

# Stepping out of the old life

**Regularly working and re-working the Steps brought her children back and gave her a new way of life**

I was between 12 and 13 when I started drinking. I was a state ward, back in the young days. I was placed in the system and I was there from the age of 13 to 26. So I got tossed around to the homes and my behaviour was out the gate physically, mentally, and spiritually. I used to lie, cheat and steal. I went to drink for every reason possible with life prior to coming in to AA.

I am a mum of seven adult children and 14 grandchildren. Three of my younger children were in the grip of my active addictions. I used to drink at home - I locked myself in the bedroom while the kids were watching TV. My behaviour was very out there. There were a lot of people within the community that were saying to me that I had a drinking problem. 'Denise, you need to address it. Your children love you, but they don't love the behaviour.' Anything that twisted me over, I was going for a drink.

And my last drink, I was at one of our bars in Christchurch here and I blacked out in the bar. I was trying to lean towards the bar and I thought I got there but I didn't. I just dropped on the floor. The bouncers thought somebody had beat me up or knocked me out, could have been both, but I'd actually had enough - and from there it was just a case of waiting until I could be admitted to a rehab.

My kids had given me a warning. If I didn't get the program, I was going to be deleted off their lives. And that's why I went. That's my rock bottom - going into a place called a treatment, a rehabilitation centre. I went to Queen Mary Hospital in Hanmer Springs and did the Taha Māori programme in 2001.

I came into recovery unsure of where I came from, and the people running that programme suggested that in a couple of years we were to go and search for Wai, which means who am I? Where am I from? I didn't know because I was adopted as a child. I was a state ward as a child, and life became really unmanageable to be quite honest.

I do know my history today. It would be best to say Ngā Hau e Whā - from the top to the bottom to the east coast to the west coast. So it's basically Te Whānau a Apanui. And Nga Puhi, Ngati Porou, Tuhoe and Ngai Tahu - those are my iwi.

So my journey began, and then I went from Hanmer Springs to Elmtree Lodge a halfway house in Christchurch. I stayed there for a while, got my roots grounded. It was suggested that I go to meetings, get a sponsor...

It's been a whirlwind. I've had a lot of family deaths in my journey but with that, what I can say is that with everything that went on in my life, in sobriety, I have not had the desire to pick up a drink.

I have gone to meetings from the top of the North Island and Lower South Island. I reside in Christchurch and I've been able to have a solid foundation within the fellowship - meetings, sponsor, service sponsor, and helping the newcomer. I sponsor ladies. I work my steps. I'm currently on step four and five, and with the guidance of my sponsor and I'm really grateful I have a lovely lady who assists me on a weekly basis for check ins, check-ups. It's been paramount for me to network with the ladies.

I think the biggest thing for me is building relationships. My two youngest girls and my youngest son, we have a really good relationship. It was rocky at the beginning, I would say the first 15 years, still dealing with my behaviours that affected my children. Trust was always uncertain, even though I hit that three year mark in sobriety. And we had to communicate. Be around one another. I had to listen to them and listen to what they had to say to me, because I wanted to know the impact my active alcoholism had on my children. And they wanted answers. And today I get the privilege of being with my grandchildren. I get to travel to Australia to visit five of my children in different states and be with them, be present for their births, be present for their birthdays.

In this journey of recovery, you know, everything outside of AA, we have to do our very best. It doesn't matter what we do. We just don't need to pick up a drink. My misbehaving is in eating lots of chocolate. I'm guilty of that.

But I really love what I do today. And how it is for me is that everything in my house is legal. It is not stolen. It is not from dirty money and the clothes that I wear, I own. I say that with gratitude because when I went into Queen Mary Hospital, the clothes I had on were borrowed from my cousins. I have a legal license. I have a real passport. I can travel. I have travelled. I love having fun. I'm a bit of an adrenaline junkie. I love my bungee jumping, jumping out of planes, skydiving. I do this and I love it. And I network with a lot of people.

### One step at a time

I'm really grateful that I have a journey and it's embedded in my life. I take the 12 steps off the banners into my life, and I do that with my adult children today and the same for my grandchildren.

I completed the first round of Step work in the treatment program in Hanmer Springs - we had to complete a fourth and fifth. If we didn't do the step-work from one to five we were not allowed to step out. We had to roll over again for another eight weeks. I came out of rehab, went into Elm Tree Lodge, the recovery house, got a sponsor, and then I started doing some more step work. The first couple of times when I did the Fourth Step the list of people, places and things I resented was from here to kingdom come. Everyone was my enemy, so I assumed, and I was my worst enemy. So I had to just knuckle down and address the 12 steps and the traditions within this program. Without that, it wouldn't be possible to be the person that I am today because I have a higher power and I'm now able to hand my will and my life over to the God of my understanding. So the step work hasn't changed. I've changed.

There have been lots of highs and lows around the Steps but I've just got to get it done with humility - accepting that I need help from other people. We have an expression in AA: I can't. God can and I will allow Him. I want to live a life better than what it was before. I want that new, positive thinking instead of negativity. Working the steps does that for me.

But first of all my primary purpose is to stay sober myself and to help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety. My home group has a roster for those that have a year or up in sobriety. So we go into the rehabilitation and detox centres once a month and we share for one hour, our experience, strength and hope to those that are still under the influence. That's the way I give of my time to help the still suffering alcoholic. And I say to them, look at the person on the left and on the right. You may not get to see them again because what happens is that it becomes really clear that this disease of alcoholism is a killer. It really is a killer. We see our men and women that suffer and then they pass away. The path is often jails, institutions and death. That does happen.

So what would I say to the newcomer? First up - welcome to the solution. Let's go to a meeting. Let's see if you can relate. I went to any lengths to get my alcoholism met and now I'll do the same for sobriety. If I hear the similarities in a person sharing that I relate to with my drinking, it may embed something, instil that light bulb moment of, Ooh, ooh, that was me. I did that. I used to drink like that. Oh, it wasn't just me, they did it too. You know, that sort of stuff. And our famous words 'just keep coming back' because we know this programme works and let's work at it. It's a We thing.

But you know this program ain't for the faint hearted. You're going to hit your low of lows. So feel the emotions, get the support, work the steps, go to meetings, and being kind to self. All that sounds really foreign, but it actually does work.

And most groups have a list of meetings and a starter pack with phone numbers of group members - women for women and men for men. We do this so that newcomers can connect with us. Call us.

But we just have to keep our feet on the ground and trudge the road to happy destiny one foot in front of the other. So kia kaha to all those that are struggling and want help with Alcoholics Anonymous. We are here, everywhere in our country. So just keep coming back. This programme is for all sorts of people. And I am an alcoholic who's proud to say that I've kept coming back.