RACHAEL ROBERTSON
Antarctic Expedition Leader

LEADING ON THE EDGE

Extraordinary stories and leadership insights from the world's most extreme workplace

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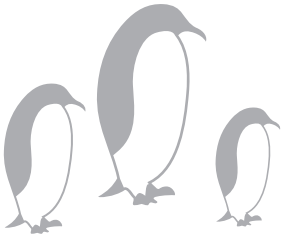


Contents

A note from the author

Firstly, a big thank you for buying this book. I really hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it and reliving one of the most incredible times of my life.

I spent an amazing 16 months with 17 wonderful people. We had our ups and downs and highs and lows, but each one of my Antarctic expeditioners is special to me and unique in their own way. Living in such close proximity for so long meant we got to know each other intimately. We saw each other at our best and at our worst.

Now, our worst is something that usually goes unseen, because in normal environments we're just not put under so much pressure that we reveal it. So to protect the privacy and reputation of my fellow expeditioners I have been a little creative with names and genders in some of the stories. I hope, reader, you don't mind too much. But if you put yourself in their shoes, it would be unfair to be written about in a way that doesn't reflect who you are in a normal environment or under normal circumstances.

We took *so many* photographs down there! I wanted to include them all, but to keep the size and cost of the book manageable I've introduced just a few in the book. But don't despair! Visit my website, www.leadingontheedge.com, where I have uploaded lots more photographs depicting what was going on at each stage of the story. You'll also find a short epilogue, just in case you were wondering what happened in my life after I got back.

Lastly, I'd love to hear about your own leadership journey and your reflections on the book. So please make a comment on the website. I'll endeavour to respond to each one.

Enjoy the book and remember, *it's always better to regret the things you did, than regret the things you didn't do*.

Regards,

Rachael

Acknowledgements

Several important people have made this book possible and I would like to thank them publicly.

Firstly, to my gorgeous husband Ric. You have given me the confidence to go out and do something I love and supported me all along the way. Thank you for your wisdom, insight and guidance as you read, and re-read the draft chapters and prepared the book for publishing. You inspire me! My life changed irrevocably the day you walked in and I have loved you, and been in awe of you, every moment since.

Secondly, I want to thank my four beautiful stepchildren, Doug, Julian, Anthony and Georgina, and my wonderful son Louie. You make me smile and balance my life. You teach me new things every day and I watch all of you in wonder. I'm so proud of you all.

To the 17 men and women of the 58th Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition — my heartfelt thanks and gratitude. While we all had our moments, myself included, I remain so proud of every one of you. They way you pulled together as a team, the way you delivered on every project and, most importantly, the way you cared for each other, truly inspired me. I hope whenever you hear the Pina Colada song you think back and smile.

To my fellow expeditioners and station photographers Peter Nink and Ian Phillips — thank you for generously and willingly supplying many of the amazing photos contained in this book and uploaded on the website. You both captured this wonderful place in all its vivid glory.

Thank you, Mrs Purcell, for opening my eyes to English literature at the age of 15 and setting me on a course of adventure and excitement.

Thank you, Mark Stone, Brett Cheatley, Annie Volkering, John Goodman and David Young at Parks Victoria, for your support, trust, guidance and patience.

To my former colleagues at Parks Victoria — thanks for a fantastic 18 years. I have so many wonderful memories of my time at PV. I know the critical role you play in protecting and enhancing our precious natural assets is often unacknowledged, so from me to you — a bloody huge well done!

To the wonderful team at Wiley — thank you, especially Lucy Raymond and our awesome editor Jem Bates. Your patience, insights and advice were much appreciated. This publishing game is a tricky business and your support and belief in the book made all the difference.

I also want to thank the audiences who continue to invite me to present to them. I have spoken at more than 350 events over the past six years. I am continually amazed at the questions from the floor. You have given me many insights into my own life that I would not have had otherwise. Seeing your faces and interacting with you is one of my greatest joys. Thanks too, to my fabulous management team at Ode Management for supporting and inspiring me and for keeping my professional life in order, especially Julie Winterbottom, Leanne Christie and Heidi Gregory.

