International Womens Day Speech 2017

Be Bold For Change - Jacquie Brown

Hi everyone, I am Jacquie Brown and I’m thrilled to be talking to you today…….. although, this is several hours earlier than I’m used to being awake, let alone capable of speech.

When I was approached to speak today my first reaction was “Why me? What words have I got to share with an audience? The answer was …. ‘You are Bold Jacquie!” So, preparing for this speech has given me the opportunity to reflect on my life, and I am both grateful for this, and honoured to be sharing my thoughts with you today.

If to be BOLD is to be courageous, daring, bright (sometimes gare-ish), conspicuous and confident then these are good descriptions of my life. I have never been afraid to speak up for what I believe and I have never reacted well to being told what to do.

As you already know I have Multiple Sclerosis and just getting through each day and doing all the small things like showering and dressing that I used to take for granted, now take up much of most of my time and certainly my energy. When thinking about today it became clear that MS dominates my life and the self motivation and independence I once enjoyed are now more difficult to achieve.

The Jacquie Brown story began in a small country town in the Mallee called Rainbow (no wonder I’m colourful). A happy carefree childhood surrounded by loving family and friends. Always the one to test the boundaries and question authority I was the 15 year old who when preparing to make my debut at the annual Rainbow Debutante Ball – the highlight of the year in a country town, I designed and my sister made my dress. When the organiser heard that I would be wearing a white gown with a ‘knee high split” I was told to “sew it up or you’re OUT”. Never one to be bullied I chose to drop out of the event rather than be told what to wear. Defiantly, I attended the ball as a guest – and wore the dress anyway!!! My poor dad had the onerous job of driving the school bus and often over dinner he would look at me and say in an exasperated voice “Jacquie, why you? Why do you have to be worst behaved kid on the bus, sitting at the back singing dirty ditties.”

Not long after the debutant ball incident I decided that there were very limited career (and fun) opportunities in Rainbow and I certainly did not want to end up as a farmer’s wife, so at 16 a couple of my girlfriends and I boldly moved to Melbourne. We set up a flat in Windsor and got jobs. As we only earned enough to pay our rent we had to go home on the train to Rainbow each weekend so Mum could load me up with food to last the week. I moved from job to job whenever I got bored, fearlessly turning up to interviews where I had neither the qualifications nor necessary experience. I usually talked my way into the job and then talked someone into teaching me everything I needed to know. This was the early 70’s and I did not realize that a teenage girl from the country, living and working in Melbourne was indeed adventurous and bold. Three teenagers without any parental supervision! …….. as you can imagine, there were many adventures! On one of these adventures I met ‘my Phil’. How we met is a story for another time (needless to say, I’d be horrified if a 17 year old daughter of mine had told me the same story), another bold adventure that has resulted in 42 years of marriage, 2 beautiful children, several addresses, one family business, lots of fun and friends and in recent years some challenges for both of us that we will continue to face together.

So, 42 years married …… YES, I married Phil in Rainbow when I was 19 and following the family tradition, I designed and my sister made my dress. This time my dress didn’t have a knee high split, but it was green! “Oh Jacquie”, exclaimed my father “Why couldn’t it be white like all the other Rainbow girls……..”

The next phase of my life involved buying a house in Essendon, starting our own business and having children. “Mr B Screenprinting ’ began with Phil and his brothers but soon I was working there doing what I do best – collecting the money! When our customers failed to pay by the due date I would politely ring and remind them, and if that failed I would present myself at their reception desk and offer to just wait quietly while they wrote me a cheque. This worked particularly well when I took along my toddler Emily and was heavily pregnant with son Nick.

This experience of chasing payment has set me up for this current phase of my life……. As one of our clients said at the time “If you don’t ask, you don’t get .” I took this mantra to School Council when I was a parent at Aberfeldie Primary School where I presented myself at every meeting and asked for a new path for the mums to walk around the oval – I persisted until the building work was completed . Anything to shut me up! During these years I involved myself in my family, my community and our business – they were busy years. As a new Mum I joined Nursing Mothers and became a Counsellor to give support to others. This lead on to Parents Committees at Kinder and school and the inevitable fundraising that these roles require. While my motivation was to enhance my children’s experiences what actually happened was that I made a very large network of fantastic friends. These loyal friendships have endured the years and have become even more important to me in this current phase of my life.

