

My Story

By Dean (Karlyn) Connolly

Every story must start somewhere and this story begins a little bit after my birth mother discovered that she was pregnant and not too long before I was born.

In New Zealand, back then, it was frowned upon big time to be pregnant and unwed. When my birth mother told her mum that she was pregnant, she was sent away from the small country town where she lived for the duration of her pregnancy, and ultimately my birth, because she was not yet married.

I think it was done to prevent embarrassment to the families. However, it also meant I became this big secret until more than twenty years later when I went to see her and met my birth family for the first time. It wasn't anyone's fault. It was just how things were done.

Thinking about it now, it must have been challenging for her to navigate on her own, a moment in our lives made even more complicated when my birth father told me recently that he knew that she was pregnant but did not want to get married or have children. So, my birth mother finds herself in Wellington, pregnant and alone.

This part of my story becomes even more relevant when before my birth she goes into a movie theatre, sits up the back, crying and stressing about everything that she is going through. She reckons she can't remember anything about the movie - who was in it, what it was about, or even the theatre where it was playing. She just remembers the lights coming on at the end of the movie and looking up to see the credits finish and noticing the director's surname, "Karlyn" (pronounced 'car - lin')... then deciding at that moment to name me after him.

Officially, I was born Karlyn James Anderson on the 15th of October 1971 in Wellington, New Zealand, but my name was legally changed to Dean Graham Connolly when I was adopted by a local couple, not too long after I was born.

I asked my adopted parents many years later why they had adopted me and was told it was because they did not think that they could have children of their own. However, two years after being adopted my new parents had a son and life for me then somehow became a lifelong quest to discover who I was, because I kinda felt like I was always being reminded of who I wasn't.

My first memory is of a book about a kid whose parents were not able to look after him. They had died in a car accident, or something like that, and so the kid lived with a new family called The Fairweathers. I had nightmares about that story growing up and all the things that could have happened to my parents. Something I have never shared, until now.

That book was how I was told I was not the same as most children. It was my new parent's way of letting me know that I was different, and I can honestly say it is from within the context of that memory I have always struggled to feel like I belong anywhere and that feeling is at least partially, why I have continued to look for my 'somewhere' all of my life - somewhere that I actually feel like I fit in and call 'home'.

Once upon a time, I blamed who I was on the things that had happened or were happening in and around my life, but the truth is my life has allowed me to do so many meaningful things that I do not think I would have done had my life been any different.

I have shared this story, my story, with so many different people, in so many different ways and it is only because of who I am, that my life has crossed so many different paths.

I can't blame someone else for the life I have lived. My life is the only thing that I truly own and even though it took a minute to forgive myself for hurting those around me growing up, while I was trying to find my place in this world, the path that I ultimately chose was mine and therefore I can not blame anyone else for what happened. It's only because of everything that happened that I have been able to do what I have done, and apparently, I have done quite a lot, so let me tell you about just some of it...

I was not what most would call "a good boy" growing up. Even when I was really young I had the strangest knack of getting myself into the most incredible circumstances through sheer misadventure and bad timing.

I spent as much time as I could away from where I lived, and once, when I was maybe six or seven, I ran away to join the circus (which was where I thought everyone went when they ran away). Unfortunately, I did not know where to find it, so after eating the sandwiches I'd made myself at the top of our driveway, I returned after only a couple of hours and mostly I just remember being disappointed that no one had noticed I'd gone.

However, people did notice when I set the bushes behind the school on fire. I was about eight years old, and was playing with matches. They also noticed the time when a few of us stole a proper full-sized boat from the harbour opposite our school at lunchtime, even though we never knew how to sail it and that was the main reason we got caught. They definitely noticed when I cut a square of brand new carpet out of the middle of the lounge room when I spilled some ink I wasn't meant to be using on it and then cut another square out of the corner of the room, under the curtains, to hide it.

People noticed when I did stuff wrong, what they didn't notice was why I was doing it and my struggle to fit in.

I was up for anything growing up and enjoyed having all kinds of 'naughty' fun away from home, but it felt like whatever went wrong was somehow my fault, and - if I were to be completely honest - it usually was. However, even when it wasn't, I would still get the blame. This led me to leave both home and school very early. That quickly led me into a life few will ever understand.

Strangely all of this did make me and my adopted brother close. Without being able to explain it properly, I think my being who I am made his life easier, as he could quite clearly see what not to do and knew that I would get in trouble regardless of which of us was at fault.

This was especially true when we were very young, but in some weird way, I was okay with all of that. It was my way of being a big brother. It was my way of looking out for him, as I would for any of my real friends later in life. Even though we did drift apart as we got older, we always kept that bond we had as children and I am extremely proud of who he became as a result of the choices he made.

As a teenager, I rebelled more than most normally do. I destroyed everything around me, including the room in which I lived and every relationship I was a part of. I tried suicide three times as a young teenager and I drank myself into a state of unconsciousness more and more regularly. I used a variety of drugs to numb my overactive mind and I got into trouble with the police a lot, but thankfully it was nothing too serious.

I think the first time I was brought home by the police, I was fairly young (Maybe eleven or twelve years old). My best friend delivered newspapers, and he had to collect them from a shed near where we lived. I had somehow got my hands on a bottle of wine, drank it, and was playing up at the newspaper shed when the local priest came over and told me off. As he was leaving, I was being cheeky and, at some point, pulled my pants down and wriggled my ass at him.

Next thing I know I am in the back of a police car being taken home, which my friends thought was pretty funny.

The world I grew up in was not always a happy place. It was full of people trying to make the most of what they had, and trying to forget about what they did not have. A lot of my best memories are from the time we shared, but so are some of my worst. Life is not always kind or fair and when you live in a world that includes the best and the worst of people, you learn a lot about who you are and even though most of my real friends were as outcast as I felt, we did do everything together.

I guess we were all a little bit different but grew up together sharing the not always kind or fair world around us, with each other.

I knew a huge variety of people when I was growing up, people from all walks of life, but I didn't think about what they had or didn't have. We mostly accepted people at face value (you were either a good person or a bad person, someone that was okay to be around and someone who wasn't) and whilst other people around me became lost within the perception that those who did not know us had of who we were, the bond between most of my friends and I just grew stronger and stronger. I had some good friends and some not-so-good friends.

Unlike those people who did not know us, I never really thought of what we were doing as us being naughty. We just did whatever we wanted to do, whenever we wanted to do it, which weirdly made us very well-known within the different circles of people around us.

None of us became properly famous for anything good though. Some of my friends were in accidents that killed them. Others died because of mistakes they or someone else had made.

Death was the final consequence of some of our actions and we accepted that without ever really caring about it. Some of us grew up, some of us moved on, and some died. That was just how it was.

I don't think any of us realised just how lucky we were to have had that freedom we had created - a freedom that most people do not have. Effectively we could do anything we wanted and so that is exactly what we did. Mostly, I guess, we did what we did because we did not know any differently.

In life, as people grow, I think we all reach a crossroad at various times where we can actively choose what comes next, regardless of who we are and for me when one of those times arrived (after my best friend was killed) I choose to find my birth parents with the help of my social worker and discover even more about who I was.

My thinking at the time I guess was that perhaps my birth parents held the key to unlocking unopened doors. I somehow believed that by finding them that I would somehow make my life better. More complete.

