



WITNESS STATEMENT OF EVA SIFIS

I, Eva Sifis, say as follows:

- 1 I am an artist, a trainer, advocate and brain injury and cancer survivor. I have lived experience of the mental and physical health systems.
- 2 I have worked for Arts Access Victoria sporadically since 2011. I coordinate the Lesley Hall Arts and Disability Scholarship and the Stella Young Award. Currently I am developing, as Project Officer, a 'Nexus' professional development program for young artists with Acquired Brain Injury. They will be preparing to enter or already practising in the arts field. First hired as an associate director of the 2012 Other Film Festival, I went on to be a participant in the Arts Access Pathways program. This brought me the opportunity to develop and perform my autobiographical story in movement and speech called 'Embryonic Zombie Butterfly' in 2013/2014.
- 3 As director of my own organisation, 'By Accident', I lead a series of trainings for other people with brain injuries. I use what I have learned in my long recovery to help others be aware of life strategies that can be adopted and also of alternative therapies that can help. I wish to change the medical viewpoint that life is as good as over when a brain injury is acquired.

Personal story

- 4 In 1999, I sustained my severe brain injury after being hit by a car. A client of the Transport Accident Commission ('TAC'), I received a sum of money in settlement of my matter. Legally I have my medical expenses covered by TAC for the rest of my life. I take full advantage of the therapy available. Having been a professional dancer in my former life, my standard of 'normal' in terms of what my body was capable of doing is quite high. Currently I am having lessons with a physiotherapist to learn to ride a bike again. My standard of what is 'normal' for me in a cognitive (mental) sense is equally high.
- 5 For about four years immediately after the brain injury, I saw a neuropsychologist, psychologist and psychiatrist for my mental health. I saw a physiotherapist for my physical needs and every now and then an osteopath or a chiropractor. All those Western medicine offerings were available to me and I am so grateful. I had fantastic physical support for recovery, however I felt there were gaps in my mental recovery and in re-joining society.

- 6 To provide context, 7 months before my brain injury I had returned to Australia from my fourth contract as a cabaret dancer in Japan. Making plans to return overseas again, I had passed an audition to go to China and work as a pop star over there. When returning home from the second rehearsal for this role, I was hit by the car. That was the end of that life.
- 7 My social functioning before the accident was sky high. I was working in nightclubs wearing roller skates and not much else, partying and having a great time – I had billions of friends. All of a sudden I was in hospital in nappies. My network of friends was rapidly reduced to about four people (all of whom were my family). I experienced the death of that identity that was Eva at the time of the accident. It took a very long time and lots of grieving, anger and adjustment for me to finally get to the point where I wasn't so spiteful my old life had ended.
- 8 In coma in hospital for a month, after I came out, the hospital staff told my family that I could be transferred back to Adelaide. However Mum and Dad had done their homework while I was unconscious and found the best rehabilitation for people for brain injury in Australia was here in Melbourne. Dad ran his own company and folded it to move to Melbourne and into the flat where formerly I had been living in Elwood. He worked four jobs, including cleaning the Epworth hospital at night-time so he could be close to me.
- 9 I lived with Dad from when I came home from the hospital after the injury in October 1999. It was about October 2000 before Dad started driving me crazy again. When that happened, I knew I was getting better. I was 24 at that time. We moved back to Adelaide. I moved into independent rental property in early 2001.

My recovery

- 10 When I was recovering from my brain injury in Adelaide, I did much of my rehabilitation at a gym 20 minutes' walk from where I lived in North Adelaide. I used to do up to eight classes a week of yoga, Pilates and basic movement classes; exercise that taught me to use my body again. I had to relearn or understand where I was in space and to balance again, which was really important for me. As an ex-dancer, I still forever compare myself with what I once was capable of.
- 11 I spent a lot of time at the gym because I didn't have any friends anymore. Even though many people that were friends with me as a teenager in Adelaide were around, they dropped away after realising I wasn't the same person anymore. My neural pathways had changed and I was not the same Eva. I had very, very limited social interaction. The majority of my social interaction was received at the gym. Most of the people I mixed with there were over the age of 65. The people going to the gym in the middle of the day

were wonderful women. I loved and connected with them in a remarkable way because I was not connecting with people my age on that level. People over 65 all of a sudden were my peers; they understood me. But I knew I had to get back in touch with my own generation.

