

So what if I have albinism, I just get on with it!



Julie Derrett – Broadcaster, teacher, daughter, sister, wife, mother and most recently a woman of international mystery.

When I was born in Christchurch New Zealand in 1960 my parents were not told that I had albinism. It was noted on my hospital record, but when my mother later asked why she hadn't been told that I had albinism, the reply was that they didn't want to interfere with the mother child bonding process. My mother had never been more insulted. She lived for her children, I was her fourth daughter in quick succession and I was as wanted as my sisters. My parents hadn't twigged to the albinism, because my older sister had looked exactly as I did as a baby. She grew up to be a Swedish blonde. Their alarm bells went off when my eyes didn't focus as the other children's had. They took me to an optometrist, who inexpertly declared me to be blind. They knew that was rubbish. They saw a paediatrician who immediately set the record straight and diagnosed albinism with vision loss.

Being the fourth child was a blessing, a busy household with lots of others to play with just meant that I got on with life. My eyesight was poor, but I didn't know any boundaries and just went to have a close up look. My early years were sweet and filled with laughter, play, routine and love. Perfect.

School did prove a little more difficult. The family had moved to Auckland and I attended preschool, which was lovely and I went to the school my sisters attended, a Catholic parish school. I had a caring Indian teacher who wore a sari, I thought that was so exotic. Half way through the year, she quietly suggested to my mother that the very strict nuns may not cope with my needs and that there might be somewhere better for me to go to school. Mum, a teacher herself, didn't hesitate. I was enrolled at a demonstration school attached to a teacher's college. I thrived. There were ups and downs, but this modern setting meant that I could move around as I needed to to see things up close and even though I encountered a few cranky teachers, I made steady progress, not outstanding but good enough. The thing that held me back was access to large print. It didn't exist and I didn't even have a magnifying glass. Needless to say my reading was falling behind my peers. However, in maths, music, gross motor, drama and friendships I excelled. My sisters were soon to follow me to the "dem school".



When I was eight, in 1968, my family moved to Sydney, where I was enrolled in the local primary school where I encountered straight lines of desks, everything on the blackboard and absolutely no moving around. I floundered. Towards the end of year 4 my parents found out about state run special schools for children with low vision – Partially Sighted Units as they were called. I was enrolled and taxied along with other children to the school. I travelled from French's Forest to Asquith. I know that route like the back of my hand. The school was outstanding. Two composite classrooms: K.1,2 and a 3,4,5,6 classroom. Going to this school saved my education. We had the same curriculum but all the materials were accessible. We were given the freedom to slide our desks around so we could see whatever we needed to. In this setting I didn't have to struggle. Sport was modified to make it accessible and there was an outstanding music

program delivered by a specialist teacher. I learnt descant, treble and bass recorders, sang solos in the little choir and performed in the school musical as Oliver in Oliver. Gender didn't seem to count. There were lots of excursions and many practical lessons. They did a great job with this bunch of partially sighted kids. Mr Foster was my teacher. He really went the extra mile looking after and teaching kids in 4 different years all at once. I owe him a lot.

I was fortunate that the department of education decided to open a new partially sighted unit in a high school near my home, Beacon Hill High School. I was in the foundation year and there were 5 of us with one teacher. We did Maths, English, Science, Music and Art together. We did PE and Home Economics with the GL (general learning) class. In other words the children with learning difficulties. All went well until year 9 when it was announced that we could only nominate to do ordinary level in the Partially Sighted Unit. I wanted to do advanced level study so I left the unit and went into the mainstream classes for all of my subjects. It was sink or swim. The problem was always access to study materials. It was still a chalk and talk style of teaching. I struggled academically because of lack of access to materials but still managed to be in the A and B classes for all subjects. I made friends and mostly enjoyed my teenage years at high school. I especially enjoyed being in the school musicals; thank you My Bell and Mr Fryer for all the work you did on these productions.

