

# Deb

I was born in Daylesford in Victoria. We came to Perth when I was 13. I am the oldest of three. My mum died suddenly when I was 15. Dad basically had a nervous breakdown after that, then remarried within 12 months to a lady with three children. Because I was doing my Leaving Certificate I stayed in Perth. Dad took my brothers and moved to Melbourne with the new family.

My dad didn't speak to me for 20 years because not long after my mum died I fell in love with my best friend and one day my dad asked me to tell him the truth about our relationship. I told him, and he couldn't cope. He had a lot of strange views about gay people. He used to say things like 'Maybe if I had hugged you more as a child'. But we've since reconciled and it's basically music that's brought us back together; when we were younger we had a family band, then when I joined choir I'd fly dad over for concerts. Largely dad's been able to overcome his prejudices although he does still say weird things sometimes.

In high school two girls being together was actually quite trendy. We did ballroom dancing as an elective and partnered with gay guys. We used to go to Connections, a trendy place. In our teenage world we were normal, having fun. It was only when parents got involved that we were told we weren't supposed to have girlfriends. So that's where you started to hide it. Being gay was never talked about. Even when I first thought that I was gay I looked for stories and films and there was hardly anything. What there was, was all about guys. So I was just me. I didn't know that there were gay people or trans people. It was only in my 20s when I went to Melbourne that I realised there were others out there. Then it became the real world vs the world that you went out to for five or six hours a night. You'd step into this world, feel comfortable, hang off your girlfriend and then the minute you walked out the door you dropped hands and walked separately and that part was over until the next weekend.

Dad told both sets of grandparents about my sexuality. His parents were non-judgemental. But my mother's parents stopped me in the street saying 'You remember how you said you would never do anything to disgrace your mother's memory? I just want you to think about that.' Then I confused everyone a few years later because I got married (in the same church as mum and dad, in mum's dress) so the problem went away. I had come back to Perth from Melbourne and met someone through my part time job. We genuinely loved each other. The other thing too was that he was one of the first people to be diagnosed with AIDS. He wasn't expected to live a long time. He was bisexual and he knew that I was gay. Also, I wanted to have a baby and thank goodness I didn't. I remember sitting at Royal Perth Hospital with the head gurus on AIDS, telling them I wanted to have a baby and them saying 'Well there's no reason why you can't.' They didn't know at that time it would have been a death sentence. Research and treatment evolved slowly.

I tried to be a good wife. I didn't want to be gay, I wanted to be normal. I tried to be sexually attractive for him and sexually attracted to him but after a while I just couldn't turn off who I was. So there reached a point in my early 30s where I thought 'I can't do this anymore. If he touches me one more time I'm going to scream.' I remember telling him one day 'I'm terribly sorry but we can't do this anymore'. It was really sad. We remained very good friends until his death on Anzac Day this year. He was the only man I loved and I will treasure the memories of our time together. I'm lucky that he and his parents understood everything from the beginning. I'm pleased I had the experience. As a young girl I wanted to get married and have the white dress and for those few years it was real.

Next I had two relationships with women closeted from their families. We'd move in together but have to pretend we weren't a couple in our own home. Finally, I bought my own place. That's when I came to choir. That's also when I met my current partner. Luckily for me we're very honest, living our life how it should be.

I'm a class teacher. Early in my career I had to hide my sexuality; it wasn't acceptable until the law changed. Being married was really cool because I had the cover of being a 'Mrs'. As far as being out, I've been lucky in my life because people have known me as a person first and decided whether they like me. The 'gay' thing has been the second part to come out. I haven't lost many friends or associates because of it. My current school has been very supportive. I don't advertise it but if people ask, I tell them. My colleagues and boss know that I have a female partner and our family is accepted. As far as being out to parents and students, they probably know but no one says anything. My favourite thing is when kids say things about gay people. I say 'You meet gay people every day, they're your doctors, your lawyers, you'll be surprised who is'.

Joining choir was a hard decision. I needed to say 'I'm gay'. Initially I'd stand off the edge of photos and roll the sleeves on my choir top to obscure the choir name. I wore a mask in my first Pride march so I couldn't be recognised. But now I am proud and don't care who sees. Society has changed too – we're a lot freer to be who we are now, without fear of reprisal. Choir has changed my life. Awesome opportunities and also personal growth, being more content with who I am and how I can live my life for however long it goes on.