To the best friend a girl could ever have — Michelle Arthur. You have been my buddy for over 30 years now and I look forward to sharing the next 30 years with you. You are simply wonderful.

Thank you to my wonderful family, Shaz, Loz, Aunty Pammy, Ben, Jane, Sam and Tim. The only reason I could take up the challenge of leading an Antarctic expedition was because I knew I would be coming home to the most amazing, supportive family in the world. It made the decision that much easier.

Finally, especially, to my beautiful, wise and extraordinary Mum. I love and adore you. Your strength got me through the dark times down south. You were, and you remain, my aurora in the dark sky. Shine on!

Preface

I don't know exactly what it was that woke me up that time. It could have been the crash of my laptop as it slid off the table onto the floor; it might have been the crunch of my neck as I yet again slid up the bunk and whacked my head on the bulkhead. Perhaps it was the series of ship's noises as the icebreaker crested the 11-metre swells, the mighty rush of water and the 120-kilometre-per-hour winds ripping through the superstructure, the feeling of weightlessness as the ship first hung in the air then plunged downward to hit the surface again with an almighty boom, jarring every rivet, every tooth and every frayed nerve . . . Yes, maybe a combination of these things woke me.

It wasn't the first time I had been woken that night. By this stage I hadn't slept through the night in over a week. What sleep I did get was 30 minutes snatched here and there when my body simply shut down. It was cold, uncomfortable, wet and terrifying.

I rearranged my pillows for the twentieth time, searching for some combination of cushioning that would protect the top of my head, my neck and my ankles from the fore and aft sliding along the bunk. But then I would have no protection from the side-to-side rolling of the ship and my sides would be battered!

They say people who have never been seasick can't appreciate the depths of despair it brings. It's not just an upset tummy. Everyone's heard the term 'green around the gills' . . . it just doesn't capture the sallow, pasty sheen you turn when you're seasick. Plus you feel a million times worse than you look. There are stories of cruising sailors locking up their sick crew (difficult in a small sailing craft!) for fear

they will throw themselves overboard. Death really does feel like a viable option.

As I lay there, willing myself into a coma, I thought back to our training—three months in Hobart accruing all types of skills, cramming checklists into our already overburdened brains and 'weather-testing' our bodies. Our seasickness checklist came to mind:

- *Ginger*: Check. Glazed ginger between tongue and cheek now for two weeks—no effect.
- *Water and dry food*. Yep, drinking lots of water and eating dry biscuits, which usually take about four minutes to reappear from the same place they went down.
- *Stay above deck in fresh air*. Ahhh . . . no. Can't do that, I'd be blown back to Hobart.
- *Avoid anything that requires small motor skills*. Does this include buttons and zippers? I can barely manage to speak, so anything as complex as buttons and zippers is out of the question.
- *Lie down on your back, near the centre of the boat*. Check. That's not working either, for obvious reasons.
- *Avoid strong fumes*. This would include diesel, yes? A thin film of the oily stuff covers the cabin floor and my clothes and has leeched into my hair. I can't avoid this. Showers aren't an option, even if I wanted to relax standing under the hot water I couldn't. It takes two hands just to hang on and stay upright. Level of difficulty: 4.5.
- *Steer the boat*: Hmm . . . I'm not sure P&O Maritime Services, the owners of our expedition ship, would consider this appropriate!
- *Swallow your pride*. Thanks for that. Whoever wrote the handbook obviously had never been seasick! After half an hour, any pride I had is emptied into my bucket—which, by the way, is currently strapped to my wrist.

So as I lay there thinking, 'This did not end well for the *Titanic* . . . but you know what? I don't care', I worried how my team would perceive my 'weakness'. On board were 24 full-time ship's crew and 120 passengers. Well, as far as the crew were concerned we were

passengers, but we considered ourselves expeditioners. We were professionals. We were trained. We had been chosen. We were going to live in Antarctica. For a year. And I was their leader. And I was very, very sick.

My close friend Graham Cook, the incoming Station Leader at Mawson Station, stuck his head in at some stage. 'Can I get you anything, mate?' In my head I replied, *Yes. You can take your happy bloody sea-dog face out of my cabin doorway*, but in reality I mumbled, 'All good Cookie, thanks'.