It took a long time (almost two years I think from the time that we started looking until I made contact) but eventually, I found and was soon writing letters to my birth mother. We then quickly arranged to meet and I went to visit. I stayed a couple of nights and then very quickly decided to move into the house she had just built with her new husband.

It all happened so fast that we never really got to know each other. I quickly became more lost than I had ever been before because to be there I left the safety of all I had known and found myself in a situation where nothing around me was familiar. Yet through my eyes, it was all meant to be leading me to where I was meant to go.

When I first met my birth mother, I also met my oldest younger sister the same day. Not long after that, I met two younger sisters and I can tell you without any doubt it is near impossible to describe the intense feeling I got when first introduced to every one of them.

It's like a mixture of feeling weird, excited, nervous, and at home, as well as a strange sense of peace, all rolled into one. It is something that comes from the instant acceptance that we have the same blood in our veins, but at the same time, there is almost a sense of guilt and, for lack of a better word, 'remorse' that this was the first time we were meeting and so much has been missed.

The roller coaster of emotions was incredible. I went from seemingly no one caring what I did or did not do, to people fighting with each other to take care of me and that was quite a lot to take in.

I have never been good at directing feelings and thoughts appropriately. The right words always seem to get lost in my head somewhere and I began to get a little lost in my thoughts around this time.

A long time ago (I think I was maybe five or six) I fell out of a tree and landed head-first onto a concrete block. I remember it because it not only hurt, but it was also the first time I remember actually being able to hear my thoughts, as I kept telling myself not to let my adopted parents see that I had hurt myself.

Sometimes it's like I can have a conversation with myself without speaking and other times it's like a thousand thoughts go through my head at the same time and I have to snatch at them while I am talking to someone, because I can usually think a lot faster than I can talk.

Often the words that do come out of my mouth appear confused and it's much, much worse when I am not completely comfortable in a situation. The less confident I am the more noticeable it is. As a result, I think a lot but don't talk so much and I am mostly okay with that, except in situations where I feel like I need to say something and struggle to find the right words. I used to think it made me a little bit crazy, but it has been checked and I can reassure any potential employers reading this, that I am not insane.

I am completely deaf in my right ear and a little bit deaf in my left, which makes my awkward conversations rather one-sided sometimes, and not usually in my favour, further isolating me from those around me, most of the time.

Because of this, depression has played its part in my life. I have never really done anything about it, other than just try to live through it. I accepted being unhappy as just a part of who I am a long time ago, and it is only through my desire to not allow other people to go where I have been, that I found someplace inside me that pushes that darkness inside me to one side so I can give something that resembles light to the world outside of mine.

I always try to be completely honest with people, but some make that a lot harder than it should be, because they hide stuff, and are not completely honest with me. What I feel is what I think, and what I think is what I try and say. I am not smart, but that doesn't mean I am stupid.

I should also mention reading is not one of my strong suits (I kinda get lost amongst all the other words on the page I am trying to read) and my thoughts only flow onto paper consistently sometimes, so what you are reading here has taken me bloody ages to put into any sort of legible context. And I had a lot of help to do so.

I used to worry that everything different about me was seen as a negative thing, regardless of what I did to try and hide it, so to fix that, I have now stopped trying to hide it.

In hindsight, the biggest mistake I made when I met my birth mother was to not admit that I had these 'built-in characteristics'. Instead, I continued doing things the way I had done them previously, and tried to hide them, not fully understanding what I was doing or why I was even doing it.

I then became more than a little lost and would effectively hide in my room, drawing how I wish I felt and slowly I retreated further and further within the images I was creating.

Through my eyes, I had either given up on or walked away from all I knew to be where I thought I was meant to be. I had turned my back on not only my adopted family but also my friends, and everything that had ever been familiar to me. Because of this I unintentionally started to spiral further and further away from who I was, with no way to stop myself.

If someone ever tells you that things cannot get any worse, please punch them in the face for me, because I promise you, they can always get worse. A lot worse.

I was then asked to leave my birth mother's house permanently; I got kicked out and that hurt. It hurt so much that it caused me to become even more lost than ever before because I had no idea what to do.

So I lost the plot a bit, and for a little bit longer than just a while, I stumbled from one misadventure, straight into the next.

It took me about a year to get my head around the fact that the only person who I thought could make everything better, did not, and then it took me a minute longer to realise that it was wrong of me to go into that relationship thinking that is what should have happened.

Sometimes it takes me a minute to figure things out, but I seem to get there eventually.

Life has the strangest way of teaching me stuff and I have learned all sorts of things in uniquely random situations. I would enjoy these lessons more if the process was less dramatic, but then those moments (and what I learn) wouldn't be so meaningful.

A lot of dumb things happened after I left my birth mother's place and then one day I randomly found myself staring at an advertisement in a newspaper for a public speaking course.

I'm not sure why it kept catching my attention or why I picked up the phone and called to enrol, but I knew I needed to do something and that was the meaningful something that I did next.

Once a week, I would catch a bus to the financial district in the city, where I slowly regained my confidence by telling stories about my life publicly for the first time.

In an environment where business leaders would go to learn to be better business leaders, I learned to be a more confident me, as I unloaded years of personal conflict to strangers in suits and won little prizes for telling those strangers who I am. I regained some confidence and it was only then that I decided that I wanted to meet my birth father.

Unsurprisingly, I had learned some stuff, in my own special way, meeting my birth mother and so when I went to meet my birth father, I intentionally didn't want anything from him other than to be able to say that I had met him.

My birth father played rugby for New Zealand and was an All Black in the 1970s, which means he is like super famous and yet he still seemingly accepted me for being me the moment we met.

It was like I didn't have to be anyone else and at the time, after everything I had been through meeting my birth mother, it meant a lot. It meant so much in fact that it gave me the confidence to get on a plane and fly to Australia on a one-way ticket, knowing that whatever would happen there, I would figure it out.

I left New Zealand for two main reasons. The first was that I felt like I had screwed almost everything up around me and I saw it as an option. I had turned my back on my friends and adopted family so I could have a relationship with my birth mother, screwing that up and then I screwed up the relationship with her as well. I felt that I had achieved something special with my birth father, but the probability of screwing it up too - through my eyes - was pretty high, so I felt that it was a good idea to leave and preserve what I had left.

The second reason I left New Zealand and I suppose the main reason that I went to Perth (apart from the fact it was as far as I could afford to go), was my ex-girlfriend.

She had moved there to be with her mother after I had ended our relationship to go live with my birth mother and I missed her.

She was the best thing to ever happen to me; she knew me better than anyone else. I had dragged her into my shitty world, and I knew that a lot of shitty things had happened as a result. I wanted the opportunity to make things right.

Ironically, I had everything stolen within 24 hours of getting off the plane, when someone walked into my hostel room whilst I was asleep, picked up my bag and then walked straight out the front door with everything I had taken to Australia.

They took all my money, clothes and most importantly, my address book, which had the names, addresses and phone numbers of everyone I had ever known in it. That caused me to then lose contact with them all, except thankfully the one person I had gone there to see.

I thought I would surprise her, but it was me who got the surprise. I phoned with the news that I was in Perth to see her and discovered that she had not expected this useless so-and-so to ever show up, or she might have mentioned that she was now engaged and pregnant to someone she had recently met. Someone that she then would live happily ever after with, refusing to even meet with, or see me ever again.

My world instantly crumbled down all around me. I felt like I was truly alone, that I was now completely and utterly broken.

