

## WEST WEEKEND

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## From the editor

*I get to meet some pretty  
inspiring people in my job but  
there are few I've met whose*

*story is so overwhelming that I find it  
difficult to convey in words. For there is  
absolutely no way I could do Sharon  
Faye's incredible life justice in the  
space of one article — it would take a  
book. Perhaps, one day, she might write  
one; there doesn't seem to be much this  
psychologist, grandmother, marathon  
runner, and business maestro can't do  
once she puts her mind to it. What  
makes her achievements all the more  
extraordinary, however, is her terrible  
history. She was abandoned, abused,  
beaten and deemed retarded. And  
that's just for starters. How she pulled  
herself out of the quagmire to pursue a  
different path is a testament to the  
emotional strength she has worked so  
hard to build — and one that she is  
determined to teach others.*



'I had no memory,  
I had no identity, I  
had no education, I  
had no money, no  
family, nothing.'

WEST  
WEEKEND

November 26, 2016

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*I knew what not to do —  
I just did everything  
opposite to my mother.'*



# Inside OUT

**N**o one paid any attention to the little girl in the corner of the school playground rocking back and forth, sobbing.

"I remember not one teacher came near me," Sharon Faye recalls 50 years later. "No one ever came up and asked me 'what's wrong, little girl'. Nothing."

If they had, perhaps Sharon's story would be different. Perhaps her childhood memories would not be so full of heartbreak. Sexually abused at nine, and many times thereafter. Branded "retarded" in Year Eight. Feeling constant hunger. Endless beatings at the hands of someone who is supposed to love you the most. Four suicide attempts. Sleeping in doorways as a teenager, huddling up to strangers for warmth.

But Sharon's story is also one of remarkable emotional strength, of one woman's battle to overcome her shocking past to raise four children in a loving environment. A story of a mature-aged uni student who would go on to win a distinction for her masters and start a business as a psychologist helping to dig others out of deep, dark places and build better lives.

People such as Yelo Cafe owner Michael Pond, who says Sharon saved not only his business and his marriage, but helped him deal with the subsequent loss of his wife to cancer. Or plumber Phil Roggio, who was so impressed with her work that he went to university to study psychology so he could follow in her footsteps. Or Dr Sue Cruthers, who battled an eating disorder for 40 years until Sharon's intervention saved her life and prompted her involvement with the Sharon Faye Foundation, setting up a support group for people with anorexia.

The accomplished 61-year-old sitting opposite me in the light-filled boardroom of her Clear Perceptions practice in Subiaco gives no hint of her past. She is tiny and immaculately turned out; her physique puts women 40 years younger to shame; she says she feels about 25 after taking up running at 50 (she tackles her sixth marathon in Honolulu in two weeks). Sharon's usually pounding the streets before the rest of us are up, though even this routine occasionally evokes unwanted memories.

The smell rising from backstreets might trigger memories of sleeping rough, or walking home to one-bedroom squalor in a boarding house in Bennett Street, aged 10. "I had no shoes, no warm clothes and I remember walking over disabled people, old people, laying in their own faeces and smelling the vomit and the urine as I tried to get into the boarding house."

Her mother Shirley was an alcoholic who dragged Sharon and her younger sister Carmen from one cockroach-filled doss house to the next, back and forth from the Eastern States, invariably because the law, child welfare or landlords were chasing her. Her father Frank left when Sharon was three. "I would say to my mother 'what does my daddy look like' and she would say 'just look in the mirror!'" Perhaps partly because of her resemblance to him, Sharon copped most of her mother's beatings. She would dream of her father, who she later discovered was

Sharon Faye should be dead. Instead the psychologist is helping business owners come to grips with their emotions and build a better life.

WORDS **JULIE HOSKING**  
PICTURE **IAIN GILLESPIE**

also an alcoholic and compulsive gambler, coming to rescue her. He never did.

Shirley was particularly violent every June, which Sharon later learned was the month a brother she hadn't known existed was born; her mother had abandoned him as a baby in Melbourne. It also happened to be Sharon's birthday. "I never had a birthday party, we never had books, I was virtually illiterate at 14."

Having been classified as retarded, Sharon was put in a class with Down syndrome children where teachers spoke "veerry sloowwly" – all of which would horrify parents and educators today. She finally ran away, spending two years on the streets, drinking herself into oblivion, foraging through bins at the back of restaurants for food. "It was hard on the street but I did feel safer – at least on the street there were some rules," she says. "But I remember Perth as having freezing winters because I was outside all the time. You'd find a body, it didn't matter who, to crouch in a corner with to get warm and just pass out."

Somehow Sharon still imagined a better future. She has a distinct memory of waking up in a gutter, the sun in her eyes, and seeing the silhouette of a passing businessman. "I was at my lowest point. I had no memory, I had no identity, I had no education, I had no money, no family, nothing," she recalls. "I had this sense of success and of failure and in that moment of contrast, that was a turning point. I wondered what it would be like to be that success."