Still no closer to my hoped-for coma, and with several new bruises and half a kilo lighter, another knock on my cabin door. The captain, bless him, resplendent in his P&O finery, poked his cheery head in. 'Morning! Oh . . . no better I see. Still, don't worry, you're not the only one.'

I tried to respond, opened my mouth and just . . . squeaked. I had no voice, no energy and barely the will to respond. I opened and closed my mouth like a mute and flapped one hand feebly. I managed to get out one question. I'm not sure how it sounded but the captain understood. 'The other passengers? Oh . . . pretty much the same as you. In fact, if it's any consolation, over 100 of you are laid up. Several are even on an IV drip for fluids.'

It alarmed me to learn that out of 144 people, only some of the crew and 16 expeditioners were still functioning. They were probably slogging it out in four-hour shifts trying to keep the ship running. For some reason, this made me feel a bit better. Not physically, of course. But knowing that not only the passengers but even some of the crew were suffering made me feel a little less hopeless.

It's one thing to be an expedition leader. It's another thing to be a *woman* expedition leader. And it's yet another to be a *young* woman expedition leader. At 35, I was one of the youngest expedition leaders ever and only the second female leader at Davis Station. And the last time I had even seen snow was on a Grade 6 school excursion to Mount Donna Buang. And seriously, I hate the cold . . .

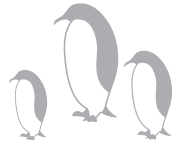
Feeling a bit better about myself, I spent the next three hours reconstructing how on earth I had been selected to lead the 58th Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition to Davis Station. Then I panicked!

Part I 

How I got there

Be restless. Create a life that seeks challenges, root out opportunities and jump in the deep end.

You don't have to be the smartest in the class. You don't have to be super-driven. But you do need to have an eye open at all times for interesting things that might come your way. When they come along, take a leap and back your judgement. If it doesn't work out you will have learned something about yourself. And seriously, what's the worst that can happen?



Chapter 1

Leadership can be learned, and taught, early

My first memory of leadership is from Grade 1. I was an early reader; my parents had encouraged me to read the newspaper over their shoulder at breakfast on Saturday mornings. I was also the youngest in school—I started at the tender age of four so from the outset I felt 'behind'. This was one reason Mum pushed me hard to learn how to read before I got there. She knew that I would be less developed physically and socially when I got to school and wanted to make sure I wouldn't be behind intellectually. I quickly got the hang of it and by the time I reached Grade 1 I was topping the class.

Leader without a title

My teacher was the most beautiful woman, Miss Barton—who became Mrs Williamson later in the year, dashing the hopes and hearts of many young boys in my class. She quickly recognised that I was not only a great reader but also very encouraging with those around me. Rather than have me sitting bored at the back of the class and destined to distract others (a trait that came to the fore in secondary school), Miss Barton gave me a special job. I would no longer have 'reading time'—instead, I would be a reading coach. She gave me a small group of classmates to sit with, listen to and help with words they were stuck on as they developed their own reading skills. Through one small intervention, this very wise woman managed to keep me interested in school and improve the learning outcomes for the other kids, while allowing her to spend time with the kids who were a bit behind. Importantly, I think this was the first time I had been given a leadership role. I didn't recognise it at

the time, of course, but on reflection that year changed me. It let me see that you can lead people with, or without, a special title or a shiny badge.

Loz, my father, was a sales representative working the stores and supermarkets on behalf of big manufacturers. He was a pretty good one too, so I thought! Every week or so he'd come home with extra treats from work and delight us with a box of Wagon Wheels, Mint Patties or Golden Roughs (my favourite). Which, in hindsight, seems odd as he worked mostly in pharmaceuticals! But whenever he went on a country trip he always returned with some little treasure. He still knows where every factory outlet is located and to this day will say to me, 'If you're heading to Bendigo don't forget to drop in to the Ardmona factory for some cheap canned food'. Sure Dad, will do.

His own father died when Dad was only four years old and he grew up in a household of women. All of his parenting skills were home grown and intuitive—fatherhood books didn't exist then, and I doubt he would have read them anyway. The idea of being the 'stern patriarch', which was still popular at the time, would have never entered his mind. We didn't even call him Dad—he was just 'Loz', short for Lawrie, which we were astounded to find out later was short for Lawrence!