It really should not surprise anyone that I have never been very good at maintaining relationships. I have had the best and worst luck at the same time with girlfriends, meeting some of the most beautiful people I have ever known at the worst possible times in my life and then discovering the very worst in people at the best possible times in my life.

I have been in love twice. Once with someone I did not know how to be with and once with someone I have never been able to be with.

I know what I want and won't settle for less, but I have also had to accept as a result, I may not get to share my story long-term with any one person and I guess I am mostly okay with that.

I was now further from 'home' than ever before. I was in a foreign country. I did not know anybody, or have anything and to top it off I was broke, but instead of panic, I decided that at that moment I had the unique opportunity to truly start fresh, to have a clean slate so to speak and so I began to pick myself up again.

Creating my own path then led to an adventure that took me all over Australia. I went from Perth all around Western Australia, then from Adelaide to Melbourne and Sydney to Brisbane. I lived on the Gold Coast, The Sunshine Coast and even in Byron Bay.

I travelled in and out of so many different people's lives, over such a significant period of my life, where I discovered what people were truly capable of, both good and bad, in such a diverse range of situations, but ultimately I also discovered who I did not want to be.

At times I found myself living on the streets, surrounded by some of the most insane people I have ever met. People who, perhaps understandably, only cared about themselves and it was very lonely. I found myself attached to anyone who cared, anyone who would listen and that was not always a good thing, because that led to some seriously stupid life choices.

Other times I found myself looking at moments from the outside, special moments that I will never forget in other people's lives, moments words simply cannot define and things for which I became eternally grateful, thankful I guess you could say for the balance and those who shared those moments with me.

There are hundreds of stories that I might get to share one day, but for now, it is enough to say that for every new low I reached, I found something positive that allowed me to never give up hope within each separate adventure. I kept finding a random something that allowed me to, at least the very least, continue looking for a happy ending to my own story.

Eventually, I settled in Melbourne. I still moved around a lot looking for my somewhere, but Melbourne was where I was based for almost 10 years. I liked Melbourne a lot.

I arrived there working for an American door-to-door sales team, but got fired when one of my co-workers was stealing our product and selling it on the sly. The boss thought it was me, but I couldn't be bothered telling him it wasn't and just walked away, ready for whatever was next.

That led me to do a security course and work in a couple of Melbourne's largest underground nightclubs, where you would think being surrounded by hundreds of pretty girls all dressed up and having fun would be a great job, but it was work that I did not enjoy because I would rather have joined in the fun than maintained it.

Thankfully, almost straight away, the small company that I was working for was taken over by one of the largest security companies in the world and I began to specialise in major event security.

My job was all I had that was consistent, even when everything else around me wasn't and so when combined with my desire to be more than I was, my ability to relate to all kinds of different people, in almost any situation and the simple fact that I am 'me', I became very good at what I did. As a result, I enjoyed being placed in some of the best positions, in some ridiculously cool scenarios, working with some of the most famous and influential people on the entire planet at that time.

One of my first major event contracts was the Melbourne Cup/Spring Racing Carnival and I had the job of opening the door to arriving limousines for VIP guests, most of whom were national and international celebrities. I was truly in my element, surrounded by TV cameras and lots of glamorous people. I must have done a good job because at the next event, the Australian Open Tennis tournament, amongst other things, I would walk players out to the court and make sure they got safely to and from their vehicles before and after each match.

We then got the contact for the very first Formula 1 Grand Prix in Melbourne. I was in my own personal heaven standing in the pits, surrounded by all the cars and drivers, while people paid thousands of dollars to sit in a grandstand on the other side of the track.

I spent over 5 years going from one major event to another. I did everything from arranging the day-to-day lives of the best golfers in the world at the Presidents Cup golf tournament to ensuring the safety of the world's best motorcycle riders at the Phillip Island MotoGP. I worked at everything from the Commonwealth Games to major concerts, opening ceremonies, and gala dinners.

In between the international major events, I had weekly sports games, where I would often be inside a dressing room with the team, standing on the side of the field of a packed stadium with some of the most famous people in the world, in front of crowds upwards of one hundred thousand people. I liked my job a lot, but my home life was very different.

I never really celebrated 'me' when I was in Australia. When I wasn't working, I was still lost, so I would do what I had always done and go into the city and get wasted. I mean, really wasted. I would often spend over a thousand dollars a night when I went out and even more over a big weekend. I would easily drink myself sober and then drug myself to sleep.

Yet I was somehow lucky enough to have people around me who occasionally made sure I felt important on my birthday, but I had already reached a point where I honestly did not know how old I was because I never cared about myself.

I would get invited to join friends at their family's Christmas, but more often than not I chose to work so that someone there did not have to miss sharing the day with their family.

I liked working Christmas for that reason, but regardless of where I was, they were always the same and along with my birthday, one of my least favourite parts of every year.

The exception was 2004 and I remember it like it was yesterday. I was sitting in my room all by myself after working another Christmas day shift and I was looking at the only card I had received from my boss at that time, which simply said, 'Merry Christmas, Karlyn, I wish you and your family all the best' and at that moment I just started to cry.

It was at that moment I decided to again actively alter my future by writing (and more importantly, sending) a letter to a few people I had preserved over ten years earlier (when I had everything stolen the day I arrived in Australia), and it was all inspired by a few simple things that added up to a much bigger something, that had all happened in my life around that time.

I had been working at Government House for a couple of years. It had taken me a little over a decade to get from pushing a shopping trolley with all of my stuff in it to one of the highest-profile security jobs in Australia, a job that I loved, where I was surrounded by people who genuinely cared about me. I was renting my own 3-bedroom house near the beach, had brand new furniture and was even considering signing up to build a new home, but knew I had reached another crossroads in my life.

I had somehow realised that my life should be about me and that I now had to choose between staying in Australia and living the happily ever after that I had created for myself or going back to New Zealand to start over and see if Aotearoa was still my home.

But, if I am completely honest, there was no choice.

It felt like something was missing, or at the very least I thought there could be and the only option that I had was to do something about it.

Earlier that year, someone in the building next door to where I was living had died in his sleep; this had a huge impact on me because he was not found for over two weeks and I could not stop thinking... 'How can someone die and not be missed for two weeks?' whilst realising that so easily could have been me.

My life always leads me to choices that I get to make, and there is usually a right choice and a wrong choice. By choosing correctly, life will lead me somewhere else, to someplace where I guess that I am meant to be.

Not making the 'right choice' does not automatically mean that bad things will happen, because I have also learned that making good choices can cause bad things to happen; I guess it just means that my life will not change, even if I want it to. Choosing to do something is better than choosing to not do anything and so I kind of knew that I had at the very least 'do something'.

I felt I had no real purpose, and I quickly realised this fact alone was a huge part of what I believed I was missing in my life, but it was also something that I could change, and so that is what I did.

That Christmas, straight after reading the card from my boss I wrote a letter to each side of my family, simply wishing them a merry Christmas and Happy New Year and after I sent it, I received a reply almost immediately. This quickly led to regular contact, phone calls and then half a dozen visits back to New Zealand.

I then met another sister and brother, nieces and nephews, cousins, aunties and uncles, plus long-time friends on all sides of my family, while I separately renewed relationships with my birth mother and birth father.

On one visit, I even ticked a big box when I had my first-ever birthday with my birth father, birth mother and all of my sisters in the same room when I was 32 years old.

