

## Being a burns survivor - from surgery to self-confidence

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A Waikato woman who bears the scars of burns to 60 per cent of her body has endured more than 25 surgeries since childhood.

Donna Gregory Marshall was burned on her arms, back and shoulders after she was doused in boiling water when she pulled on a dangling jug cord as an 11-month-old.

What followed was years of surgery, and a struggle for acceptance. Donna, now 56, told *Checkpoint* her early memories of living with burns scars was terrible, with teasing at school and a teacher telling her to harden up.

"All I remember is bad stuff. Being called names, hideous names... The worst one was 'burnt toast', I hated that.

"There was really nothing I could do about it. My father was a policeman, so it's not like I could hit back or anything because in the back of my mind I was always thinking I'd be the one to get in trouble."



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*After each surgery to treat Donna's burns, there would be pain for at least a couple of months.*

When she was burned as an 11-month-old, Donna must have fallen forward, she said, as the burns from the boiling water are across her back and arms.

The major surgery she remembers happened when she was about 11 years old.

"One of the most hideous things I will never ever forget was being put in the bath after I'd had the skin graft done and they take the donor site off."

The donor site is an area of the body where good skin is taken to be grafted.

"After about 10 days they put me in the bath and told me to take it off with the water. And it was so painful. I must have been in the bath for a couple of hours. And each time they would rip it... I was absolutely beside myself. And mum wasn't there. It was just horrible."

Donna would have had about 25 surgeries on her skin, she said. The skin tightens over time, and further surgeries are needed.

Part of the treatment involves scoring the skin to loosen the tension.

### **'TEENAGE GIRLS ARE THE WORST'**

Growing up, Donna said she was quite withdrawn, but she had a few select friends who she is still close with today.

"I didn't do any sports. I didn't like swimming, I hated swimming, because I had to wear a bathing suit and people could see my scars, and I hated it.

"Then the bullying would start all over again. And teenage girls are the worst... Even back then."

Nowadays, it's more about how she deals with the stigma, she said.

"Sometimes I have really bad days. Only just a couple of weeks ago I drove up to Hamilton. There was a whole group of people around where I parked the car... I wouldn't get out of the car. I drove home.

"I just froze. It was like I had a panic attack. It's only in the last seven years that I've actually worn sleeveless dresses."

Her fear was that she would be bullied or stared at.

"And I know that it's just curiosity, but at that moment, I couldn't cope with it.

"But other times, I just say to people: 'You can ask me what happened'."

### **'JUST BECAUSE I HAVE SCARS DOESN'T MEAN I SHOULD HIDE AWAY'**

For Donna, a major turning point in her life was the break-up of her marriage.

"It took me right back to school, and being bullied.

"About six months later, I suddenly thought, if I can survive that, I'm going to wear sleeveless dresses!"

These days Donna is happily swimming, and has three bathing suits.

She does sometimes still have panic attacks, she said, but one of her goals for 2020 is to go swimming at the pools in Hamilton.

"It makes you grow. And it educates people that just because I have scars, doesn't mean I should hide away.

"I was 49 when I 'came out', when I stripped off. I've got a friend in Tauranga who took a whole lot of photos of me, and I just felt so liberated. It was just so empowering."

After each surgery to treat Donna's burns, there would be pain for at least a couple of months.

"Like all my surgeries that I had, even as an adult, my mum came and looked after me, which was really hard, because she always still feels guilty.

"But I would never blame her, it was an accident. I was just one of those kids that was walking at 11 months."

It was not until adulthood when Donna really felt the impact of having the scars.

"I had to look at my back... And I just couldn't cope with that, for a little while. Because it was so ugly... But you get over it. Well you have to, because you're the only one."

Looking at her back now is not so bad, she said.

"It can't go away, it's not going anywhere.

"Now, if I just wear my togs, if people are looking at me, well, good on them."

At Donna's last surgery, she met someone from the Burn Support Group. She said did not have any issues, until they talked about swimming.

"Two and a half hours later I walked out of her office."

She has now just returned from the World Burns Congress, with Burn Support Group's help.

"It was just the most amazing thing I've ever been to. It was about a thousand other burn survivors.

"It was amazing to be in a place where if someone is not burnt, they're the minority.

"Everywhere you looked there was survivor after survivor, and it was like, I'm really comfortable here. I'm so glad that I went. Changed my life.

"Because they really do make you feel that you're okay. And you're doing okay."

Donna said she is comfortable in her skin these days. Her journey has not been easy, but it is good now.

"And it'll only get better."

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