He was, and still is, a gorgeous, fun-loving father, now grandfather to six grandchildren. We went where Loz worked, and during the mid seventies Loz tried out a few jobs in different locations. What this meant for me was that I attended three different primary schools in the three years from Year 4 to Year 6. Thankfully, he was able to time his moves so they occurred over the long summer holidays.

Starting a new school is tough. And starting a new school every year, at the stage in your life when you are just starting to understand your world and that you are an individual, distinct from those around you, was particularly hard. I don't remember being coached but I found a method of assimilation that worked for me—a method I had to quickly unlearn when I entered the workforce. I would survive by being a chameleon. I would blend in, try not to attract the spotlight, keep a reserved distance and hope that somehow I would make a friend. It was pure self-preservation.

To a large extent this worked and by the time I entered Grade 5 at Waverley Park Primary School I had it down to a fine art. Such a fine art that by week four of the first term I had been voted Red house captain. Taking on this leadership role a good year or so younger than my peers didn't faze me. I was a big sister to two siblings, I had survived two changes of school and the kids had voted for me!

It was at this time that my gorgeous mum, Sharon, went back to work full-time. My little brother Ben (later an AFL player for Carlton) was in Year 4 and my sister Jane (who we called and still call Sparky for her extremely energetic mind, crazy curly hair and unshakeable optimism) was just starting school. Straight away I was shouldering a great responsibility. From 3.30 pm, when we walked home from school together, to around 5 pm, when Mum would arrive home, I was in charge. Sounds awesome, doesn't it? And at first I was very excited. I enjoyed the responsibility and the chance to boss my younger brother and sister around without the watchful eye of Mum and Dad. Quickly, though, I started to learn what it was really like to be a 'mum'. Making afternoon tea, constantly bugging Ben to 'stop kicking that football on the road and come inside now', playing with Jane for an hour.

I'm sure Shaz and Loz wouldn't have organised it this way if they'd had a choice. We had just moved into a new house in a new suburb and like most Australian families we needed the second income to support our simple suburban lifestyle. If Shaz hadn't had to go back to work, would I be a different person? Sure. I'm convinced I would be less resilient and resourceful. I learned a lot during that time about responsibility, remaining calm in tricky situations and settling disputes. All skills I would need in Antarctica, more than two decades later.

A code to live by

By the time I hit Year 9 at school I had a reputation, and not a great one. I was, or was always close to, achieving straight A's, but not through application or hard work. I think early on I learned how to work the system. My report cards were unanimous: 'Can do better. More focus and effort required.' I was fast and accurate when I wanted to be, and would often finish my work before my classmates. At which time I would whip out a Rubik's cube (my record was 1 minute 46 seconds

for the complete cube; I even used silicon lubricant to speed up my spins), pull out a copy of *Dolly* magazine or do something generally annoying and disruptive, just to signal that I had finished. I wouldn't explicitly interrupt or disrupt the kids around me, but just the fact that I was amusing myself while they were still plugging away at their work was enough for the teachers to take note.

And take note they did. At the end of Year 10 I was called into the deputy principal's office. 'Do you *really* want to go on to years 11 and 12?' she asked me. 'Wouldn't you prefer to go and get a job? You would love the freedom to be able to do what you want, when you want and the way you want. Your teachers all say you are bored with school.' I looked at Sister Mary in silent disbelief. *Are you throwing me out?*

Two of my best friends had left school after Year 10. Both were a month into their 'retail careers', working at Woolworths full-time, with all the money they could spend. I was seriously thinking about joining them, mainly for the lucrative income. Oh the glamour! What I could do with the princely wage of $150 a week! I went home and told Shaz. Now, Shaz was totally gorgeous and glamorous. Think about the late '80s — Oscar de la Renta perfume, red lippy and permed blond hair. She was stunning. But she was also very wise. She said, 'Darling, why don't you just finish Year 10, then try out working at Woolworths over the summer? You'll earn lots of money and you'll get to see what it's like working on the checkout all day, every day. If you still love it after two months, chances are it will make you happy. But if you don't like it, then you can go back to school and do your Higher School Certificate'.