The hardest part was probably meeting my birth mother's father, my grandfather, and discovering I was his only grandson, and we would never really get to know each other.

In hindsight, visiting would have been enough, but each time I came back to New Zealand, the bonds I was nurturing were growing stronger and stronger, making it harder and harder to leave, never fully understanding why until many years later.

I think I knew I was discovering even more of my true self in those visits than I perhaps could continue to do if I stayed away, so I quickly reached the point where choosing between my two lives was simple. I quit my job and left Australia almost immediately.

It was hard leaving that part of me behind, especially my friends because I didn't tell anyone. I think some part of me kinda knew that no one in New Zealand would get to see that part of my life and no one in Australia would get to see my life in New Zealand and I did kind of want them to. I left behind a good part of who I was and I didn't really know what to do about that, so I didn't do anything about it.

I think my only regret was leaving behind someone who will never know how much I really cared about her, someone I could not be with because I loved her. I really was grateful for all I had achieved in Australia, but it was time to rediscover the New Zealand I grew up in.

Initially, I spent some time with each part of my family and to make sure I was in a position to pay my own way, I got a job delivering household appliances. I gave up thousands of dollars to come home and deliver 2nd hand washing machines, but I wanted to do what I was doing without having to ask anyone for help to do it. It certainly wasn't easy, but I made it work.

I realised two things very quickly. The first thing was I had made the right choice; New Zealand was and has always been my home and even though I quickly learned each member of my family had their own life already, I could still be a small part of their lives if they wanted me to be and for me that was enough.

The second thing was that I now knew very little about New Zealand; I knew more about Australia and I needed to fix that, so that is what I did next.

A friend of my birth father randomly suggested I should drive backpacker buses around New Zealand and again it was like my life had led me to where I was meant to be.

The more I thought about it, the more I realised that it was exactly what I wanted to do. So I applied, got the job and then fell in love with what I was able to do.

My job consisted of taking large groups of strangers from all over the world and showing them as much of New Zealand as I could, whilst entertaining them, feeding them, educating them and making them feel welcome, in the most scenic parts of this beautiful country. I went well beyond what was expected of me as I quickly figured out that the happier the entire group were, the better the tour was for everyone, including me.

My job allowed me to visit my family scattered around New Zealand and yet still permit me to do my own thing. I could see and learn about all of New Zealand, visit family and have some fun whilst doing it.

I was a little different compared to most of the other drivers, as my main focus was not so much guiding each tour, but rather allowing each group to dictate what they wanted to see and do by offering to do more. My personality allowed me to create a tour where everyone on my bus became an important part of the tour, rather than just being on a tour. As a result, no two tours were ever the same and I took my role seriously, wanting to show everyone as much of Aotearoa as I could. I quickly gained the reputation of being very good at what I did by my passengers and I probably learnt more from the people on my bus, than they learnt from me.

One of my very first passengers was a young lady from Germany who had travelled to New Zealand after the death of her father. He was born in New Zealand, but she had never been here before. It was my responsibility to show her the country in which her late father had come from.

I did my utmost best to do that by stopping more often than I was meant to do and squeezing into each day as much as I possibly could.

I began taking group photos and organising group meals as often as I could so everyone had as many memories within the group as possible. I wanted everyone to share not only the journey that she was on, but also become a part of it, and that is an attitude I have maintained ever since.

I was still a bit naughty, but never as naughty as I could have been and certainly not as naughty as some of my co-workers. I gave myself rules and mostly I stuck to them. As a result, everyone was comfortable, in a safe, relaxed and fun environment, because I made sure of it.

My previous experience allowed me to achieve that and my personality allowed me to achieve even more.

It did take some adjusting. I had spent the last ten years in an incredibly professional role, working hard and then playing even harder separately, so when my job was to play hard, it did take a minute to find a balance that I was comfortable with.

During the first couple of years that I worked there, I got in trouble for quite a few things that happened. Mostly it was more incredible circumstances through sheer misadventure and bad timing kind of stuff, that I was now old enough to disagree, with because it was no worse than what others were doing whilst I was there. That made it seem like I was being singled out and unfairly treated because the truth was I was trying harder than anyone else, rather than being like everyone else.

My life then again took me through a series of events that ultimately led to a situation I am almost certain no one else could have got themselves into and so I left the job I had learnt to love and the first job that I had I can honestly say never felt like work, bitter and angry at how it all played out.

The worst part was not being fired for doing something a few people thought I had done, it was trusting someone who I thought had my back when the truth is they just used me to take another step up the ladder at my expense, which wasn't very cool at all.

Again, I found myself a little lost, wanting to do more than I was doing. That led me back to Wellington and a short stay with my adopted parents, whom over the years I have discovered a new respect for within the knowledge that, as different as we are, I know that they do love and care about me. Like any parent, they want the best for me and if I were ever in trouble, they would be the first people there to help.

I have quite a few unpleasant memories as a child growing up and I blamed myself for all of them because I felt like it was all my fault. It is only as I have grown older that I have learned children make mistakes, but so do adults. Children react in a variety of ways and so do adults. It is nobody's fault children do what children do; it is just that they haven't learned any differently and adults are exactly the same.

One of my biggest problems is that I am still learning who I want to be because I have always felt like I am not who I was meant to be, that I am still not doing what I could be and I definitely am still not where I should be, so I continue to question who I am vs where I want to be in the world around me and that has led to making some very unique choices in my life in search of answers.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that whilst I was in Wellington, I was inspired to ride a bicycle around the entire coast of New Zealand. I had seen a 60-year-old lady on television run 60 kilometres to celebrate her 60th birthday and thought to myself that I should be able to ride a bicycle as far as she had run.

I cannot offer any better reason for me deciding to do it other than I thought at the time it was the next meaningful thing that I needed to do, and my life had brought me to a point where it was something that I thought I could do.

I am not going to sugarcoat this next bit; I had no idea what I was doing.

I have had many challenges in my life, but they were all mostly unintentional. Cycling around New Zealand was planned; it was a challenge that I had set for myself and I think now that by completing that challenge I allowed myself to discover not only a part of me that wanted to help other people in the future without wanting anything in return, but also the part of me that challenged a preconceived perception that the world in which I lived was not a very nice place. I am still not convinced it is a good place, but at least now I am working on it.

I have experienced some truly terrible things growing up and have shared stories with other people of even worse things in their lives. There is a huge percentage of people that I know who have to go through what can only be described as a life less than what they deserve and that is something I am now actively trying to change.

I know I cannot change the world by myself; I know that bad things will continue to happen to good people, but I believe that I can do my part to make the world in which I live a better place and it all started by riding a bicycle, towing a heavy trailer, around the entire coast of New Zealand.

I was so unfit when I started that I could not ride the bike out of Picton the first day, so I pushed it. Every time the road went from dead flat to slightly uphill, I pushed it. I pushed that bloody bike up every hill for over two-thirds of the South Island coast. I had blisters on my feet, sunburn from the summer heat and the sorest arse you can imagine, but I continued, and on the 91st day, I completed my 6237-kilometre adventure even though very little between the first and last days went to plan.

I loved that first bike ride so much that I did it again a few years later.

It was suggested to me that I should do my first bike ride for charity, and because I did not want to collect money, I raised awareness for all of New Zealand's children's charities, which in turn had me register Custom Vision as a business officially in 2010, after I finished my first bike ride because I then wanted to do even more than I already had done.

