

# I WAS HOMELESS for THREE YEARS

**UP** until 2010, I had what I thought of as a good life.

I had two beautiful children: a daughter, who was married with two kids of her own, and my sister's son (she died when he was very young and I became his caretaker), who was studying in the US, where his father lives.

I was single, divorced for over 20 years, and took great pride in my home, a house in a complex, which I rented. I had two cats that I adored, I gardened, I sang in church, I had a job in marketing.

I say I 'thought' I had a good life, because I wasn't happy. Not really.

When I was very young, I was sexually abused. In retrospect, I can see that that is at the root of what happened to me. Because of it, I grew up with very low self-esteem, and a huge amount of fear, which built up over the course of a lifetime.

My job was stressful, and I looked after my mother, who had Alzheimer's. (She eventually moved to a care facility, which was a relief.) I was a textbook people-pleaser, hypersensitive to criticism:

Bronwyn Lowe, 58, lost her job, then her home, then her dignity, and then herself. She tells us how an average suburban working grandmother ended up on the street – and why she's now the happiest she's ever been.

if someone was even slightly bitchy to me, I just couldn't shake it off; I'd obsess about it. At work, I gradually found I was just going through the motions – I'd lost my drive.

One day – I remember it clearly – I was eating an apple at my desk. The boss walked past and said, 'You're not supposed to be doing that.'

I tried to make light of it, joking, 'Oops, busted!'

And she returned, 'You'll be in for a hearing on insubordination.'

I couldn't believe it – it was so

ridiculous. At the hearing, I was asked if I would accept a formal warning. I said no – and I walked out. I just dropped the job. I thought, 'I can't do this any more.'

It was all part of the mental breakdown, of the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that occurs in survivors of trauma. You give up.

I applied for other jobs; ones for which I felt well-qualified, but I couldn't sell myself – I no longer had it in me. So I watched, helplessly, as my finances dwindled.

I started selling my belongings. I took on tenants. I truly believed something would happen to stop this downward spiral, that someone – a friend, a relative – would take pity on me. But eventually I ran out of money and had to cede my lease.

I walked out of the complex I lived in with one suitcase, one bag, and no idea of where I was going to go. The worst part was leaving behind my treasured cats – they were my babies, and I loved them dearly. It killed me to leave them behind.

I walked up to Tableview Beach, sat down and started SMSing just about everybody I knew. I said, 'I'm here, alone on the beach; I don't know where I'm going to go.'

And the response? Not one person offered to come and collect me, or offered me a bed. The majority said: 'We're so sorry to hear about your situation. We'll pray for you.'

That kind of rejection... I just couldn't believe it was happening. These were people I trusted.

What about my family, you might ask. Well, that's quite difficult to explain. My son was in the States, so there wasn't anything he could do. I have a brother, who knew what I was going through... But for his own reasons, he chose to distance himself. I've tried to reconcile with him, I still love him, but it didn't work out.

My daughter... this breaks my heart... She knew what was happening. But her husband has the final say, and he is very controlling, not a compassionate person – and he simply didn't like me. He never offered to help me in any way. My daughter didn't have any money of her own to help me – I know she was extremely torn up about it.

Luckily, a woman I knew from work, and her son, both Messianic Jews, took me in. I gratefully slept on their floor for almost a month.

Even though they helped me, I could feel there was something wrong with me. I was erratic, impulsive, and I began to find it difficult to string sentences together (a symptom of PTSD). Feelings of dread, disconnection and helplessness were with me constantly.

One morning I woke up with a childlike desire to go somewhere safe. I kept saying to myself, 'I want to go home, I want to go home.' Home, for me, was Somerset Hospital. I'd been going there for years, on and off, and it was a safe, familiar place. So I went.

BRONWYN CURRENTLY WORKS FOR THE CITY OF CAPE TOWN AT TRAFALGAR PARK SWIMMING POOL IN WOODSTOCK, CAPE TOWN, WHERE, SHE SAYS, 'I HAVE THE BEST BOSS AND COLLEAGUES IN THE WORLD.'