What a great response. She affirmed my concerns, outlined the options and, importantly, gave me an 'out' if my chosen course didn't work out. Giving people an 'out' is a key leadership skill, and like many parents, Shaz intuitively knew that if she laid down the law either way I would have rebelled. Better to give me some options and let me choose; after all, I was 16 years old and like most teenagers there wasn't much I didn't know.

Mrs Purcell, my English teacher, steered me through years 11 and 12. She consistently reminded me that raw intelligence alone is not enough for success. It needed to be married with dedication and application. Intelligence alone would make for a waste of school, and

the choices I made now would affect me for life. While she adhered to the curriculum and taught us the usual classics, one particular project stayed with me all my life and really set the scene for my home life, career and relationships.

After closing Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Mrs Purcell turned to the class and said, 'I want you to choose a popular song. A song that you love, a song with strong lyrics. Then we're going to deconstruct it and find out what is at the heart of it. We're going to explore what drove the lyricist to create this song, the message the writer was trying to get across'. It was an English Literature class in sentence structure, prose and rhythm dressed up as something quite exciting and even a bit daring! Perfect for bored teenagers like me.

This was 1986, and I had one particular song constantly running through my head. The writer, Peter Garrett, was at that time particularly critical of US military activity in Australia. He was passionate about the environment and social justice. Over the course of a month I pulled apart the incredible Midnight Oil song 'Power and the Passion', a classic rock anthem from 1982 (I'm sure many 40+ readers will now have the chorus resonating in their heads!). One particular line hit me and hit me hard: 'It's better to die on your feet than to live on your knees.'

Truly.

As I thought about this I realised I had two choices: I could continue to meander through life, putting in minimum effort, taking no chances and accepting whatever was dished out to me as if it was my preordained destiny; or I could live by a new code, one that could take me well out of my comfort zone, make life much more risky—but also open the world up to me. As I shaped and then wrote out my new code, I made the personal commitment to live by it as much as I could. My new motto as a 16-year-old high-school student, which changed my life forever and set me on a course of adventure, excitement and challenge was: 'I would rather regret the things I did than regret the things I didn't do.'

Rather than saying, 'Oh, Mark Twain and Emiliano Zapata—not very original . . .', Mrs Purcell offered me affirmation and the licence to make this pledge my own. The first true test of this personal commitment came at the end of Year 12.

By now, thanks to my teacher's wonderful guidance, I was passionate about words and people. Writing was easy and I was good at it. Maths was a whole other story. I loved to understand what made people tick and put this into words, so I chose to study either public relations or journalism. I thought these occupations might enable me to exercise my love of writing but in such a way as to create broad influence for the people I worked with. My Higher School Certificate score (the primary assessment criterion for entry to university) was good enough to afford me the choice of enrolling at Melbourne University (arguably the best in Australia), or at one or two other universities in Melbourne, or taking a leap into the unknown by moving 300 kilometres out into the bush and enrolling in a new degree that combined journalism and public relations.

Melbourne University had lots going for it. Several friends were going, transport was easy, and there were many, many excellent cafés, student digs, parties and extracurricular activities in and around the Carlton campus. I was tempted, but as I weighed up the options I thought, I can go to Melbourne, get a great degree, stay in my comfort zone and end up with a good job; or . . . I could go right out on a limb, leave all my friends and family, and study for an untested degree but one that was a better fit for what I wanted to do. I would live in the 'bush' and learn a whole lot more about myself while building critical life skills.

To the dismay of those closest to me, I changed my university admission preferences at the last possible moment and chose to attend Deakin University, Warrnambool campus. I vividly remember the day Shaz and Loz drove away from my student accommodation. I felt a mixture of dread and excitement for what lay ahead! I knew nobody in Warrnambool, not a soul. I had no way of getting to university from my rented student accommodation (a 10-kilometre round trip), no job, and even coming home for the weekend would involve nearly five hours' travel on public transport.