When I finished my first bike ride in 2010, I quickly found myself back in Hamilton, near my birth father, who had always allowed me to be me. It was somewhere I knew was not the ideal place to set up Custom Vision, but it was somewhere that I knew would allow me to create my own path.

I quickly reached the point where I knew if I was to progress, I had to do even more; I needed to be more professional and attract more attention, which led to me building my 'Photography Cart' and going to the local market to share my story and try to sell a few images that I had created. It was a big step for me and something I am immensely proud of.

I was soon almost ready to start my own business, but I discovered that for every step forward I wanted to take, I would take two steps backwards before actually taking that important next step forward. In business, wanting to do something on my own and actually being able to, were two very different things. However, instead of giving up, I persevered.

I created a few cards and learned to build picture frames. I continuously worked on my photography cart until I was happy with it. I selected a few images that I liked and put them together in the frames that I had made and, finally, I had a few things that I was able to sell.

Every week I would create a bit more and each week I became increasingly proud of what I was doing, I even had an employee at one point and I wanted to keep doing more and more.

I got myself into a position where I was ready to take the next step, but I needed help to do it and because I was still unwilling to ask anybody for help, that somehow led me to cycle the coast of New Zealand for the second time to promote the idea of what I was trying to do. I have never been very good at asking others to help me.

My second bike ride in 2013 was easier; I was fitter and had a new bike seat, flyers, uniform and trailer adjustments, which all contributed to making Cycle 4 Life 2 even better than my original bike ride.

The support I received was amazing, and a part of me wishes that I could do it every year because it made a positive difference in people's lives by doing it.

Honestly, I did not enjoy Cycle 4 Life 2 as much as my first bike ride and I don't think that there will ever be another one, because I was very, very sick by the time I finished.

With that said, my second bike ride did give me plenty of time to think about what I wanted to do. It gave me lots of time to think about my next step and I decided that I needed to better prepare myself to take another step forward on my own.

Unsurprisingly, before I took my next step, I took a step back and did something I loved doing, driving tour buses. I drove around New Zealand again for a while to repay all the money I owed doing my bike ride, got myself a bit healthier and had some fun showing people not only the New Zealand that they had come to see, but the New Zealand that I loved sharing.

Eventually, this led me to Queenstown. I was finally ready to do more with Custom Vision and my photography, ready to show the world what I was capable of doing and prove to myself that I could do what I had originally set out to do on my own, so I moved to Queenstown after I secured a job driving big buses from Queenstown to Milford Sound.

Queenstown is a tourism hot spot. I chose to set myself up there for that reason alone because after spending almost 10 years visiting on tours, I knew there was a market that catered to tourists, where I could set up my photography cart and sell images from all over New Zealand, knowing that the volume of visitors would allow me to grow into a recognised local artist quicker than anywhere else in the country.

I had a plan and I thought it was a pretty good plan, but in case you haven't noticed, very little in my life ever goes to plan.

I arrived in a van that I had converted into a camper van. It was somewhere that I could live out of while I moved around. It wasn't very large, but it was comfortable enough to sleep in and I thought when I arrived in Queenstown that I would live out of that until I sorted out something more permanent.

Because Queenstown was such an expensive place to live, I ended up spending the next few years living in my van outside the local campground on a patch of grass without any electricity.

I tried going to the market on the weekends with my photography cart selling cards and driving buses to Milford Sound during the week, but not long after I arrived, whilst working on my market cart, I fell off the roof when I asked someone to hold a ladder that was not qualified to do the job and snapped my leg at the knee, which was not part of the plan.

Living out of my van with a busted leg caused a whole new set of challenges and I soon found myself again trying to survive instead of making further steps towards where I wanted to be.

I set new goals and tried different things, but realised very quickly that I couldn't do anything that I wanted to do long-term from my van without electricity or rely on the 24-hour gas station where I made most of my cards so decided I needed a bigger space of my own, so I purchased a caravan.

I moved through different jobs in the same company quite quickly, driving people to Milford Sound, up to the ski fields in winter and then the rafting bus into Skippers Canyon for a while until that company sold, and I decided to move on, joining the team at Bungy when they were looking to make their bus trips more of an experience than they had been and it was whilst working at Bungy that I got stuck into my caravan project. Oh, and also decided to walk the 3000 km Te Araroa Trail - the entire length of New Zealand - with no real experience doing either.

The caravan I can kind of explain. What I have done to it, not so much. The walking the length of New Zealand thing might take a minute, so bear with me and I will give it a go.

I never thought I would have my own home. I grew up in and around Wellington, but have lived in a lot of places. If someone asks me, New Zealand is my home, but I don't really call anywhere in New Zealand home and when thinking about this whilst living out of my van, I figured out a perfectly good workaround, so to speak.

My caravan was to become something that I can take with me wherever I go, but it needed to be more than just a caravan because I am me and that is just how it has to be. I needed a unique space to work out of and somewhere to live in.

It had to be both an advertisement for what I can do and something that defines who I am. Somewhere that I am proud to call home, but like so many other things in my life, it is a work in progress and like so many of those other things, I am slowly making progress.

Unfortunately whilst I was in Queenstown, the caravan park where I was upgrading my caravan closed and it needed to be moved before it was finished, which caused more delays.

Thankfully though, those delays have allowed me to finalise parts of the build that were unplanned because, being completely honest, the plan was more of an idea than an actual plan, but I have learnt that having a plan is not something that I usually get to stick to anyway, so why complicate things any further, by starting with an actual plan?

If I make a mistake, I will fix it. If I change my mind, I will change it. I would have liked to have completed it sooner, but like so many other things, I do not always get to do what I would like; sometimes I have to do the things that I need to do first.

Breaking my leg did not stop me, but it did mean that I had to navigate a few other things that I needed to do instead of doing what I wanted to do and those things took me a lot longer than I intended, which I guess brings us to my walk.

Whenever things aren't going so great for me, I have learned to do stuff to make those things better. I was used to making the best of a bad situation, but after my first bike ride, I discovered that by doing something big, I could radically change my perception from within whatever hole my life had me trying to escape from and unfortunately, in my time working at bungy, a job I enjoyed, I again found myself wanting to interrupt the path that I was on.

Things had not gone to plan in Queenstown. I found myself bouncing from one job to the next, looking forward but continuously being pushed back and instead of staying focused on what I wanted to do, I started blaming those around me for their role in my situation and I ultimately let that distract me.

I quit my first job in Queenstown because they wouldn't do anything about a seedy old fella who kept being creepy to young girls, the next job because I got told off for eating a pie in public whilst driving a bus (when we didn't get time for a lunch break) and the next because I got a written warning for politely telling someone off who had overtaken me dangerously, who unfortunately for me, was related to one of the staff in the office.

My work life had begun to spiral towards my personal life, which had been my only consistent happy place forever. I had always been good at my job and usually loved what I did, it was always a distraction, but now I found myself in an unusual situation where my work life was on par with my personal life.

Subconsciously I knew that I needed to act and do something positive to alter my path, like I had learned to always do, but I never would have guessed where that took me next.

One day after work, I walked past some random young English fella sitting outside of the local fish and chip shop, eating his dinner and reading a newspaper, when I saw the photo on the front page of an 80-year-old man who was walking the length of New Zealand, doing New Zealand's Te Araroa Trail.