It would take many, many more years of struggle and self-doubt, however, before she would discover it for herself. Years in which she returned home to a still-drunk mother, going back and forth from Perth to Brisbane before finally finding some stability with a job filing tax returns when she was 20. "That was the safest I'd ever remembered feeling."

Sharon met a "really kind young man" about this time and the newlyweds had one child, Peta, before moving to Perth in 1977 and having three more, Joel, Ryan and Bianca. "I didn't know what to do but I knew what not to do – I just did everything opposite to my mother."

The happy mother lived in a kind of utopian bubble for 15 years, devoting herself to her children, the self-

contained gang spending hours baking or following ant trails through the grass. Then on the day Bianca started Year One and all four children walked out the door, Sharon collapsed in a heap on the floor. "I still get emotional about it now because those 15 years were the happiest time of my life," she says, tears welling up. "I don't know how I knew what to do ... all I knew were that these beautiful little human beings were with me."

She had been having therapy off and on for years but this meltdown led her to a psychologist at Osborne Park Hospital. Sharon was angry when the psychologist told her she was highly intelligent, thinking it was some kind of cruel joke, but "this wonderful woman" spent six months working with her, just to get her to the point she could dial the number of Carine TAFE to sign up for mature-age matriculation. "I was paralysed with fear at the thought of an education – coming from 'retarded' you can't even imagine the paradigm shift."

Although her children were all doing very well at school (three would go on to university, two are now doctors), Sharon did not recognise any of that as a reflection of her influence as a mother. She still felt ignorant, stupid even, and failed the year. "I spent the whole year crying. I carried this little pocket dictionary around with me everywhere until I realised that wouldn't work because I didn't know the word to look it up!"

Knowing she couldn't go through that again, she sat the mature-age exam for university. Unable to comprehend the questions, she ended up just writing something of her story, and couldn't believe it when "the big yellow envelope arrived" to say she had been accepted into Edith Cowan University, in its inaugural year.

By then her marriage had broken down and the new student had to juggle the demands of four children with university and a night course to help her with the statistics required for psychology. With a steely determination not to be the dropout she thought everyone expected, Sharon was the top of her class by the third year, going on to do honours and then masters in organisational psychology at Curtin University in 1995.

After five years of working as a researcher and lecturer at Curtin, Sharon decided she had to help others. She applied for 70 jobs – a demoralising time when she kept thinking she had chosen the wrong speciality – before finally landing a position in workers compensation. The first stress-related claims were being lodged but she found while she connected with the people, the system was suspicious of those who needed her help. It wasn't until she found work with a NSW-based company that did workshops with small and medium businesses that emotions and feelings were finally part of the therapy equation. When WA clients kept telling her they preferred one-on-one meetings, Sharon started her own practice in 2000 and began working directly with business owners (finding the time to do an MBA along the way).

"There might be high staff turnover, there might be all kinds of issues going on. The symptom is the stress of running the place or the effect it's having on the business"

## feature

« owner's marriage and relationships – I'd always want to get to the core of where that behaviour is coming from,” she explains. “I'd go out to do the assessment and I would always see the problem was here,” she says, pointing to the heart, “and not out there. You can always trace it back to the ‘I’, to the business owner, to those unconscious drivers.”

Most of the businesses she works with are long-time clients and, as she says, “it's my way, or the highway”. Her clients aren't complaining.

Over a coffee at a pumping Yelo, Michael Pond thinks back to when he and wife Alex would look at the forecast hoping it would rain so the Trigg cafe they had owned for two years wouldn't be so busy. “We were working ridiculous hours, we had a six-month-old baby, we hated it. Yelo was super busy but not making any money; we had no back-of-house systems – the only thing we were good at was getting people in the door.”

When a customer suggested he talk to Sharon, Michael thought he had nothing to lose. “She's taught me how to build emotional strength, that's the essence of it,” he says. “But she's taught me how to run a business, how to be an effective manager, how to be in the world really. I was angry, I was scared of everything.”

It wasn't smooth sailing. “I tested her, I know I did,” he says with a laugh. “I was very cynical. But I would see the results in my business, and in my relationships, and in myself.” And in his marriage. “I was at burnout, Alex was completely overwhelmed. There's no way we would have been able to have a second child, which we did.”

The work Sharon did with Michael and Alex was then carried through to the staff, with ongoing workshops for supervisors, ensuring the whole business runs on the same values-based principles. “She's very involved because it's gone from one store with 15 staff, to three stores and a commercial kitchen with 70 staff. She sees the potential and brings it out but says she always works at the owner's pace,” he says. “I see her as a partner; we've grown this business because of her, and the support I get in the business and personally.”

And at the most difficult time in his life. Everything was good at Yelo and at home when Alex was diagnosed with cancer and given six weeks to live. “She lasted 18 months and Sharon worked with us really closely, not to just keep Yelo on track but was so supportive with Alex. We completely faced death, nothing was left unsaid.” When Alex died two years ago, Sharon helped Michael through his grief and learn how to be a truly present father for his precious boys. “I know how my kids are, I know their teachers well, we talk about emotions, we yell and cry ... I've worked really hard, I'm not going to sugar-coat it, you're facing yourself ... but I live a value-based life. I'm really connected to my children, to my staff, to my business. The ripple effect of Sharon's work is incredible.”

