

## I Am: How Aroha Andrew survived 11 months in hospital with 62 per cent burns

Bridget Jones 10:59, Nov 12 2019



TVNZ

*Just 21 at the time, Aroha Andrew suffered burns to 62 per cent of her body and spent 11 months in hospital.*

"It's the movement of the flames. It's the air around them that creates that movement, that crackle.

"And I can remember feeling that they were going to come on top of me."

On August 20, 2016, Aroha Andrew woke to find the room she was sleeping in on fire. Just 21 at the time, she suffered burns to 62 per cent of her body and spent 11 months in hospital.

Andrew is retelling her story as a burns survivor on *I Am*, the local series telling the real-life, powerful experiences of Kiwis who have been through things many of us can never imagine.



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*The original scene of the fire in 2016.*

Born and raised in Timaru, Andrew's friends and family describe her as a typical young woman, worried about the clothes she wore, how her hair looked and the way people saw her.

Straight out of school, she got a job in the offal room of the local freezing works, where she was said to have "the walk of a trucker, and the smile of an angel".

On the night of her accident, she had organised with a workmate to go out for a couple of drinks and met up with Cyrus Steedman, who she'd known for a while, and went back to his place.

He recalls turning the heater on in his room, just as he had every other night.



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Andrew says that's where things stop for her.

"Then all I remember is me waking up, alone. And feeling this overwhelming heat. Basically, the entire room was engulfed in flames. They were travelling up the wall, over the door.

"I can slow it all down in my brain now, but for me it was literally a split second; I woke up. What's that? Blankets down. Pushed myself up to the corner of the room. And I saw the door - or what I thought was the door."

Steedman, who appears in the episode, says he woke first, and after kicking the bedroom door open, remembers not being able to see a thing.

"I remember hearing her start to scream," he recalls, clearly emotional at the memory. "I remember yelling at her to come this way, and I was standing on the deck. She ran the other way."

Andrew was unfamiliar with the room layout. She finally found some external doors and pushed herself outside.

"The only reason why I get to look the way that I do now is because I protected my face [while] running out."



*John Bisset*

*The aftermath of the fire which changed Aroha Andrew's life.*

It's an interesting statement in the context of *I Am*. By its nature, the series is filmed from the shoulders up, the subject talking directly to the camera, on a simple black background.

And so it is not until Andrew lifts her hands to push her hair out of her eyes, or to wipe a tear, that the audience can see her physical scars from that night.

In fact, she suffered burns to more than 60 per cent of her body, including her hands, arms and legs.

When paramedics arrived, they put her straight into a neighbour's shower. The neighbours recall being unable to stay in the house because of Andrew's screams.

"I have no words to really describe the kind of pain it is," Andrew says.

"All I can remember is actually just looking at everyone, like, 'help me, help me, I don't know what to do!'"



*JOHN BISSET/FAIRFAX NZ*

*FILE PHOTO: When paramedics arrived, they put her straight into a neighbour's shower. The neighbours recall being unable to stay in the house because of Andrew's screams.*

That's where her memories end, until she woke up in ICU in Middlemore Hospital in Auckland, where she was sent to give her the best chance at survival.

"Major burns are about the most severe type of injury anyone can sustain," explains Mr Jonathan Heather, one of the hospital's plastic surgeons.

Andrew's recovery was long and hard. Sitting up was excruciating, and dressing changes could take as long as three hours. She underwent skin grafts, which required shaving her beloved hair - the skin of her scalp was untouched by the fire.

"When I really became aware of what was happening to me, I was just trying to grasp what I had to go through every day, waking up. I didn't want to see anyone."

Because of a handful of setbacks and infections, it was almost a year before Andrew was able to be transferred to Timaru hospital - but being home wasn't simple either.

"I know everyone in Timaru, and everyone one knew who I was, before," she says.

"And now, I'm a completely different person."

Andrew explains how she had lost complete confidence in every area of her life. But soon realised, she needed to make a change.

"She's been to hell and back, and when you experience trauma to that extent, it puts everything into perspective," says Makalya Hewlett, Andrew's best friend.

This is a deeply personal story, but the most touching moments of Andrew's experience don't necessarily come from what she says - although her positivity and warmth is astounding, considering that trauma she faced.

But it is the personal photos from her recovery, full of humour, strength and apparent positivity. And it is a quiet moment near the end of her story that is most powerful, when she filmed quietly, simply getting dressed, caring for her body.

If there was ever a role model for young women, Andrew is certainly a strong contender.

"Looking back, I don't really like who old Aroha was and what she was doing, and what she stood for. I think she tried to be something for other people... But I needed to get to a point where I was happy with myself," she says.

"I look at my body now and think, what a piece of artwork. I'm a patchwork quilt. I'm not grateful for the accident happening but I'm so grateful for what I get to take from it.