

## **Illuminating a dark path**

To be diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease at the age of 46, in the middle of a high-flying career as a senior public servant in the Prime Minister's department, would be devastating for many people. For Christine Bryden it became a catalyst for a new career and a new life.

The prospect of early onset dementia did not foreshadow a dark path for Christine. She has illuminated her future with her advocacy and her books. She lost her job, but gained a new role in life. She lost her past, but gained a future. Her work and study since that diagnosis twelve years ago eventually led her to the Graduate Diploma of Pastoral Counselling at Charles Sturt University.

"I was already retired from my career, due to the diagnosis of Alzheimer's, when I set out to do the Graduate Diploma. It provided me with the skills and knowledge to listen and to help people," Christine said.

Her final thesis was published in the international peer-reviewed "Dementia Journal" in June 2002, and after her studies she published two books about living with dementia, set up support groups for people with dementia, and gave talks nationally and internationally.

Christine was elected to the board of Alzheimer's Disease International in 2003, stepping down in late 2006. Her books are now published in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the UK, as well as being available through Amazon.

She describes her dementia as a "gift", saying it made her slow down, reflect, and focus on what's important in life. Her first book, *Who will I be when I die?* details her "emotional, physical and spiritual, but uncertain, journey into a future where I'll lose the resources that I think are necessary to be strong".

Her second book, *Dancing with Dementia*, deals with the effects of memory problems, loss of independence, difficulties in communication and the exhaustion of coping with simple tasks. It describes meeting her husband Paul and embarking on a new journey of advocacy for all those living with Alzheimer's Disease or other forms of dementia.

What was her life like before the diagnosis? She was a single mother of three with a demanding job. "My first degree was Biological Sciences, and my first position was as a research scientist.

"After only a relatively short time as a research scientist, I became a scientific editor for research journals, then a science writer and editor for popular and teaching materials. Later I worked for the CSIRO as an information officer for minerals and energy, then a manager of the office of space science and applications, and finally as a policy and planner for minerals, energy and construction.

“My final job was as the head of the Science and Technology Division in the Prime Minister’s Department. Working as a public servant was never dull, always challenging, and ever-changing. The attraction was the chance to make a difference to Australia.”

The chance to make a difference is central to Christine’s life’s path. She says her family’s motto is Knowledge is Power. “I have a commitment to make an impact on society, and leave this world a better place”.

She has a positive outlook on life, despite the challenges she faces each day. And her advice to young graduates just starting out would be to remember that a career, like life, is a journey.

“Follow a path of challenge and enjoyment, attempting to keep a balance in your life. Remember that your university studies teach you how to think, and do not give you life’s data base of knowledge. It is how you apply the knowledge you acquire along the way that will make a difference.”

**Source and courtesy:** Christine Bryden – Graduate Diploma in Pastoral Counselling - Author and Advocate for people with Dementia