

WINE VVS

Woman badly burned in barbecue accident as a child writes of 43 years of anguish

ABC Tropical North By Sophie Meixner and Tegan Philpott

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PHOTO: Annette Swann was nine when a man poured flammable liquid onto a lit barbecue and it exploded next to her. (ABC Tropical North: Sophie Meixner)

A woman who suffered severe facial burns in a barbecue accident at the age of nine has written a memoir detailing the incident that "changed her life".

Annette Swann was at her mother's work Christmas party in 1974 in Melbourne when a man next to her poured methylated spirits onto a lit barbecue.

The resulting explosion left her with third-degree burns to her face and arms, requiring her to undergo 40 surgeries over the years and leaving her with scarring on 30 per cent of her upper body.

Although Ms Swann's accident occurred 43 years ago, burn incidents at barbecues and campfires remain a risk today, with fire authorities urging caution this summer.

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PHOTO: In 1975, six months after the accident. (Supplied: Annette Swann)

Writing for closure

Ms Swann, who now lives in Mackay, has never spoken to the man who caused the incident.

"I don't remember the actual event, I remember just before the event seeing metho pouring from a bottle towards a little flame on a barbecue," she said.

"I remember being put in the back seat of a car to go to hospital with a blanket around me I lifted my arm and saw my skin, black skin, falling off my arms.

"Once I was put in the car the blanket felt like piercing needles in my skin."

She said the physical and mental anguish stemming from the incident had shaped her whole life.

"At nine years old, you haven't really established who you are yet," she said.

"From that day on I became a different person.

"During those young, formative years it was really challenging because of the bullying and tormenting, and also being a young girl you feel like you're never going to find love and you're different to everyone else.

"The first thing people look at when they meet you is your face, so it changed my whole persona."



PHOTO: Two months before the accident. (Supplied: Annette Swann)

Points and stares still sting

Though she has come to terms with her appearance Ms Swann will not leave the house without makeup to prevent stares from strangers.

"You'd be surprised how ignorant some people can be, and pointing, staring, it does surprise you, but that happens unfortunately, and it's mainly the adults," she said.

"I'll often grab my husband's arm and say to him 'Honey, they're looking at me because I'm so good looking!'"

Ms Swann would like to speak to the man who caused the incident to gain closure and ultimately forgive him.

"He's never acknowledged it; it's been like a hit-and-run for me," she said.

"One day I was great and then all of a sudden my life changed, and I've never had any closure.

"I want to thank him because as hard as it is to believe, I don't know myself any other way anymore.

"Who knows where my life would have gone if I hadn't have gotten burnt?"

"Maybe I would not have moved to Mackay, maybe I wouldn't have been with my husband, and we've been together for over 20 years."



PHOTO: 1977, three years after Ms Swann sustained burns. (Supplied: Annette Swann)

Barbecue safety

Queensland Fire and Emergency Services zone commander for Mackay and Whitsunday region Steve De Pinto said burn incidents at barbecues and campfires were rare but potentially devastating.

"Sadly we've seen some burn victims and I think anyone who has suffered a burn will attest to how painful it can be and people will often require skin grafts and hospitalisation," he said.

He said barbecue users should ensure gas cylinders were within test date, the gas line to the burner was connected properly without leaks, the barbecue plate was cleaned of oil and grease build-up, and to never use them indoors.



PHOTO: Ms Swann's mother was her "saving grace" in the years following the incident. (ABC Tropical North: Sophie Meixner)

"They do tend to occur at [this time of year], hopefully this year we won't see any but it does occur around this season," he said.

"A fire will start around the loose connection and things will slowly progress worse from there."

He said pouring flammable liquid onto a lit barbecue was "fraught with danger".

"Lots of things can go wrong, it's very uncontrolled," Mr De Pinto said.

"So please do not pour flammable fluid onto the barbecue or campfire or even use that to start a fire – the potential for something to go wrong is very high."

Campfires were another hazard, with people sustaining burns on their feet from hot coals.

"Make sure you've cleared around the campfire for a couple of paces so the fire can't spread," he said.

"When you put out the campfire we suggest you put it out with water because sometimes when people throw sand over the hot coals ... those coals remain hot for a long time.

"There have been many incidents of people then walking over those coals and the injuries to your feet can be quite devastating."

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Contact Sophie Meivner