Phil Roggio has been working with Sharon off and on for 13 years. Things started to fall apart when his partner left Lakeside Plumbing & Gas, the Joondalup business he established in 1989. Phil had to take out a loan to cover debt and became depressed. But he soon realised the problems he had attributed to his partner were still recurring.

“I was stressed to the max, so was my wife, the marriage wasn't doing well and the kids weren't doing well because we weren't emotionally available. We were both on antidepressants. I was about 18kg heavier and on pain medication after two back operations, I was a mess,” he recalls. “My dad died at 51, he dropped dead on his way to



**Pride and joy**  
Sharon the graduate with her four children; as a young woman.

work on a Sunday morning of a heart attack and we all watched him die on the lounge-room floor ... I thought the business is going to go broke and I'm going to be dead in two years, so what does it matter?”

It was at a course to try to improve his business skills that someone gave him Sharon's number. He thought she'd help him sort out an employee who was making life difficult but she told him it wasn't the staff member who needed work. “She worked with me and my wife individually. She taught me how to face really intense emotion and still be productive. Within six months, I was off all medication and had lost 18kg.”

Phil couldn't believe how quickly things started to improve even before Sharon started working within the business, laying everything on the table, educating staff about emotions and communication, and looking at efficiencies and business structure. Phil was so astounded by the results he told Sharon he wanted to follow in her footsteps. “So she said ‘we'll get the business to a point where you can exit, we'll get you into university, you can do a degree in psychology’, so that's exactly what we did. The business went from working from home, with four guys, to buying this place and by the time I exited in 2007 we had 10 people and our own vans, without subcontractors.”

He was in his third year of uni, with multiple assignments due, when his wife left him. “I was in meltdown and my lecturers were telling me I needed to defer,” he says. “And there was literally a fork in the footpath, where one direction was to my supervisor's office to pull out, the other was up to my car to call Sharon.”

He chose the latter. Sharon told Phil to keep at it and she would help him get through everything. He went on to do first-class honours but had to return to the business full-time to get it back on track, with Sharon not only overseeing the restructure but helping Phil and his wife navigate a respectful divorce and ensure their kids were doing well. While he still plans to work with Sharon as a psychologist, Phil is determined to ensure Lakeside is in a good place before he steps out again.

“She believes in me, in all her clients, and that helps me believe in myself no matter what else is going on around me,” he says. “That's her definition of emotional strength: the ability to respond in an open and productive manner in the face of an intense emotional experience. She saved my life – I was headed for an early grave.”

It was through some of her other similarly inspired clients that the Sharon Faye Foundation came about. They

had changed their lives and wanted to know the best way they could help Sharon make a bigger contribution in society, not just with individual businesses.

She wants the foundation to help others in “the five pillars” – health, education, business, justice and the voice of the people, or politics (though she acknowledges with a laugh that's a tough gig). Next year she plans to recruit a primary school so she can work with teachers to build emotional strength in children. “I believe it's the teachers who are going to make a difference. If I measure the teachers and the students in a pre-test, and if I work with the principal and the teachers for 12 months, my hypothesis is there will be a marked improvement in the learning outcomes of those children.”

Amid what seems a crazy workload from the outside – “it's easy”, Sharon says with a shrug – the grandmother of seven looks after Bianca's two boys once a week. Her daughter was killed in a car crash nine years ago.

Sharon didn't see her own mother from the age of 20 but had ad-hoc contact with her sister, who kept asking her to visit. She finally relented after 20 years, meeting her mother at a park in NSW. “When she realised it was her eldest daughter, she started to run towards me,” Sharon says. “She touched my face gently and said my prayers have been answered (she wasn't a religious woman). She held on to my arm for hours and wouldn't let me go. She was in shock. From that day we kept in contact by phone and I'd pop in to visit her on

some of my business trips.” Sharon even gave the eulogy at Shirley's funeral. “I regard this as one of my greatest achievements. There is something unique about telling your abuser's story in the end.”

While Sharon blamed her mother for many years and pretended she was dead, she believes that at heart Shirley was a good person. “I do but she was horrifically abused, losing her mother at three, being passed around from pillar to post ... and that conditioning had her projecting that horrendous dysfunction on to her children. I can look back at the generational abuse passed all the way through on both sides.”

But how did she not perpetuate that cycle? As both Michael and Phil tell me separately “she didn't have a Sharon” to help her. “It's a big question,” she says. “Take two kids, horrendously abused, alcoholic... how come one stays there and this one gets out? It will take the rest of my lifetime – if at all – before I can answer that. If we could answer that, we could really make a big difference. How can we be better human beings?” **WW**

*‘How can we be better human beings?’*

For more on the Sharon Faye Foundation, email [tristan@sharonfayefoundation.com.au](mailto:tristan@sharonfayefoundation.com.au) or call 9381 1596. If you or anyone you know is depressed, call beyondblue on 1300 224 636 or Lifeline on 131 114.