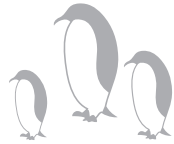
I started university at age 17. No driver's licence, unable to legally drink, many miles from home. It was a very difficult introduction to university life. But two part-time jobs, one as a waitress and the other working in a supermarket, a gaggle of new, similarly displaced friends, and the charms of a blue-eyed blond local surfer called

Chris who became my first real boyfriend, made university fun and interesting. My part-time work was predominantly on the weekends, which meant that I stayed and played in and around Warrnambool and really got to know and love this little city on the big coast.

Of my six best friends at university, two of us made it into the final year and I was the only one who graduated. Some found the work too hard or uninteresting; others simply missed their family and friends too much. Two things helped me persevere through the loneliness and complete my degree without dropping a subject and with reasonable grades. The first was my motto. The second was a conversation with a stranger on the long, boring train ride home one day. Her pivotal advice was that a future employer wouldn't look so much at grades, prescribed learning and tuition. A future employer would look for the ability to finish something you started. Stickability, resilience and perseverance against the odds would be accounted more highly than the academic transcript and conferral of the degree. So I stuck it out, made my sister spend her sixteenth birthday driving down to Warrnambool and back with Mum and Dad for my graduation ceremony (she still reminds me of this quite often), moved back to Melbourne and went looking for work.

What I learned

- *It's never too early to learn the basics of leadership.* Start small and safe. Do it in an 'unofficial' way. Focus on just the next step and see your new recruit or pupil step up and flourish.
- *Step out from safety—it's a sure-fire way to make something happen.* You may fail, you may succeed, but along the way you will grow.
- *Stick it out.* Never underestimate the importance of perseverance. Tough times don't last but tough people do. It builds resilience and shows strength of character.



Chapter 2

Very few decisions in life are irreversible, so make some!

It was only upon graduating and getting my first job in PR that I realised I really didn't like PR at all! My first job out of university was with a government agency. I quickly found the work to be deeply annoying! Looking back, I realise PR itself wasn't the problem; I simply didn't have the maturity to work in that field.

Convinced by an act of grace

In any government agency, much revolves around your minister. It's your job to keep them interested in your portfolio, up-to-date with the latest goings-on, and to give them opportunities to shine in front of their staff, the media and the community. A big part of our role was to create events for the minister. We would work for weeks and weeks, often very long hours, to schedule, plan and conduct fantastic events for our minister. More often than not, and primarily because we were a reasonably low-profile and small agency, the minister wouldn't attend. We would get a call from his office the night before the event to say that 'something has come up' and he had to reprioritise to attend to more urgent matters on the day, which meant all our preparation and planning was wasted. At the time I found this deeply demoralising, but later (after working in and with government for 15 years) I realised it's often not appropriate for politicians to attend a launch or a breakfast, particularly when bigger issues and higher priorities exist. As a 21 year old, though, I found this frustrating and disrespectful and started looking around for different things to do.

One of my roles in PR was to lead bus tours. On these tours we would take lovely retired people on outings into our metropolitan parks. My favourite at the time was Jells Park, in Glen Waverley. Smack in the geographical centre of Melbourne, Jells Park contains waterways, bush trails, barbecues and a visitor centre. The thing I loved about Jells Park is that I always felt good when I was there. I loved how the park rangers obviously loved their job and took great pride in explaining the fine details of the flora and fauna to visitors. One visit I witnessed a remarkable example of customer service that inspired me to pursue a career as a ranger.

A young boy, no more than eight, came to the rangers office cradling a very sick starling in his jumper. He was quite upset, on the verge of tears, when he knocked on the rangers office door. The ranger looked at the starling, looked at the boy, then carefully took the injured bird from the boy and promised to 'fix it up'.

Now, anyone will tell you that starlings are not high on the list of birds that rangers want to see flourish, or even survive! As an introduced pest, they crowd out native birds, destroy habitat and breed like crazy. So the ranger had a dilemma that he solved in a beautiful way. Once the boy had left he quickly euthanised the bird — I know some people won't like this idea, but (a) the bird was nearly dead and (b) that was the ranger's job. Then he wrapped the bird up and disposed of it in a way that wouldn't spread any disease, feed the rats or risk it being found by park visitors. Job done.

