

The Making of Mary

Mary is not a typical grandmother. As a child, she was the black sheep of the family, and continued that trend into adulthood. She is known for devouring an entire packet of Tim Tams in an afternoon, has attempted to stick a knife into a toaster in the presence of her grandchildren, and bought a bicycle at age 76, more than 60 years since last riding. She'll try most things, find positive comments for everyone, and she's my Granny. This is her story.

In November 1938, as the youngest of four children Mary Jean Brabrook was born into a traditional north shore Sydney family. Females of this era struggled for equality, especially when their parents were Presbyterians with fairly strict Victorian ideas. Her father still believed in the idea that girls' role was in the kitchen and bedroom. There was no alcohol consumed, card playing was frowned on, and only 'gypsies' had their ears pierced. From her teenage years, Mary found it necessary to rebel and to spread her wings further than the family would allow. Although church was viewed as a place to learn about god, Mary got a different kind of education from a man who joined her youth group. He owned a motorbike which, of course, Mary was forbidden to ride. Unfazed by rules, the bike was parked at the end of the street, the young gentleman would walk to collect Mary from home, and together they would cruise Sydney's northern suburbs. Another teenage romance lasted for six months, rather than the week or so it may have deserved, simply because it was also forbidden. Mary was keen to push outside the boundaries she saw restricting her life.

She was not allowed to attend university, so left school early to earn money and live life. Soon after finding her first job as a clerk she quit because she found it too boring, and instead she enrolled in secretarial college full time, giving her the qualifications to secure a variety of jobs. She found it took her around three months to learn a new job, three months to perfect it and then six months to become bored, meaning most of her jobs were held for only a year. The rebelliousness streak was ever present though. One job that gave her particular enjoyment was with a hardware and sanitary-ware supplier. While sounding less than glamorous, the fact that she sold toilets and urinals made her boyfriend of the time extremely embarrassed when she mentioned it in public, which obviously meant she delighted in highlighting those aspects of her work. Conforming was never Mary's intention.

Mary married Brian Vincent in 1960 after meeting him on a blind date, and within the next six years gave birth to two daughters, Nicola and Penne, five years apart in

age. While this may seem like a big gap, during that time she suffered multiple miscarriages. Around this era women were still expected to leave their jobs to become full time housewives once they had children. Mary was not that sort of woman though. Once her youngest daughter Penne was in pre-school she found she was bored at home. Adventure and opportunity was on the horizon though, as the family soon moved to Coffs Harbour and bought a banana farm, hoping that Brian, a lawyer, would have more time with the girls and less time drinking with clients and colleagues. This is where Mary believes she acquired her 'education in life' since previously had led a fairly sheltered and innocent life. She quickly had to quickly learn the practical aspects of banana growing, working in a physical demanding role alongside employees. As a quick learner she was soon on equal terms with them and proved that she could easily lift a full case of bananas and put it in the dip truck. Mary's pride in this achievement demonstrates the need to show independence and success in a world outside that set by society's expectations.

Since Brian worked at a law firm, Mary was left in charge of the farm until she secured employment with the Department of Education at a local high school in 1974. Challenges were still ahead though. Brian and Mary's marriage ended the following year, mostly due to his alcohol addiction. Four years later, Brian, on a waiting list for new kidneys, died in hospital from kidney failure. Not one to wait for life to drift by, in 1978 Mary moved out west, near Moree, to live with Malcolm Brabrook, a long-time acquaintance who had also recently divorced, and in 1979 the two of them married. The marriage meant she was now a step-mother to three teenage boys and a girl. Societal attitudes in western NSW in the late 1970s meant that as a divorced and remarried woman, Mary was not always accepted socially in the conservative rural community of the time, although oddly less judgements were made on Malcolm. Always one to focus on opportunities, it was during this period that Mary also became a glider pilot, attending national championships as part of her husband's crew for a number of enjoyable years. In fact, most of her enjoyment came from adventurous outdoor activities, as they also owned a fishing boat that they frequently took out to sea on trips along the coast of northern New South Wales.