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By the time a doctor saw me, I could barely communicate. He was kind, but put me into psychiatric lock-up for two weeks, which was a nightmare. From there, I was transferred to Valkenberg Psychiatric Hospital, but my medical records were lost, and instead of phase one, I

was placed into 'high care', which is where they put the very worst cases.

It was pure hell. I remember walking into this huge room with locks and chains. There were women who were stark-naked, urinating, defecating on the floors, women beating themselves and each other. Whatever



**'WHEN A STREET-WOMAN – WHO HAD NOTHING HERSELF – GAVE ME R5 FOR A TAXI, THAT'S WHEN I UNDERSTOOD THE TRUE NATURE OF COMPASSION.'**

dignity I had left, I lost it right there.

Eventually I saw a psychiatrist, who realised I didn't belong there, and placed me in phase one. Gradually, I regenerated, and recovered my ability to speak. After three months I was released – but I had nowhere to go. So I was out on the streets again, alone and completely penniless.

A coloured man noticed I was upset and offered me a lift to Napier Street Night Haven shelter, which I gratefully accepted. And that was it – I lived in shelters for the next three years. I had no idea at the time that it was going to last that long.

At first I found it difficult to sleep. There's noise all the time. TV, talking... There were arguments, because space is limited. But when the chips were down and you were upset about something, all the women would be there for you. They'd build you up, support you, and they had an hysterical sense of humour.

Life in a shelter is what you make of it – it's extremely hard, but it's not all doom and gloom: I

gained and learnt a tremendous amount. Mainly, I developed an immensely joyful attitude of gratitude. A bed, a shower, food... I was so grateful for these luxuries. Little things I'd taken for granted – deodorant, chocolate, even loo paper! – were so precious, and I was grateful for each and every gift I received, because that's what they felt like.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was coming back to life. I started to blossom.

I started a group called the 'A-team', and we learnt some songs and entertained the others. I also met people of all cultures: Angolan, Zimbabwean, Malawian, you name it. It taught me tolerance – big time!

Another gift.

Most important of all, my relationship with God grew

***Even though they helped me, I could feel there was something wrong with me. I wasn't behaving like myself.***

incredibly strong during this time. My faith became my lifeline; it carried me through the worst times, and I truly learnt the power of prayer.

Of course, I still had to get a job, and the only job going was at the city council's waste depot. The team comprised mainly men, and a few young women – I was the oldest, at 56, and the only white person.

The route was tough: hot, dirty, walking endlessly in the heat of summer. I was laughed at and insulted. Physically, it took its toll, and after three months I had to quit. But I don't regret it for a second, because it really was character-building: afterwards, I had a fearlessness and toughness I'd never known before – something I wish I'd had years ago.

Luckily I got another job at the city council immediately, and

over the next two years I worked various contracts on and off for the city council. It was tough, moving between Night Haven and Happy Valley shelter in Simonstown when contracts expired (you can't stay in certain shelters unless you're working), but I'll never forget the incredibly compassionate people I met at both. I am still humbled by the kindness of the people who worked in those shelters, and the enormous generosity shown to me by those who had very little themselves.

I really wish more people understood how truly lucky they are to have what they do; how much they have to be grateful for.

Today, I work on several city council contracts, and I have my own little room here in Cape Town; it's not much, but I think its lovely.

One of the highlights of my life was receiving an award, Woman of Courage and Strength, from the Night Haven Shelter just before

I left: They often hand out certificates, but they created this award just for me. It blew my mind – it meant so much to me.

These days, I wake up every day filled with joy. The fear that ruined my life and almost destroyed me, the people-pleasing... it doesn't rule me any more. Not so long ago, someone told me I was bossy – it was the best compliment I'd ever received!

The world has opened up to me. I see things I never saw before, as everything is filtered through the experiences I've had these last few years. I find it so much easier to connect to people, to cut through the BS. And it's a real gift to be able to connect with people of all cultures and find such acceptance. I will never look at the world in the same way again.

PHOTOGRAPH: CHELSEA MACLACHLAN