

# The power to change

Domestic violence, sexual assault, forced adoption, homelessness and poverty; Gwen Wilson's life story makes harrowing reading but is ultimately a tale of triumph over adversity. She spoke to JODIE DUFFY about her recently published biography, *I Belong to No One*.

Gwen Wilson turned 60 a few days ago.

At her party at the Links Seaside Retirement Village in Wollongong, an impromptu karaoke challenge had her belting out the Aretha Franklin hit version of *Respect* alongside her girlfriends.

The late-1960s song could well be an anthem to Wilson's early life.

Growing up with the unpredictability of a psychotic mother, being raped by a thug, a teen pregnancy to her boyfriend and three years spent trapped in a violent relationship with another man, Wilson's early years were defined by a series of emotional and physical traumas.

By the time her son was two, she had handed him over for adoption. She would never recover from the loss even long after their tense reunion when she was 35 and he 19.

By then Wilson had pulled herself out of poverty and despair. She had worked on her self-esteem and confidence and, even though she hadn't been searching for a career, a career found her in the male-dominated logistics shipping industry.

From her unit in the Links, where she now lives with her husband of almost 30 years, Wilson looks out over Belmore Basin, a golf course and the Pacific Ocean, where she'll often sit on her sun-drenched balcony identifying the international cargo ships in the queue to Port Kembla Port. It is where she wrote much of her memoir *"I Belong to No One"*.

"This is the triumph over adversity," Wilson says spreading her arms indicating the beautiful unit with its stunning view, that also takes in Five Islands.

Wilson has not forgotten what it was like to be homeless, to be sleeping on friends' couches or in boarding homes with "a parade of transient males and deranged landlords".

After giving up her child, Wilson spent years overseas, returning home to Australia when she was 25. She never had another child of her own.

The decision to write a memoir came to her as she delivered a speech at her 50th birthday party 10 years earlier.

"I didn't have a good upbringing. There was a lot of upheaval," she says. "As I was

looking around at the faces, I realised there were people in the room who had been there for me throughout my life journey. Mostly they were women who had supported me. I had a real sense then that it could have gone the other way, that things might have turned out differently for me, had it not been for these people."

She went home and began to write down her story as a tribute to those women and her uncle who had "filled in the gaps" while her mother Joyce Clark was in and out of psychiatric institutions.

"The reason I've been able to achieve all that I have is because of the people who nurtured me in my younger life," she says.

She has fond memories of her mother's siblings, Aunt Myra and Uncle Jack Clark, and her neighbour Mrs Kulper, whom she called Kulpie.

"It was a happy day when at four-years-old I came down with measles, because Mum said she couldn't look after me and sent me to live with Kulpie full-time until I recovered. I was in heaven," Wilson writes in her book.

Where her mother was not capable of providing warmth, nurture and love, Kulpie and others stepped in.

When Wilson was seven, her mum had her first major psychotic episode and she would go on to battle mental illness until the day she died – spending her last 30 years in care. During the 1960s and '70s Wilson remembers that the medication had turned her mum into a "zombie".

"The pills overwhelmed her and she became one of the living dead to me," she says. "She was fragile and withdrawn. She didn't speak much and, when she did, it could be cutting because she didn't really have a filter."

Her mother had also harboured shameful secrets. She told everyone that her husband had died. But the truth was she never married. Her two children, Gwyn and her much older brother Steve, had different fathers – a situation considered scandalous before the '70s.

While her mum had her own house, it had no carpet and there were few material possessions. There was no television and the roof leaked. Her mum spent most of

her time in her bedroom.

In the book she says: "I lived with my mother for 16 years, but I cannot say I knew her. I learned her routines. I learned how to interpret her unspoken words. I learned how to recognise her body language, but I cannot say I knew the person who dwelt inside that body."

In researching the book, Wilson discovered that there had only been illegitimate children born on her mother's side of the family since 1854 – that cycle was broken when the child she had given up for adoption had his own family.

Her mum, during her own childhood, had lived five years in an orphanage.

"The financial side was so desperate for my grandmother back then that she was forced to place two of her children into an orphanage," says Wilson. "She told them that their father was dead. They were evicted five years later when the authorities discovered he was alive."

For Wilson, the love she gained from those outside her family was enough.

"My mother could not nurture me and I learned it was fruitless and unfair of me to expect her to," she says. "What would

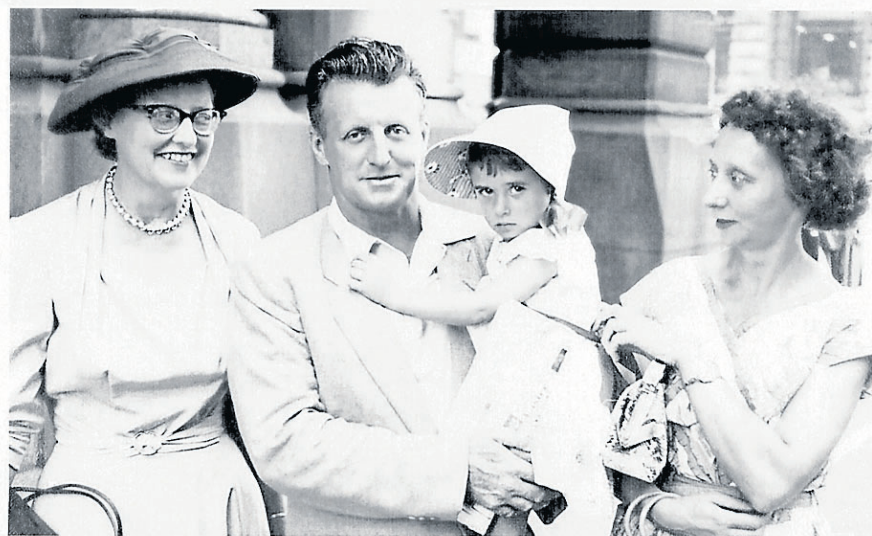
be sadder still is if I blamed her. For all I know, my mother wanted to be closer, but was incapable on account of her illness. Learning to forgive, though, took time and experience. I had to put a lot of resentment and bitterness behind me."

When she was raped by a friend of her boyfriend's, she could not confide in her mother but dealt with the police investigation on her own. The matter was later dropped. She was 16.

Wilson says she wants young women to understand that before the '70s, life was much tougher for women.

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Happy family – Myra Clark and Jack Clark, holding a young Gwen, with her mother Joyce Clark. Above: Gwen Wilson just before her fifth birthday.

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