In that moment, I just knew it was what I had to do next.

It is difficult to explain properly. I certainly was not happy about it. My first reaction was to look up and say out loud to whoever or whatever was listening, "Oh, fuck off," because I generally hate walking, but I also knew I was going to do it.

Somehow it felt almost exactly like seeing that 60-year-old lady on TV again who had inspired me to ride my homemade bicycle around the coast of New Zealand twice, all over again.

The really funny part is riding a bicycle around New Zealand a third time was something I had promised doctors I would never repeat because the last time had almost killed me.

They reckon I got hypothermia towards the end of it and because I had continued, literally passing out and falling off my bike a couple of times near the end and then collapsing after I had finished, that was what had caused me to spend about a month in bed.

My body hated me for quite a while afterwards and I never was going to do that again, but walking... they never said anything about walking and so after my initial shock, with absolutely no idea what I had just signed up to do, I became quite excited about it.

I was working at Bungy at the time and all sorts of dumb things had been distracting me, so it was kind of cool to have something else to focus on, something positive that I thought would lead me back to where I was meant to be and so when I figured out what date I would start, I gave notice that I was going to leave and concentrated on getting myself organised to begin what would soon become my 3000km Walk 4 life.

It's really funny for me to think about all of this now because I have never told any one single person the whole story.

I never prepared myself to walk the length of New Zealand or complete the Te Araroa Trail as most do; instead, all I did was what I needed to do to begin, to get to the start and to commence the walking bit because I knew I could figure out the doing it bit after I started and the completing it bit after I was doing it. In truth, once again, I had no idea what I was about to do and technically should not have done it, but I did it anyway.

Te Araroa is a 3000-kilometre hike the entire length of New Zealand, which is a little bit funny when you take into consideration that New Zealand is less than 1600 kilometres from top to bottom.

The trail itself is approximately 300 individual sections, loosely linking over 100 individual day walks and longer tramps via private and public conservation land, where hikers typically spend 4–6 months carrying everything that they need to survive some of the most diverse scenery in New Zealand.

My first day carrying a backpack and wearing hiking boots was the day I left Cape Reinga and before that, I had never hiked a day in my life.

I received a brief lesson on how to use hiking poles from a friend before I left Queenstown and a very nice lady at Outside Sports helped me source what we thought I might need. Everything else I figured out as I went.

Typically, very little went to plan. I tore the tendon that connects my heel to all of my toes in my left foot the second week (my boots were too small), and because I'm an idiot, I decided to continue anyway and that if necessary, I could limp the length of New Zealand.

A month later, whilst limping down a wet wooden staircase near Auckland, I slipped, snapping both my walking poles as I went up in the air and landed on my lower back, which I only recently discovered fractured my tailbone and ruptured two of the lower discs in my spine, causing me to then actually limp the length of New Zealand.

Unlike my bike rides, where I had become fitter as I continued and the exercise had become easier after an initial training period, walking the length of New Zealand was the opposite. It seemingly became harder and harder as my pain levels increased. Slower and slower as I continued day after day, month after month.

I loved the scenery and most of the people. I loved the idea of doing what I was doing to raise awareness for mental health and my friends at CanTeen, who had been so supportive of my previous two bike rides, but I hated the walking part completely. It was really hard because I was in so much pain and to top it off almost actually killed me... twice.

The hardest part wasn't actually how difficult it was (read - it was not easy); it was because I was so slow I could not complete the whole thing in a single attempt. Winter well and truly arrived before I could complete it and I had to wait for snow to melt before I could finish what I had set out to do.

After 7 months and everything that I had been through to get to that point, I hated not being able to continue because the mountains I had to cross were completely covered in snow and it would have killed me if I had tried.

This then became a negative thought and after trying to do something so positive, to have it turn into something so negative did not sit very well with me at all. I needed to turn that negative thought into a positive thought and it's in moments like these that I usually have my worst ideas, so obviously I had my worst idea ever.

When I did it, in the previous 30 years that Te Araroa had been a thing, maybe 1000 people had done it properly. Most skip-out bits. Very few people that start Te Araroa do every single step from one end to the other (Cape Reinga to Bluff - sobo/southbound or Bluff to Cape Reinga - nobo/northbound) and at the time no one had ever gone from Cape Reinga to Bluff and got to Bluff and then turned around and gone back to Cape Reinga (Cape Reinga to Bluff to Cape Reinga - yoyo), so obviously I decided that was what I needed to do.

Doing something that no one had ever done before could never ever be a negative thing and I honestly believed it would make everything that I had done previously worthwhile, so that is what I decided I was going to do. Even after everything I had already done, I still wanted to do more because the most important thing was now that I knew what to do, I knew that I could do it.

I then spent a couple of months in Queenstown waiting for the snow to melt so I could continue walking, during which time the holiday park where I was building my caravan closed before I had finished it and so that got moved to Te Anau, which would now be where I would go after I completed my walk to finish it.

I then had time to think about what else I would like to do, to finally put all of the pieces of my life together that I had spent the past 10 years working towards since the conception of Custom Vision and at the same time be able to do more for myself than I had ever done before. I created a plan.

I planned to move to Te Anau and drive buses in and out of Milford Sound as often as I could. Earn heaps of money, so I could finish my caravan as soon as possible, buy and customise an old truck and then on my 50th birthday (which was still two years away at the time), drive away from Te Anau with my own mobile photography business that I could take anywhere in New Zealand.

I also wanted to continuously visit family and friends whilst helping people all over New Zealand. Do everything that I ever wanted to do and live my own personal happily ever after.

I even thought about buying some land in the North Island that I could call home, an idea that presented itself when I was doing the first part of my walk, after I had walked through the small town where both of my birth parents were from and randomly found an instant connection and finally understood why I had moved back to New Zealand.

I had a couple of friends in Te Anau who ran a tour company, someone with old-school values who did it properly, who wanted me to do what I did best, who I enjoyed working with, someone who I thought I could trust and so I ignored my other options by taking steps towards working there full-time after I completed my walk.

I then secured some sponsorship for my walk, on which I could promote not only what I was doing by using what I had done, but more importantly, what I was going to do once I finished.

It was my best plan yet and I could see that all my hard work was about to pay off until the COVID-19 pandemic screwed everything up.

I had spent 7 months limping three-quarters the length of New Zealand. I had almost died twice; I destroyed my left foot, my back, my knees and a shoulder. I had put a tent peg almost completely through my right foot, an axe into my hand chopping firewood and the left side of my face had gone completely numb for a couple of weeks (something I still can not explain).

I continued regardless until I spent almost a week waist-deep in the snow near the Lindis Pass, which cost me some bits of a couple of toes and then forced me to stop until it was safe to continue.

Not being satisfied to just complete it when the snow melted, I instead challenged myself to then turn around at the finish line and do it all over again, using everything I had already done to promote what I was about to do.

To then arrive in Bluff the day before New Zealand went into complete lockdown for COVID-19, forcing me to spend months in my unfinished caravan, in the industrial part of Te Anau on my own, without access to a toilet or hot water, unable to do anything other than think about where I have been and all that I had done, caused a lot of things to begin to change for me.

Te Anau is heavily dependent on tourism, so when the borders closed, so did Te Anau.

My happily ever after would have to wait; it was once again time to look after me and so I started looking for jobs further and further away until I eventually found one. I did try to make it work in Te Anau, but without a job, there was very little I could do because I had spent every cent I had and more walking the length of New Zealand, so I accepted a job delivering furniture a little over 3 hours away from Te Anau.

