



2nd
updated
edition

YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE

A true story about the 'Bangkok Hilton'



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DEDICATION

To Sr Joan Evans, a woman whose empathy and sense of social justice for the sick and poor in Bangkok inspired me to reach out to others.

Thank you, you gave me a priceless gift.

Never would my journey continued to this day without my friend and great mentor Jan Woodland. Walking beside you for the past six years opened my heart and eyes.

Believing in me, encouraging me. I miss you everyday.
YNWA

CHAPTER ONE

One thing is for sure; you can never know from one day to the next what life has in store for you. Seven years ago, when I was merrily juggling a business, a household and a family, I would never have dreamed that in the coming years I'd be on the telephone discussing foreign affairs with the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, or debating on-air with one of his key ministers, Alexander Downer. I never would have pictured myself comfortably sitting down to breakfast with the Governor of that infamous prison, the 'Bangkok Hilton', while outside 15 prison inmates ran a marathon that I had helped organise in order to raise money for disadvantaged children in the Bangkok slums. I never could have imagined that I would do many of the things that I've done, and lived through the incredible events that now form my memories. So many people have told me that my story is unbelievable. If I hadn't lived it, I think I would agree with them.

But what is unbelievable, really, is the capacity of humanity to treat strangers with such extremes – in the last seven years, I think I've witnessed the worst and the best of human behaviour, from utter contempt and degradation, to an awe-inspiring capacity for love, coupled with a genuine desire to make the world a better place for everyone. My journey has been harrowing at times, desperate at others, and sadly doesn't have the happy ending for which I had hoped. Still, I don't think there's much that I would have done differently, and though the ending is not what I first wanted to achieve, it has brought a lot more to my life than I could possibly have imagined.

I grew up in Liverpool, England, in a wonderfully loving family. I was the youngest of four children in the Doran household, my mother having had three boys before I was born. Kevin and Daniel were twins, but sadly Daniel died in infancy. Pat was born a year later, before I came along six years later; the only girl and the youngest member of the family. That was until the 1970's when my mother became increasingly interested in the idea of fostering. My older

brothers were flying the coop – leaving home and getting married – and I don't think Mum could bear the thought of an 'empty nest'. My father was largely unaware that my mother had begun making enquiries to the Merseyside Social Services about fostering. I was privy to this secret and was so excited at the thought of having younger brothers or sisters. I was always hovering over her shoulder when she was on the phone to the agency, coaxing her on. I had been the youngest for long enough, I felt, and I didn't want to be the only one still at home either. We both began dropping hints and generally bringing up the subject whenever Dad was home from work, and it didn't take long before he cottoned on to what we were plotting and accepted with good-natured resignation that it was going to happen, with or without his blessing. I remember him saying something to the effect of; 'Do what you like – you always will anyway!' And so our family went through the screening process and within a few months, short-stay foster children who needed temporary accommodation, perhaps due to a parent being in hospital or because they were in pre-adoption proceedings, became part of our family.

John came into our family as a foster child when he was about seven years old, after a pretty rough start in life. He was a lost and very sad little boy; looking into his eyes you only saw sorrow. He had never had a father figure, and his mother, who had cerebral palsy, just wasn't capable of looking after him. The placement with us was not the first time John had been placed in care with other families. His mother had indicated that she could no longer cope with John, so his length of stay with us was always presumed to be long term. From the moment he entered our house, it was pretty obvious that this skinny little guy had been through a lot. When the social worker brought him to us, all he had with him were the clothes he wore, which were two sizes too small, a change of underwear, and a small box of broken toys. In anticipation of his arrival, Mum had already bought new clothes, toys and shoes, so within hours of joining our family, John's transformation began. He wolfed down every

bit of food that was offered to him, and it was clear that he was undernourished.

It was impossible for our hearts not to go out to him, and our immediate and extended family quickly grew to love him as one of our own. And that is how I've always thought of him – as my brother. In my mind, the distinction between blood and foster relations seems ludicrous – if you grow up in the same house and share your lives together, the bonds are the same as blood ties. To this day it annoys the life out of me when people refer to him as somehow 'outside' of the family, simply because he is not my blood brother. For us, the sense of family was always very strong. We looked out for and supported each other, and always have. For me, this was no different when it came to John. He was one of us. Simple as that.

After John came to live with us, he and I quickly became very close, particularly as I was in my mid-teens and tended to spend more time with him, baby-sitting and collecting him from school. I was the only sibling he ever had, my older brothers having left home, and in a dramatic change that saw me go from a precocious, spoilt girl to a responsible older sister, I realised I was someone he would look up to. I was no longer the centre of the universe. I recognised that I had responsibilities, and that I needed to show John, who had been brought up in an emotionally barren environment, that he was loved. I was overwhelmed at the thought of him not have the stable loving home, with two loving parents, that I had, and I was determined to fill that gap. The bond between us grew strong as a result. It didn't take long before I felt as though he had always been a part of our family. I used to love babysitting and minding John when my parents went to the Dockers Club. We'd have great fun stuffing our faces with sweets in front of the Saturday night movie, and most of the time I'd let him stay up late, until we heard the taxi bringing Mum and Dad home and would have to dash up the stairs and hop into bed.

I loved John's dry sense of humour, which he had developed very early on in life. But he would also try your patience.

SECOND EDITION YWNA

Over the past six years or so I have constantly been asked when I am going to write a follow up to YNWA. Truth be known the thought of going down that road gave me shivers, but in mid-2014 whilst in Bangkok I met a guy named Keith who was staying at my hotel.

To say the least Keith is a very generous soul and on hearing of Sr Joan's work he expressed how he would love to meet Sr Joan and learn more about her work.

We set off to Klong Toey to meet her and Keith was very moved by what Sister had to share with him.

Then Keith read my book, and he contacted me to express how much he had enjoyed it, but it left him with so many questions.

He went on to encourage me to update the book especially as I had continued to visit Thailand 22 times since writing the original.

I must admit I had been contacted hundreds of times from people all over the world asking me for updates for example, how is John? Is Jason still living with you? Did Trevor get released? How is Sr Joan? And many more...

It finally set me thinking seriously...

I decided the best way to update the journey is in the form of short stories and photos. I hope this gives more answers than questions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a result of the experiences related to this memoir, Liverpool born Debbie Singh is a well known campaigner for Australian prisoners in foreign jails.

Debbie is a tireless fundraiser for various children's charities in Thailand and travels frequently to oversee the projects. For the past six years Debbie's worked for a Non for profit organisation and is passionate about her work with Aboriginal children.

Debbie lives with her husband and four sons in Perth.