While the rest of her siblings who remained settled in Sydney, Mary always felt urge to keep moving. In 1981 the family returned to the Woolgoolga region, with Penne and two of the step-children completing high school there in the mid-1980s. Still the wanderlust was gnawing at her. She wanted to explore. Her adventures continued when Penne finished high school as Mary and Malcolm were given the opportunity to sail around the world on a yacht. Leaving Australia from Cairns, Mary, Malcolm and their skipper Stan were caught in the middle of a cyclone for 24 hours somewhere in

the Indian Ocean, requiring enormous amounts of concentration and physical effort. There was no time to feel frightened as the storm advanced on them, with the need for numerous sea anchors to be deployed and sails reduced to the minimum. The three of them were so occupied that it wasn't until well afterwards that she began to shiver and shake with delayed fear. Every time they anchored at a new port, Mary and the others found other yachts and threw parties with all of the sailors before stocking up on supplies again for the next leg of the trip. She vividly remembers spending over \$3000 in Cairns at a local Woolworths and was surprised when she was denied a discount. It turned out that a lot of the stations in the gulf frequently made purchases this large. They also took the opportunity to explore London after leaving the yacht in the Maldives and flying across to England, spending six weeks there and three weeks on a bus tour through Europe.

On return to Australia, Mary found the relationship with Malcom, which had been strained once he no longer need a mother for his teenage children, suffered emotional abuse and a deteriorating relationship and in 1996 ended her second marriage. Emotionally, this was a difficult time. She needed the freedom to live life to the full, but felt society would see her as a failure when a second marriage fell apart. However, as her children were now grown up, she spent more time trying new and exciting experiences, including abseiling. She was 58 at the time, the oldest female the abseiling instructor had ever worked with. Mary was also the only one out of the group of six to prussic her way back up again, hauling herself hand over hand up the same rope. The younger members of the group found a track to climb up.

Both of her daughters now had children of their own so Mary focused her attention on spending more time with her grandchildren. In 1998 Mary, Nicola and her twin grandchildren Josie and Kate spent three months travelling half way around Australia in a clapped out old Holden, sleeping in a \$20 Kmart tent and living off dehydrated food. On return to New South Wales the four of them moved in together at a house in Safety Beach where they happily remained for the next 10 years.

Even when travelling home from visiting the family of her daughter Penne, then living in the tropics, Mary never took the easy route. She did not want to get to 80 and think "I have done nothing, seen nothing". So instead, she travelled to various National Parks, rivers and towns, and was frequently invited by other campers to join them for drinks when they discovered she was alone.

When Mary was 68 she decided she'd like to learn to play the bass clarinet. This was another adventure for her since all of her grandchildren were musicians and she was lucky enough to be invited to play with various school bands with them. She also enjoyed singing, and joined choirs and singing groups both in Woolgoolga and in Mareeba, where Penne lived. This proved to be particularly advantageous as in 2010 she met Joe Miller through Sing Australia in Mareeba, finding in Joe a kindred spirit who loved camping, music and chasing life's opportunities, and the two of them moved in together in 2011. Like a giggling teenager, she confided the joys and fears of a new relationship with Penne, and questioned the merits of starting again. Knowing how positive and loving Mary was, the family response was simply to ask, what did she have to lose? The next year the two of them travelled to Spain for yet another adventure, before returning to do more travelling in Western Australia and remote areas of New South Wales. An air-medical evacuation from somewhere past Lightning Ridge to the Broken Hill hospital, caused by of a 'heart flutter' was broken to the family about six weeks later. She didn't want anyone to worry. Choosing not to marry, in 2014 Mary and Joe purchased a house together in Woolgoolga, and are now setting out to conquer the next challenges together.

As this biography is being written, Mary and Joe are on a dancing tour of South America, visiting Mexico and then taking dancing lessons in Cuba. They show no sign of slowing down, having spent the last six months renovating their house, going on camping trips and learning to play the ukulele. She still blatantly refuses to wear what our family refers to as 'sack dresses', and she has always maintained that she won't be put into a nursing home unless she starts dribbling. Mary may not have led a life of luxury, but she continues to lead one full of adventure, love and lots of laughter. The way she sees it, her life had been full of adventures, and at 77 there are still many more to come.