- 12 I started volunteering with the Wilderness Society in Adelaide. I've always been really passionate about the environment (I helped organise my first protest about the hole in the ozone layer when I was 14!) Walking/Limping the 40 mins to and from the Central Markets, I worked two hours a week on the quietest day, a Monday. I would sit on a precarious stool behind the cash register, greet people as they came in and if the opportunity became obvious, assist them with their purchases – that was how I began to learn to interact with strangers again.
- 13 I willingly stopped taking antidepressants four years after my accident. Clearly aware they were stopping me from feeling, I knew I had to feel to heal. I haven't taken antidepressants now for 17 years. This differs from person to person. Perhaps I don't have the precise neurological disconnections associated with more severe forms of mental illness. From my personal perspective, I have been able to get through by remaining curious, exploring and practicing many different complimentary therapies. I chose to take an active road to my recovery.
- 14 I trained and qualified with Certificate IVs in Wholistic Wellness, Community Development and, most recently, Training and Assessment. My first certificate started only five years after my injury whilst I was still learning to handwrite and to take part in conversation again. These three Cert IVs really encapsulate my entire journey.
- 15 In 2009, after finishing my Community Development study, the plan was to move overseas to Canada for a short while. I had been 'off' for some time when I was diagnosed with advanced Hodgkin's Lymphoma. The tumour stretched from my trachea to my liver. Six months of chemotherapy with ongoing radiotherapy were forecast at least. Having cancer was a huge challenge, but it gave me a chance to re-evaluate where I wanted to go in my life. By embracing a natural approach seeing a Naturopath for her treatments and a Chinese Doctor for herbs run side by side to the chemo I avoided the radiotherapy and ended up returning to live in Melbourne in 2011. Here I have have slowly rebuilt my life and identity once more.
- 16 A lot of my recovery was self-led, thanks to the person that I am innately. If I didn't have this motivation then I don't think I would have been as successful in my recovery as I have been. I'm really proud of myself, but it's also infuriating that my recovery had to be self-led for the most part. I feel therapy in the early years was good but did not empower me. Leaving it behind, other options were sought that helped me grow rather than stay

stuck in an echo chamber. Really everything rests upon moving forward past the trauma and the way I did this was to involve the self in whatever options are of interest.

- 17 Looking back on all the exploration I have done in recovery, I want to help others. My training in Wholistic Wellness taught me concepts that sometimes fall through the gaps of university-taught psychology. Much of my recovery has exposed me to ways of thought that are 'outside the square' of Western approach.
- 18 'By Accident' is the culmination of everything I've learned and experienced. By Accident is my offering to other people – based on my own system, my own theories and experience of what helps rehabilitation after a brain injury. With By Accident, I want to show people the many different ways you can get better and invite discussion and input from the other authorities (of their own experience) in the room. Part of recovery involves embracing the totality of your experience. It's not just physical rehabilitation, it's psychological rehabilitation, social rehabilitation, spiritual rehabilitation; it is the totality of life, and that's what By Accident is.
- 19 The By Accident website¹ includes a video of me speaking in September 2016 for Brain Injury Awareness Week at Epworth Hospital and an iteration of 'Embryonic Zombie Butterfly', (my biography in movement and speech) that played at La Mama theatre in Carlton in 2014. The website provides information on healthy eating, exercise, tools like gaming glasses for computer screens, binaural beats, natural therapies and supplements, meditation and kinesiology. The website also has blog posts about my work in the arts and disability sector and travel, and links to helpful resources for people managing a brain injury.
- 20 I also run By Accident Trainings. In Feb/March 2016, I delivered the first series of trainings developed using the Ethel Temby scholarship I was awarded from DHHS in 2014. The following years have seen few series delivered however now I am focussing once more upon it. Recently part of receiving an ILC Grant from the NDIS, I partnered with Brain Injury Matters and United Brains to deliver my course three times over 2019 and 2020.
- 21 The first course funded by NDIS took place in late 2019 with Doveton Brain Injury Support in Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs. I am consistently taken aback by the willingness of the participants to 'go there' in sharing personal wisdom not heard by others. Brain injury is a many-layered experience that forever changes the recipient and those close to them. Sometimes, all is not bad. In fact, as our participants shared, it can be a source of gratitude.

¹ <http://www.byaccident.com.au/about-us/videos/>.

Fierce and Fabulous - The Feminine Force of Success

- 22 I wrote a chapter published in 2017 in a book called 'Fierce and Fabulous – The Feminine Force of Success' – Nkandu Beltz. An anthology of women making change in whatever sector they call their own, my contributed chapter took the form of an autobiography of the circumstances leading to formation of By Accident. It highlighted the self-led and multi-faceted nature of my recovery that drove me.
- 23 As I mentioned above, besides all I have achieved, I chose to leave the mental health care system very early in my journey of Brain Injury; only going back for sessions with psychologists when my mental health seriously needed it. The chief reason for my distrust harkens back to hospital days when my cognitive functioning was freshly rebooted. I hadn't even the ability to string sentences together before I was placed on anti-depressants. Was I depressed? No! I was just trying to put one foot in front of the other (literally). The propensity to immediately medicate and not ask questions after unless it was to increase the dosage left me with serious doubts in the nature of mental health care. I am a strong woman with history of perpetrated abuse stretching back to my school days. I am determined. Fiercely focussed on my forward movement, anti depressants quelled my fire...until I was healed enough to be able to recognise this, to realise what was missing.
- 24 Going on, I preferred to see counsellors, as they were not professionally invested in the pharmaceutical nature of our health system. Sitting and listening, they would perhaps offer nuggets of insight and suggest strategies to be used. There was never the intimation of need for medications. Unfortunately, as a TAC client, only practitioners who did medicate or chose to subscribe to the system were financially covered. I am still there, in the system of whom TAC chooses to cover. In my view (informed by my experience), this particular choice of care does not achieve the shifts necessary to progress from having one's entire life pulled from underneath them. I almost think using a diary is more conducive to real healing. It's a lot cheaper too!

sign here ►



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