Occasionally I was bullied by some idiot, that would wreck my day. I had the usual teenage angst about how I looked; silly me, I was gorgeous. I think the experiences that kept me sane and upright were those outside of school. I was attending a Youth Drama Club and taking every opportunity to perform. I was learning piano and flute and sitting and doing well in AMEB exams. I was a good runner and a passable recreational ice skater. My drama, flute and piano teachers liked me and I adored them. They made me feel worthwhile and not without talent. Those one to one lessons were the highlights of my week. I only wish that I had worked a bit harder and tested how good I could have become. As it was I was just good enough. I was never going to join the Sydney Symphony or take Broadway by storm, but these artistic pursuits kept me busy and happy and they gave me an identity. I think all teenagers need this, something they are half good at.

I really didn't understand how to study for my final exams and after doing well in my trial exams I rested and bombed in the actual exams and didn't get the mark I wanted. My dad helped me apply directly to the University of New England in the rural cathedral town of Armidale which admitted me under a disadvantaged student scheme. I struggled for the first couple of years, I still didn't know how to study. When I figured it out and started being proactive about getting what I needed to study and making time for study I aced it. I suppose I grew up and realized that I needed to take charge of my learning. Better late than never. I eventually got a BA with a major in politics.



While living in Armidale I started volunteering at a community radio station and decided that I wanted to try and build a career in radio. I learnt all that I could from anyone who would teach me. I got a stringer's job with the local ABC in Tamworth. I supplied them with three stories a week from Armidale. I applied for and got the broadcast manager's job at the community radio I had been volunteering at. Then I was offered a job with the ABC presenting mornings and afternoon programs for rural radio based in Tamworth. I leapt at this

opportunity. I was good at this stuff, my drama training, my knowledge of music and a very broad education from a BA and my interest in politics was paying off. I loved working in radio. My eyesight did pose a few problems. I am a dreadful news reader, but I have the gift of the gab and loved interviewing people and entertaining my audience. While living in Tamworth I married my partner Garry and we were owner building a house on a rural block outside of Armidale. We never got to live there together. Life moved on.

My next job with the ABC took me to Lismore, where I was the executive producer of the first NSW state wide afternoon program. I was let loose on a new project and I loved every minute of it. Garry joined me in Lismore and we rented out the house we had built in Armidale. Garry had grown up in this part of NSW, but he wasn't able to secure good work and his career was having a cardiac arrest. So we made a pact that we would both start applying for jobs in capital cities and we would move to the city where one of us first got a job. I landed a job in Canberra with the ABC presenting their after afternoon program. Garry got a job in the physics department at ADFA. Canberra it was then.

That was 1990, the year I turned 30. Canberra is still my home. I had many roles with the ABC in Canberra both on and off air, as well as in management and training. We had two fabulous children, one of each,



who are now in their 20's. We sold the Armidale house, we built another. After 27 years with the ABC, it was time for a change and I retrained as a primary school teacher. I have been working in that role for the past 13 years. I now work as a casual teacher to give me time to travel and pursue hobbies: crochet, quilting, gardening and a bit of music, but mostly I just wanted to slow down and smell the roses. I felt like I had been running a marathon for 35 years of study, careers and family; I could afford to take a breather.

I have never driven, but I have always ridden a bicycle. This kept me fit. I now ride an e bike as a concession to my age and my knees. My eyesight has deteriorated as everyone's does with age, which I find frustrating. My best corrected vision has always been less than 6/60 which means that I meet the legal definition of blindness so to lose anything off an already base is significant. I need more visual aids these days and happily they exist and are affordable. Thank goodness for computers, and iPads. I only read books if I can get them as e books so that I can read in large print. I have spent all of my life seeking shade, but as a result my skin is in better shape than almost everyone I know. When will we get it, white fellas are not built for the Australian sun.

I haven't talked a lot about how albinism has influenced my life choices and affected the course of my life, but I would like to conclude on this note. Albinism has been a big deal, I look different to my peers, I can't see what they can see with ease and every day I have to think about how I am going to keep out of the sun. So, yes, albinism is big in my life, but my life has been big and I say to myself every day, so what if I have albinism, just get on with it. The alternative would be to stay home and do nothing and I am bloody well not choosing that option. I choose to figure out a way to do what I want to do and occasionally ask for help if I really need it. And finally, a warning, if we meet don't tell me that I can't do something, because I know that I can figure out a way to do just about everything because that is what I have done all my life.

P.S. I love to dance! That is another story.