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Burn survivor's healing message

Heather's childhood trauma has fuelled a life-long desire to educate others



It's been 55 years since Heather Stewart was burnt beyond recognition as a child in a tragic backyard accident. But the Auckland teacher wears her scars with pride, using her experience to promote kindness and empathy to her students.

"A lot of people were quite surprised when I went into teaching because I'd be facing children all the time, but it's been really positive," says Heather, who works as a relief teacher with students of all ages.

"Every time I go into a class, I get to tell my story, and it teaches them a lot about resilience and accepting people with differences."

In the five-plus decades since her accident, Heather has become a professional at talking about it, something she believes has deeply contributed to her healing and acceptance of what happened.



The wee cutie grew up to be an inspiration. "I am happy with the way I am."

Aged nine, Heather was visiting a neighbourhood friend when a backyard fire exploded, leaving her with extensive third-degree burns down to the bone over much of her body.

"We were a bit starved for entertainment and watching sparks come out," explains Heather, now 64.

"My friend's father told us to stand back and he poured petrol in, which exploded as soon as it hit the fire and seemed to come straight for me."

What happened next is a blur. She recalls being dragged across gravel away from the fire and hearing someone say they couldn't wait for an ambulance. Another neighbour offered their car and Heather's parents were collected en route to hospital.

"I remember looking at my hands, and the ends of my fingers were completely black like burnt toast, and my clothes had to be cut off because they'd melted into my skin," says Heather, who was initially in Palmerston North Hospital for 10 days while they stabilised her.

"I heard something about me come on the radio. It was turned off before I could hear everything, but the story said I had a 50/50 chance of living."



It was a carefree childhood with her mum before the accident.

When the odds of survival seemed stronger, Heather was transferred to Lower Hutt Hospital, where she spent the better part of the next two years in the burns unit.

She's had countless skin grafts and surgeries to rebuild her face – so many she stopped counting after 20 – but Heather insists she was rarely miserable.

"I was quite a determined child and I didn't see that wallowing was ever going to get me anywhere. I just wanted to be like everyone else," says Heather.

Her parents supported her as much as possible, but living and working in Palmerston North meant after the initial first months in intensive care, they could only visit her on the weekends. Although it was lonely at times, Heather will never forget the kindness of the hospital librarian, the late Mrs Bonifant, who she affectionately calls her other mother.

"She would buy me lemonade ice blocks and, because my hands were bandaged like boxing gloves, she would cut off bits with a teaspoon and feed me. I have very fond memories of that."

Heather's steadfast attitude never waned and she still approaches life with an inspirational and positive outlook. She now helps other survivors through the Burn Support Group Charitable Trust, where she prepares classrooms for the return of school-aged survivors. She also visits patients recovering in hospital and often attends the annual Women's Burn Survivor Retreat and weekly meetings.

"I can be there as a matriarchal figure to help people open up and tell their stories," explains Heather.

"It's very hard and emotional telling your story when it's new, but the more you tell it, the more desensitised you become."

The avid crafter and cat lover says most survivors choose to cover their scars whenever possible. As much of her scarring is on her face and hands, Heather can't cover them easily, but she considers this a bonus as it has helped her accept them more quickly.



With fur babies Lincoln (left) and Sherwood.

"Why should you be embarrassed about scars? It's part of you and you should feel proud you've come through this," says Heather, who first got involved with the trust when founder Delwyn Breslau approached her in a shopping mall and asked about her burns. Delwyn's son was extensively burnt when he was eight and she went on to marry Alan Breslau, a

burn survivor himself, who founded The Phoenix Society, one of the first burn support organisations in America.

Heather says meeting them and joining the support group has changed her life profoundly.

"Alan said to me, 'One day you'll come to realise you wouldn't want to be any other way and you'll be happy this happened to you.'

"I didn't think so then, but I am certainly quite happy with the way I am and who I am, and a lot of that happened after talking to him and my time with the group."

To find out more or access support, visit burns.org.nz.