Instagram before bed.

Favourite TV show
The Pitt on HBO Max.

Disclaimer

This memoir is based on my personal recollection of events which may differ from the perspective of others.