

Presentation at Commonwealth Bank Local Heroes Event

Good afternoon

My name is Anne Russell and I have been invited here by the Commonwealth Bank to talk about the experiences which led me to be part of the Local Heroes Campaign.

Before I do that, it is my honour to tell you about the wonderful people at the CBA who have arranged this event so that I and others like me who have the privilege to be sponsored by the Bank can talk about our work and our passion.

Firstly there was the panel who listened to my story and agreed to support me and my particular interest.

Then there was Nathan and Ian who both helped me so much throughout the next process of photographs, interviews, presentations and organising Facebook. Stuart and Gabriel from BMF thank you for your ideas and suggestions and lastly thank you Alan Reeve a. k. a. Superman who has the courage to be wearing an unusual business suit today. Thank you all for this opportunity.

Generally, and this is something I'm sure the Commonwealth Bank is very clear about, is that it is people from the grass roots who have the passion, energy and commitment to make things happen. When people work together, they build their capacity and they build power. And power is what the CBA has given me. The power to inform! By telling my story at events such as this, I am given the opportunity to save a life, to make a life more comfortable or to support a life which has become insupportable.

I can do this by telling the story about how I inadvertently caused my two boys to suffer brain injuries and other organ damage by drinking alcohol when I was pregnant with them.

I am a recovering alcoholic but please don't think that my story is only true for alcoholic women. The majority of women in my situation are social drinkers.

I had my last drink on the 19th May 1998. Unfortunately my children were born over 13 years earlier. I had graduated by that time from light social drinking to a heavier brand of social drinking (if there is such a thing) but in 1984 when I was pregnant with Seth, I don't think I was alcoholic. My drinking had certainly increased; I enjoyed it; but I wasn't yet drinking alone; drinking in the mornings or feeling guilty the day after – all of which I associate in my mind with my particular brand of alcoholism. Others may disagree and say that I was alcoholic from my first drink, but I have no family history to my knowledge, and I could certainly take it or leave it for a long time while I was travelling around the world in my late teenage years.

But in the 80s I drank no more and no less than other people my age pregnant or not. I was just a young person having, what is perceived by people of that age, to be 'fun'.

But however much I consumed while I was pregnant, it was sufficient to cause irreparable, incurable disabilities in my boys.

When I first found out that I had physically harmed my children I was heartbroken. I even remember the moment it happened. It wasn't when I first saw the words..... although that was a bad time..... it wasn't when my son first tried to kill himself that was a bad time as you can imagine.

It was when we had Seth's 18th birthday. The only photo I have is one of him blowing the candles out on his cake. There were no other photos because no one came to his party. I still can bear to look at that photo.

Before I understood the heartrending consequences of alcohol and pregnancy, I thought that I had made it through my many years as an alcoholic without actually hurting anyone.

In 1998 when I told my boys I was alcoholic, they said they didn't realise that was the case. They knew I used to drink while I cooked dinner but they didn't see that as alcoholism. My husband had always been ambivalent about my drinking but as I continued to look after the children, cook the meals, keep the house clean and go to work, he remained generally okay about it.

Until I discovered that FASD existed, I really thought I was the only alcoholic in the universe who had used alcohol for 30 years and hadn't hurt anyone.

My son Seth is 26 years old now. He has a wife and two children aged 2 years and 6 months. He says he feels better in his head than he ever did when he was a teenager but his outward behaviour mocks his words.

He has two beautiful children and a wife who has so much patience I can't believe she is real. And until recently he was clean if not sober and had been for 6 months. Then he discovered Kronicthis legal cannabis-like concoction which can be purchased from herb shops. It is not yet illegal in Queensland but I have my fingers crossed.

Now he has started selling their things to buy it.....again. At \$50 per day it's not easy for them. So I have been buying it. Yes that's right! I have been buying his drugs. Do you want me to tell you why?

It's because when he doesn't get it he makes life difficult for those around him. He can't help himself he not only has a brain injury but anxiety, depression and schizophrenia and, without medication, paranoia. Also, while he may be chronologically 26, emotionally he is around half that age. So when he wants something and doesn't get it he nags, mopes, won't do anything to help Hayley with the children, and finally he will sell some of their things.

The period between when he starts to want this drug and selling their TV or GPS or whatever to Cash Converters may be one day or two, but during this time Hayley and the children would have a day or two of misery and I just can't let that happen to them. Tough love doesn't work. Natural Justice doesn't work. Giving him a 'talking to' doesn't work. Letting him sell their things doesn't work because it's not just he who will be inconvenienced or hurt it is my daughter in law and my grandchildren and I can't let that happen.

Is he manipulative? Yes! Does he know what he is doing to us all? I don't think so. Is he a bad person? Far from it! But I can see in his eyes that he is frightened of who he becomes at those times.

Without his addiction, he is a kind, loving man with an affection for animals and a way with his children that is beautiful to watch. But with both an addiction and a brain injury he behaves in ways that are often difficult to accept.

I know that he feels dreadful about what he is doing to us AFTER he has got what he wants. There is a clinical term for his behaviour. It's called perseveration and it means that his first choice is his only choice.

Once the thought is in his mind, he cannot get it out. Distraction works to some extent but eventually he will come back to what is in his head.

When I was young I remember my friends and I in a group telling each other what we wanted to be when we grew up. There was the usual, 'nurse', 'doctor', 'hairdresser', 'secretary'but when it came to my turn none of those things seemed important enough.....so I said that I wanted to save someone's life.

Im getting my wish.

I believe that by presenting on the dangers of alcohol and pregnancy, I am saving peoples' lives and fulfilling that little girl's dream of who and what she wanted to become. I am also ensuring that my boys have not suffered for nothing.....that their experience will be sufficient to warn others of the dangers of alcohol and pregnancy.

All you need to do is to warn your friends and family and you will also have saved a life. Perhaps not from death although FASD can be terminal, but certainly from a very very difficult life.....

My oldest son Mick at the age of six months, was found to be 'possibly retarded' according to his paediatrician. At 12 months he had caught up sufficiently in his milestones to be considered within 'normal' developmental limits.

This is a factor that is often overlooked - the subsequent birth of affected children. If Mick's paediatrician had inquired about my alcohol intake at that time, Seth would not now have Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. We would have two healthy children into whose future was woven the thread of peace and contentment not fear and apprehension, and I would never again have to look into my son's terrified eyes while he tries to hide behind a make-believe smile.

Anne Russell

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