I just realised that I had never thought about going back to Bluff after COVID-19 to finish the last half of my walk that I was going to do. I suppose it is no longer something that I feel like I need to do, mostly I guess because it is no longer the biggest negative aspect of my life that I now need to fix.

My new job took me to a small town in central Otago, a place called Alexandra, which was somewhere I had driven through a couple of times, but did not know anybody. I had accepted full-time work as a delivery driver for a retail chain on minimum wage, where my job was to deliver and sometimes install brand new household items like fridges, washing machines, beds and couches, in a medium-sized box truck all around Central Otago (Roxburgh, Ranfurly, Queenstown, Lake Hawea and Wanaka etc.).

Typically I started work on the Monday morning and then figured out somewhere to sleep on the Monday night. Stupidly though I started that job knowing I was broken and that I had a long, painful journey ahead of me because driving a truck to deliver furniture, was definitely not what a doctor would have recommended, but it was what I did because I needed to do it.

When I first started that job I could not bend my legs far enough to sit on the toilet and did not have the strength in my back to be able to stand up again once I had. My right knee was still swollen and my left wasn't far behind. I was in so much pain that I honestly could not tell you where it was all coming from and yet every day I sat upright when I drove the truck to where it needed to go, I carried whatever I needed to carry and to this day only a few people ever guessed that something was wrong.

I thought I would only be there for six months. I was paying my rent in Te Anau thinking I would be going back there sooner, rather than later and now paying rent in Alexandra at the same time because it was too far to go to get home after work.

I got kicked out of the first place I found my first Christmas there so the family could stay, but I quickly found somewhere else to sleep, not too far away. Six months quickly turned into a year, during which time most of my wages were spent on trying to find out and fix all the pain I was constantly in.

I spent thousands of dollars on doctors, chiropractors, physiotherapists, naturopaths, acupuncture and some old fella who hummed and mumbled a lot until someone finally suggested that I get a proper scan and a specialist from Christchurch got involved. That was how I found out when I fell down that staircase on my walk near Auckland that I had cracked my tailbone, which hadn't healed properly because I am an idiot and I still had two ruptured discs in my lower spine, pushing against 'a nerve', which was cause for some concern.

Combine that with how I busted my leg, which I had not let heal properly as I thought I had more important things I needed to do, plus all the damage I had done on my bike rides, I finally had an answer to what was causing all my squeaks and squeals.

More important for me, was the bit where the nice specialist lady told me an operation could potentially paralyse me (the ruptured discs were tickling my spinal cord, and they considered fusing the discs) but decided not to do anything about it.

She also said it would be a very good idea to stop lifting heavy things like fridges and washing machines every day. That it was not good to be sitting behind the steering wheel of a truck (and/or bus) for long periods and that I should let my back heal.

I only heard that it meant I didn't have to spend any more money trying to fix something that wasn't going to be fixed by spending any more money, so I stopped paying people to try to fix it and started to spend that money on my car (because some things are more important than others).

Which I guess brings us to the most recent part of my story, the bit after I quickly sidestep how I spent another year delivering furniture (and driving buses on the weekend) trying to get back to Te Anau full-time and try to explain what happened next.

You might have noticed by now that I don't always get to have good days and that my life, as previously mentioned, is not always kind or fair. Yet despite all of that and everything else I have been through, there is still one exception to this theme, somewhere that I have learned to think of as my happy place.

Somewhere that I have been lucky enough to share with thousands of people, on hundreds of tours, throughout the past 20 years and that exception is somewhere called Milford Sound.

I first visited Milford Sound about 20 years ago when I started driving backpacker buses around New Zealand after I came back from Australia. It wasn't as busy back then, but it has always been the pinnacle of New Zealand's scenery.

It is breathtaking, but what sets it apart is that it does not matter what the weather is doing when you go there, unlike most other destinations. The worse the weather gets, the more spectacular the scenery is.

If you are prepared to get out and immerse yourself in it, you will always be rewarded, regardless of how many times you have been there before.

I fully appreciate that most people, the first time they go there, would probably prefer blue skies and sunshine so that they can see the tops of the mountains and the complete vista without the need for an umbrella, but what you see when it is raining is even more majestic, breathtakingly spectacular and it did not take very long before Milford Sound became my favourite place to take people.

From my very first adventure around New Zealand, I was doing more with my passengers than anyone else on tour. When I discovered Milford Sound, I felt I had to turn that up a notch. I needed to provide people not only with a special day with the group they were travelling with but also share more information with them about how special Milford Sound was.

That required me to be able to educate people beyond what I was capable of doing on my own, so I enlisted some help.

I have always been quite terrible at the most important part of a tour guide's job, which is to be responsible for sharing detailed and accurate information about a location's history, natural resources, geographic make-up, and other important facts that make somewhere unique, because I did not do my tours like that.

I focused on my personality and made stuff up that highlighted moments or different parts of the day, utilising my biggest resource, which was the people I was travelling with, to ensure every day was unique and special to that group, so that group felt unique and special.

Detailed information about lake sizes, volumes, and sources wasn't something I put much effort into sharing beyond a selection of books that had all that information in them, which I purchased and made available for anyone interested in that information. I would instead compare lakes to bowls of cornflakes, eat out of saucepans instead of off plates and disagree with facts to highlight facts, but the road to Milford deserved more, so when I found an audio guide to Milford Sound, I started using it.

It was originally on a cassette tape and came with a map. The idea was if you were driving yourself to Milford Sound, you put this cassette tape in your car's cassette tape player, and this fella named Michael was your local guide who told you everything you could ever possibly want to know in great detail about everything around you, in stages between the Anau and Milford Sound. It was perfect for what I wanted to do.

So, over the last 20 years, Mr Michael and I have done hundreds of tours into Milford together, and in that time, I have taken him off his cassette tape and converted him into a digital format that I can use on my phone. I have edited his commentary to better suit our tour, and what I do would not be as complete without him. I don't agree with everything he says. So we argue, but that just adds to the fun of it. The passengers love him as much as I do.

I have tried all sorts of different things between Te Anau and Milford Sound over the years; some worked, and some didn't. Some I do every tour, and others I only do on special occasions, but every time I go into Milford Sound, as a result of trying to do more, I am confident that I provide a truly memorable experience in my favourite part of New Zealand and I also get to show people the best part of me, doing something that I truly love.

I know that covid-19 was not my fault and I simply did what I needed to do.

If I were to be completely honest, apart from the busted back and having to navigate a few unique personalities, I loved delivering furniture and meeting heaps of new people while doing it. Driving around Central Otago is a pretty cool way to spend a day. I made the most of a bad situation, but I was focused on getting back to Te Anau full-time to finish what I had started. I could easily have stayed in Alexandra/Clyde doing what I was doing because I met heaps of really nice people there, who liked me for being me, but it was never part of the plan.

It took about a year after Covid to put all of the pieces back together and figure out what I was going to do. I almost actually got there and then had it all taken away through no fault of my own. I couldn't start the second half of my walk, or drive buses in and out of Milford Sound to earn enough money to finish my caravan. I couldn't drive away from my past on my 50th birthday and finally get my happily ever after, instead, I ended up delivering furniture, with a busted back and no money, only a few hours away from where I wanted to be.