Two hours later the boy, with his father, came back to see how 'his bird' was getting on. The ranger took them outside and, with the boy holding both the ranger's hand and his father's, walked them deep into the surrounding bushland. Pointing up at a totally healthy starling, the ranger said, 'There she is. She's all better. We fixed her right up'.

It wasn't the time to be gruff and practical. It wasn't the time or place for this boy to be given the story about introduced pests and our absolute requirement to manage their numbers in order to protect our native species. It was the time to show grace and compassion. To give a worried boy a song in his heart and a story to tell at school.

The next day I applied to be a park ranger.

Since I had started, my agency had been renamed and merged with two other agencies. It was now virtually unrecognisable from the small operation I had joined just two short years earlier. Parks Victoria, as we were now referred to, managed both national and metropolitan parks. It had a specific responsibility to improve the biodiversity of plant and animal life in *all* state-owned crown land. To meet this challenge, Parks Victoria was recruiting Park Rangers — Customer Service. These rangers would work primarily with visitors, lead possum prowls, manage events and be 'the face of the Park'.

I didn't like my chances. I had no background in sustainability or the environment. Apart from the bus tours and work at the supermarket I had no background in customer service. But I wanted to be happy in my job and all the rangers I knew loved their work. I didn't want to wake up anymore thinking, 'Can I take a sick day today?' So, motto in mind, I applied, winged my way through the interview process… and got the job!

Me…a park ranger?

I really landed on my feet in the role of park ranger. I loved the interaction, the planning, working with the environmental specialists who knew every tree, every shrub and every animal track in their park. But it wasn't long before I realised that my ignorance of the technical aspects of the environment was holding me back. I needed to be able to talk to visitors with more knowledge and authority. I needed the environmental understanding to write the park notes, media releases and newsletters. I needed the confidence that comes with fully comprehending what it was we were actually doing at Jells Park. Importantly, I understood that in this male-dominated environment, where I was one of only two women in a team of 18, I had to be technically competent to be taken seriously.

With this in mind, I enrolled in the Associate Diploma in Applied Science — Environmental Management at Frankston TAFE. The travel drove me nuts. Three nights a week I would drive for over an hour in peak-hour traffic to Frankston, engage with the lessons and then drive an hour home. After a year I reflected on the value of the course and came to realise that there was a better way to build my technical understanding of environmental management: through a mentor.

I attached myself to John Goodman, who at the time was the Operations Ranger at Jells Park. John was a long-time ranger, highly trained with deep expertise in both the operations and environmental aspects of the park. He was very highly regarded by everyone on the team and was well respected by all our stakeholders. He was a sound, down-to-earth father of seven who absolutely lived for his family. An all-round good bloke.

I didn't approach John and say, 'Will you be my mentor?' Unassuming and humble people like John often feel uncomfortable in 'official' roles like that. Rather, I just joined him in the park and peppered him with questions, asking 'why' a lot. John taught me obvious things like identification of flora and fauna but also the more esoteric skills that rangers often require, such as how to estimate the tonnage of crushed rock needed to create a walkway of a certain depth, width and length; how to touch up park signage with enamel paint — and clean up the brushes and tins afterwards! He even taught me how to drive a manual car, with much mirth and merriment — well, at least from his side of the vehicle.

I'm sure I drove John crazy at first, but after a while it started working both ways. John had seen me excel at dealing with difficult people at the park, both visitors and staff. He started to seek my ideas about what he should do in particular situations. I had such an immense respect for the man that when he was promoted to Ranger-in-Charge at a new park I followed him there as his Customer Service Ranger. We worked very well together and often shared a laugh over the absurdities of life and people. And after nearly 20 years we still have this relationship!

Mentoring was a fantastic way to accelerate my learning. It had two great advantages over the formal qualification. Firstly, the advice was practical, grounded in real-life experience and knowledge of the local environment. Secondly, the mentoring relationship enabled me to develop a deep and highly visible relationship with someone who was trusted throughout the organisation.

I quickly became head of the customer service team in the park and at the grand old age of 22 I managed four rangers. In private industry it's normal for quick learners to be rapidly promoted. In government, particularly back in those days, it was unheard of. Promotion was