



## Burn survivor's courage: 'Why I've never been happier'

Carol was a young mum when a fire ripped through her home and life as she knew it changed forever - by Emma Levett. Dec 2017

February 3, 2000 was the most significant day in Carol Mayer's life.

But while she remembers the tuna patties she ate for dinner that night and the singlet she dressed her nearly two-year-old son Zac in for bed, she has no memories of the event that changed everything.

'I've asked so many people why I can't remember,' Carol tells New Idea. 'I think shock takes over.'



*Burns survivor Carol Mayer has opened up about the house fire that changed her life forever*



Around 10pm that night, Carol's Cairns home was engulfed in flames and Carol suffered horrific burns.

But 17 years on, she still has no idea what started the fire.

She can't remember what woke her or how she got out, but a neighbour saw her on her front lawn having just escaped from the inferno. He was the one who hosed her burning body down.

*Carol (pictured before her ordeal) was a young mum when fire ripped through her home*

'Apparently I shouted: "Zac. Front room. Front room,"' Carol explains.



It was those five words, before she fell unconscious, that saved her baby boy.

Another neighbour, Todd, was able to push in the window screen and grab Zac, unharmed, from the house.

The next days and weeks were touch and go for Carol, who was just 33 at the time.

*Carol (pictured now with her son) has used her experience to do good*



'I had burns to 85 per cent of my body,' Carol explains.

'The doctors didn't expect me to make it through the night, and even then only gave me a 50/50 chance of survival.'

I was in a coma in intensive care for six weeks – I can only imagine what my poor family went through.'

But incredibly, Carol, who describes herself as a 'fighter', made it.

*Carol quickly decided she must stay positive and look to the future*

That's when the realisation of what she faced ahead hit her.

'It was four months before I saw my face,' she remembers.

'I was absolutely devastated. Then my dad had to tell me they'd taken most of my fingers too.'



‘They were all bandaged, so I didn’t know. I couldn’t do anything for myself, I could hardly speak and I kept thinking: “If I can’t look after myself, how can I be a mum to Zac?”’

*She recently left Australia for the first time to attend a burns conference (she is pictured there) in America*

Carol says despite all this, she was positive from the start.

‘It was what it was,’ she shrugs. ‘I was upset by photos of me before the fire, but I had to come to terms with it and I just did.’

This same strength got her through around 100 painful operations during her recovery.

‘I had hardly any skin, so they were growing skin and grafting any skin they could find,’ she reveals.

In August 2001, just 18 months after the fire, Carol was out of hospital and moving into a house her community had built for her and Zac.

‘I wanted to start moving forward again,’ she says.

‘I took a Lifeline counselling course, which really helped my self-confidence. I started going to the shopping centre without my face garment. Of course people stared, but I learnt to turn it into humour. “Spiderwoman’s here!” I laughed with the little kids, and they loved it!’

*The conference was such a success that Carol (pictured there with a friend) has vowed to return next year*

It was around this time Carol found the burns survivor community, and in 2005 she attended her first meet-up.

‘Before this I thought I was the only survivor ever!’ she says.

‘It was the start of something great. I started speaking about my story at events and later became an ambassador for the Julian Burton Burns Trust.

It was so rewarding and I felt so proud of myself. There’s no way I would have been able to speak in front of 350 plus people so well before I was burnt.’

Most recently, Carol has discovered the World Burn Congress.

‘I’d never left Australia,’ Carol, now 50, says.



*I've had great enjoyment giving back and there's still so much I want to do,' Carol says*

'I didn't have the money, but when I set my heart on attending a conference in Dallas, I was determined to make it happen.'

Her community rallied, and in October Carol and four friends made the journey.

'It was incredible. Some of the people I'd been speaking to online for years were there,' she smiles.

'In Australia there are only 30 or 40 of us who attend the burns forums, but there were 1000 burns survivors in Dallas. I'm already planning my trip to the conference in Michigan next year!'

Over the past 17 years, Carol has emerged from the ashes of that fire to create a completely new life.

'I've just focused on what I do have and not what I don't,' she shrugs. 'I've had great enjoyment giving back and there's still so much I want to do.'