About 12 years ago I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis…… not the 50th birthday present I was expecting! With MS your immune system attacks your central nervous system causing symptoms which can affect mobility, eyesight, fatigue and pain amongst other things, and I am working my way through most of these conditions. The Jacquie Brown who was known for her individual fashion style, usually involving vivid colours and ridiculously high heeled boots and shoes in every colour, now makes a fashion statement in brown orthopaedic sandals and socks. I have progressed from a walking stick to a walker to a now a scooter or wheelchair. I must add that when I used a walking stick it was always one that matched my outfit, I even had one which sparkled.

Over this time my world had narrowed and I rely on Phil, my friends and my trusty scooter to get around and my mobile phone, Ipad and Facebook to keep in touch. Shopping was once a passion but now involves a friend trying on an item of clothing, sending me a photo and then buying it if I approve. I’ve also trained the girls at Motto in Keilor Rd to bring appropriate items out the front door to me while I remain seated on the scooter in the street and the girls at Mid-Summer Nails let me drive into the shop and do my nails without getting off my “wheels”.

When diagnosed with MS I undertook to try where possible to make a difference…… this is where my boldness has been an asset. There is quite a bit of research into the causes, treatments and hopefully one day a cure for MS. This presented a challenge for me, something I could do to bring about change. Consequently I have participated in many studies and have been poked, prodded, injected and pummelled all in the name of science. One fabulous result that has come from these trials is that the three times a week injection I used to give myself has been replaced by a once a year infusion. I also began to do some fundraising for MS research. This began quite humbly with a wine tasting at home and an afternoon tea hosted by a dear friend. Then Mamma Linas , a favourite coffee haunt of mine for many years , stepped in. When Sam Agostino, one of the owners heard about these fundraisers (probably because I hit on him for a donation) he immediately said “We can do that, we can hold a fundraiser here”. This put a spark under me, I was inspired by Sam’s enthusiasm and touched that he would do this for me. Sam’s family has been touched by MS and he and his partners Jim & Jake were all keen to make their contribution to my fundraising efforts. This began a tide of generosity, friendship and achievement. Local businesses donated raffle prizes and gifts, my large group of friends added their time and expertise and we put together 5 annual fundraising events at Mamma Linas. All highly successful and lots of fun. And Yes, I boldly rang, cajoled and harassed, even turning up and waiting patiently until people gave me their donations. Thanks to those debt collecting skills and experience no one gets away from Jacquie Brown with their wallet intact.

What Sam and Mamma Lina’s did was more than offer a venue, they closed their premises to the general public and donated their staff and all the food. Unlike many charities we were in the enviable position of saying to our guests that “every cent you give will go to MS – we have no overheads”. So far we have raised over $65,000 and I have confidence in saying that this will contribute to changing lives in the future. The generosity of my community touches me and has given me the energy and incentive to move forward even as my health declines. I was pleased to be able to nominate Sam for a Spirit of Moonee Valley Community Award in 2013 and he was honoured to accept a Meritorious Award.

Much of the boldness I displayed as a younger, fitter person still exists. A current project is disabled toilets. Why do businesses think it’s OK to use their disabled toilets as extra storage space? Or, why do they build them with doors so heavy that it takes two people to open them. In many places there is no accessible toilet I can use and this is unacceptable. I recently attended a local shopping centre with a movie complex. The only way for me to access one from the other was to drive my scooter across the car park and down the vehicle ramp – not appropriate and dangerous. After emailing the shopping centre management with my complaint I was dissatisfied with their response of “we will look into it next time we renovate.” They will hear more from me. I have suggested to MV council that a disabled parking space is needed in a section of Keilor Rd which consists of over 20 customer focussed businesses – restaurants, hairdressers, Real Estate Agent, Funeral Director, Dentist even a mobility aids retailer and NO designated disabled parking space. This is a work in progress!

None of us know what the future holds. A diagnosis of MS changed my life and nothing prepared me for the life I’m leading now. I never anticipated that when my adult children Emily, Nick and his partner Laura came over for dinner that they would have to cook for me, nor did I think that Phil would have to do all the housework and shopping.. I certainly never thought that Phil, my lifelong partner and now carer would be diagnosed with Parkinsons Disease, another challenge that with the support of our wonderful children and friends, we will face together.

Being Bold includes being courageous in the face of change and brave in the face of difficulty. I still like to think of myself as being bold ……only nowadays it takes a little help from my friends.

Thank you …..