I navigated all of that though by working my arse off. I delivered furniture Monday to Friday and when things started to get busier in Te Anau about a year after the pandemic I would come back to Te Anau and drive into Milford Sound for my friend on the weekends.

I worked 7 days a week for a few months, which is very illegal for a professional driver in New Zealand, month after month, slowly making progress back towards what I wanted to do and if that meant I broke a few rules to be able to do it then so be it.

I loved my weekends in Milford Sound. I guess it was a combination of sharing something I loved again, plus the fact I was closing a chapter that was now seemingly behind me.

I had a handshake agreement with my friend that I was working for in Te Anau that the weekends were mine. I had agreed to this arrangement because I knew when things got quieter after that summer, there was the most likelihood of still being working on the weekends, because after covid things were still only starting to get busy again and he had told me there was not enough work to come back full time.

I thought that having priority to any weekend work would allow me to move back to Te Anau as soon as I had completed my contract with the furniture company so I started to make plans to finish there, even if it meant only having a couple of days work a week in Te Anau when I came back. I could survive until things got busier again.

I wasn't prepared to risk what I wanted to do by getting caught driving illegally, regardless of how unlikely that was in reality, so I took steps to prevent that from happening by telling the furniture company that I was only able to work 4 days per week until my contract expired, which they agreed to because they liked what I did there and were happy to have me for 4 days per week instead of leave altogether, which then allowed me a day off each week to do all of the things I had been putting off whilst working every day.

Sometimes agreeing to do something and then doing it is not the best option, but when I agree to something then I feel an old-school sense of obligation to honour that agreement because I think it is the right thing to do. I had agreed to do my furniture job for a period of time and even though it was now delaying my full-time return to Te Anau, it was what I had agreed to do. I still had my plan and I still had my weekends... until I didn't.

My friend in Te Anau had started to get busier and, as a result, employed someone brand new full-time (instead of offering me more work) he then felt when things got quieter that, he needed to give his local employees my weekends, without any warning, not only taking away my plan but also something that I loved.

I had failed to complete my walk as intended, and when I set out to rectify that by doing it all again, I had COVID-19 stop me the day before I was about to start it, on the day I was meant to have been celebrating completing my initial goal. I had just walked (read - very slowly limped) the entire length of New Zealand but was never able to celebrate it.

I had done almost all of it completely on my own. I had got to the end with nobody there to celebrate with, spent the COVID lockdown in my caravan on my own, and it was only because of a few close friends and family that I did not feel completely alone and knew that I had tried.

I had tried to do what I wanted to do. I had tried to stick to the plan, fell, got back up, fell back down again, and tried harder and harder, wanting to do more. I actually wanted to celebrate my 50th birthday, Christmas, holidays, work and life with those that I cared about, but regardless of how hard I would try, not being able to do anything I wanted to do hurt, but I was kinda used to that, to then have my happy place taken away, that hurt more than all of it combined.

I barely had enough money again each week to survive (4 days per week on minimum wage delivering furniture was not part of any plan), and initially, I guess I was angry at how it all had played out, but like I said at the start of this thing, I cannot blame anyone else for where my life has taken me, where I am or what I get to do, regardless of how much I sometimes want to.

It took me over two years to get back to Te Anau full-time, and by the time that happened, my friend had employed someone else, which led me to eventually figure out that I no longer had a plan.

I did try to find full-time work elsewhere, but because I would prefer to do the Milford Sound tour from Te Anau properly, something I had spent 20 years figuring out how to do, I wasn't comfortable turning what I loved into just a job to pay the bills, by working for someone that didn't allow me to do it properly, so I simply stopped driving into Milford Sound altogether.

I explored a couple of other options, but for a variety of reasons they never amounted to anything more, so I took some time out to recover.

I quickly reached a point where I could see where I had been and that I still wasn't where I wanted to go. I knew I was again at another crossroads in my life, the bit where I got to decide what I did next and the more I thought about it, the less angry I became.

There is a point to my story. The bit of most adventures where the boy gets the girl, the treasure is found, our heroes save the day and they all live happily ever after, but as you have just read that is not my reality.

I don't get the girl, and there is no treasure. I am no hero, and often it feels like I am defiantly looking for some mythical happy ending that I am not even 100% sure exists, but I haven't given up trying even though it often seems for every step I want to take forward, I take two steps backwards instead.

Ever since I can remember my life has been harder than it should have been, but the point of my story isn't what I get at the end of it, it is not about winning a race or celebrating something I have completed, because I have not done much of that. It's about doing the best I can with what I have and maybe even sometimes getting to do just a little bit more. It is about being okay with who I am.

I haven't given up. My life is my own, and I get to choose what I do with the cards I am given. I can't blame anyone else for the life that I live, the things that have happened, or who I am as a result because it is my life, my story, and I am responsible for it and the world around me.

I said to someone a very long time ago that my life has taught me a lot, but just because I have done some stuff did not mean that my story was more important than theirs. One of the most important things I have ever learnt is that we all have our own story, we all try to live our own lives and we all see life through our own eyes. We don't always get what we want, but we always have what we need.

Sure, I sometimes wonder if there is a point to it all, but then I get to think about something cool that I have done or been a part of, dust myself off and get back up to try again.

It has taken a minute to get my head around everything that has happened, but life won't stop me from trying to make tomorrow better than yesterday.

Every story means something to someone else and in some weird screwed-up way, all of 'this' is worthwhile.

I honestly do not know what is next. I have taken another step back, but I am still looking for a way forward. I do not have another plan (my plans suck), but I do have an idea, and I am working towards achieving it.

I will never give up, but I also know I can only do the best that I can with what I have and maybe I might need some help to get where I want to be.

Life isn't always easy, kind or fair, but I wouldn't be me if it was, and sometimes I do really like being me.

For that, I should probably thank a few people who have been a part of my story. Some I have spoken about on these pages, others have had roles that I am unable to easily define, but all are equally important.

Some I have only spent moments with, others will forever be a part of who I am, but regardless of where we all are, I hope you know that am grateful for each one of you because I would not still be here without you.

I also hope if you are reading this that you know, regardless of who or where you are, that you are a part of this story, that you make my story more complete, even if sometimes it doesn't feel that way.

You might not always get to see it, but by being who you are, those around you would not be the same without you. You do influence the world around you, whether you try to or not, so please try to be kind and fair, but most importantly be who you really are, because you get to control that bit and ultimately you can make a positive difference in the world in which we all live.

And finally, to all of my family, I love each of you, no matter where I am or what we do. Thank you for being you and allowing me to be who I am trying to be.

I am, quite simply, who I am...

"As tender as a kiss and as simple as my touch, life in my palm I now hold up for you.
I am a ghost, a spirit wandering from room to room in search of a way out,
in search of a resting place amongst strangers.

As I have seen the angel of death take all, I have held a newborn to hear a first breath,
and I shed a tear within the knowledge that a child must grow.

I am but one and alone I stand trapped within the freedom that I have created,
except no one will know why unless I continue to try."

Ps. Remind me to tell you about the time I learned to kayak down one of New Zealand's biggest rivers via 200+ rapids to celebrate the life of a friend who still owes me 22 meat pies and accidentally set the kayak on fire... in the river.

PPs. I want to start my own tour to Milford Sound and weirdly I can't help thinking... 'what's the worst that could happen?' So I'll let you know how that goes... very soon ;-)