

Burn survivors embrace their scars

James Baker05:00, Jan 05 2021



James Baker/Stuff

Heather Stewart, 62, at the Fourth Annual Women's Burn Survivor Retreat.

Heather Stewart is grateful for her burns.

Surrounded by 20 ladies at the Fourth Annual Women's Burn Survivor Retreat along Karioitahi Beach, Waiuku, the giggling gals receive facials while exchanging dirty jokes, punctuated by roaring laughter.

It's not the solemn picture you might expect at the three-day event devoted to the mental healing of severe trauma.

Their stories are as different as their skin, some women have spent decades hiding scars from glaring eyes. For them, this weekend is about self-acceptance.

Others, like the 62-year-old Stewart, often make their burns the butt of jokes.

"Two of my friends came to see me after I got back from the hospital... one took a look at me and fainted," she laughs.

I thought 'geez thanks for that'."

She recalls her story openly, as a school teacher surrounded by curious children it's a well-practised routine by this point.

At the age of nine, she was struck by the blaze that changed her life.

"I went to a friend's house... the boy's father was burning rubbish in an incinerator... we were standing watching, and he said stand back and poured petrol on it."



JAMES BAKER/STUFF/Stuff

The fire that struck Heather Stewart, burnt away the ends of her fingers.

Stewart says the last thing she remembers is "breathing fire".

She would later learn the full brunt of the blast had struck her directly in the face and hands, turning two-thirds of her exposed skin into charcoal and melting her nylon clothes.

"They call it fourth degree burns, that's when the burns go all the way to the bone."

The next ten weeks were a haze of oxygen tents, lights and suffocating bandages. Hospital staff couldn't save the tips of her fingers but worked to repair her face, which retained intact bone and cartilage.

"My nose is grown from my arm, they had to keep it attached for three weeks to get the blood going. My lower lip is a graft from my stomach. I'm a bit of a patchwork... anywhere they could find that wasn't burnt."

She describes the horror of her experience with surprising cheer. In her view, she was lucky enough to be surrounded by loyal friends, special teachers and loving parents.

"I remember my mum tickling my feet because that's the only area she could get to.

“Even now that’s such a lovely feeling.”

And decades later she maintained the relationships forged in those hospital wards.

“We would have to go back in the school holidays for treatment... it would be a lot of the same children there. It was like camp, we’d get up to a lot of mischief, water fights and wheelchair races.

“We also had very special nursing staff; really lovely people.”



Supplied/Stuff
Heather Stewart, 62, post-make-up.

Armed with a strong support network, Stewart says she accepted her scars early in her life. Schoolyard bullying hurt, but didn’t devastate. And probing questions from strangers were met with candid answers.

“One of the things I have discovered speaking to others here is that anyone with scars they can hide, they hide, because they can.

“Because I couldn’t I think was able to deal with it... come to terms with it... I’ve had a lot of life lessons.”

And 33-years-ago she decided to pass these lessons on after a chance encounter at St Lukes Mall.

“Delwyn [Breslau] approached me and said ‘excuse me, I can see you have burns do you mind me talking to you about it?’”

Delwyn has devoted her life to helping burn survivors’ after her eight-year-old son was extensively burnt in 1984 following an explosion in Papakura.

“I discovered there was no psycho-social support here for people who had been burnt or disfigured, or for that matter for their families,” says Delwyn.

In 1987, she established the Burn Support Group Charitable Trust and would go on to create first New Zealand's first skin bank and children's burn camp receiving 15 national and international awards.

In 1990 Queen Elizabeth presented Delwyn with a Commemoration Medal for services to New Zealand.

In 1993, she married Alan Breslau, founder of one of the first burn support organisations in the United States of America, the Phoenix Society and the World Burn Congress. Alan had been extensively burned as the sole survivor in an eight-passenger plane crash in 1963.



Meghan Lawrence/Stuff
Delwyn and Alan Breslau, 2016.

“[Delwyn] told me she was setting up a support group for burn survivors... and asked if would I be interested in coming onboard?” says Stewart.

“That started off a beautiful friendship... her husband Alan is an amazing man.

“He told me one day you will be happy that you've been burnt... I kept thinking about that for years. Now I realise he's right.”

I'm quite an extrovert. I quite like people to look at me.... and what I discovered is helping others helps you... and these burns, that attention gives me a way to do that.”

For Sandi O'Connor, Stewart's self-acceptance has served as an example.

“She's got significant burns but her self-esteem is fully intact. She knows who she is, her identity is rock solid,” says O'Connor.

“That's something I'm still working on.”



James Baker/Stuff

Sandi O'Conner, 48, openly displays the arms she hid for years.

The 48-year-old has never known a life without burns, she was only 16-months-old when she fell into a bath of scalding water while reaching for a floating toy.

“Unlike some ladies here who might have been burnt in their 20s... I was a baby, there was no ‘before’ for me.”

Her grandmother immediately plunged her into a sink of cold, before removing her clothes – and her skin.

“I didn't feel any pain... I was told on the way to hospital one of the things I said was ‘don't cry mummy, I'm alright’.”

The burns covered one-third of her body. For years she would cover the scars with pants and long sleeves.

“I always had the psychological pain of being burnt. At school you would hear things... scorched almonds was a classic one.”

Growing up, her appearance dominated her thinking. Uniformed sports like netball were off-limits and classroom questions would go unanswered to avoid raising her hand.

“It didn't matter how hot it was I wouldn't take off my jumper. I was always hiding myself... isolating.”



James Baker/Stuff

At 16-months old Sandi O'Connor, 48, received burns on one-third of her body.

As an adult, she realised this internal shame was not solely a result of her burns.

“I come from multiple trauma, a traumatic upbringing... think *Once Were Warriors* type situation,” she says.

For her, home life was not a buffer or a sanctuary against the world.

Instead, the schoolyard taunts and jeers were compounded by her experience of ongoing family violence which created a cycle of inescapable trauma.

“That all added to a belief system that I was nothing; I was worthless... my mother couldn't nurture me, she didn't know how.”

“Some of the women here have mothers, parents, family, friends, neighbours that were all on board their support network, and they bounced back and that's awesome.

“But that wasn't my reality.”

The irony, she says, is that on reflection she is by all standards an attractive woman.

“I know some people look at me and say ‘she looks great’ but I didn't feel that way.

“I was even told I should be a model... but I just thought ‘I've got the face of an angel but the body from hell.’”

As the decades passed her scars faded, and with the help of a loving husband and two sons she was able to push these negative thoughts firmly to the back of her mind.

“But it's still been a restriction in my life, I won't wear skirts in public.”



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The ladies share a laugh at Women's Burn Retreat at Castaway's Resort, Waiuku.

She says the weekend retreat helped to fix that. By listening to inspirational speakers, and being surrounded by women with a shared experience, she's able to take stock of her own self-image.

“I’m learning to accept all parts of myself, even the bits that aren’t accepted by society.”