

'I hit rock bottom before I TURNED MY LIFE AROUND'

Businesswoman and Everywoman award winner Sarah Heward talks to Victoria Young about how she almost lost everything

Sarah, 50, lives in Tyndrum in Perthshire, where she runs the Real Food Café, which she set up in 2005 with her late husband, Steve.

The day that Steve and I got married was one of the happiest of my life. It was the end of our first season running our new business together; a café in a remote part of Scotland. We threw a big party at the café and invited friends from our old life in London – and from our new community. We ate fish and chips and drank Champagne and I remember looking around thinking this really is our dream come true.

Steve was literally the boy next door where we grew up in the Midlands and

I always liked him – but I didn't think he liked me. He went to work in the oil industry in Paris and I went to London where I became managing director of a chain of wine bars, but we stayed in touch. One day we met for dinner in London and I said, "It's a shame you never fancied me – we'd have been great together" and he said, "What do you mean? I fancy the pants off you! I call you GG – Gorgeous Goddess". That night we got together and that was that.

I was just mad about Steve. We had such a great time, staying in lovely hotels, dashing off to

different places and restaurants. We both loved Scotland, and bought a holiday home in a place called Killin. Looking back, I'm so glad we made the most of every moment.

When Steve's sister was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003 we had a life-is-short moment and decided to change our lives completely. When we saw a former Little Chef for sale in Perthshire, near our holiday home, we decided to fly up and visit.

The idea was that I'd open a café; Steve would quit his job, help me to set it up, then find work in Aberdeen.

The place was totally derelict but we had a vision of a new life. As we talked it through, Steve said, "How would you like a business partner? While we're at it,

how would you like a life partner – will you marry me?" I was so overwhelmed!

"I remember looking round and thinking this really is our dream come true"



The business is now in great shape

I couldn't believe that in one day we decided we'd move, totally change our life, become business partners – and get married. I was over the moon.

A few months later we left our lives behind and drove to our wooden chalet in the middle of nowhere. It was raining torrentially and the wind was lashing at the windows but we said, "This feels right". At the same time, we were laughing our heads off, saying, "Are we mad?"

My plan was for a roadside diner serving fish and chips, plus locally sourced food, home-made soups and cakes. We found a team of builders to transform the place, and opened for business on 25 April, 2005. I did the cooking and Steve did front of house. Of course we had glitches, but we made a fantastic team and that first season we served 50,000 people.

MY WORLD FELL APART

We closed for the winter, and when we re-opened we were full of excitement about our second season.

Then the unthinkable happened.

One Sunday evening in May with absolutely no warning, Steve collapsed on the floor. A paramedic was called and I thought maybe it was a stroke. Then the paramedic looked up and said, "I'm so sorry". I said, "Sorry about what?" He said, "Your husband is dead".

Later, I discovered he'd had an aortic aneurysm. Even if a team of surgeons had been there they couldn't have saved him. At the time, I literally couldn't comprehend it. It wasn't until the funeral that I realised this was really happening.

My friends and family wrapped me up in a blanket of support but the next three years were truly awful. My head was a mess; I was terrified of

"I wasn't secretive about drinking, but I was utterly self-destructive. Life was miserable."

everything, and of the future. And I started to drink excessively to block everything out. It made everything ten times worse but I didn't care.

Although I often drank socially I drank alone as well. I always drank wine and as time passed I just drank more. It got so I'd frequently wake up fully clothed, not sure where I'd been and what had happened. I wasn't secretive about drinking – but I was utterly self-destructive. I remember asking my mum to go and buy me four bottles of wine and when she asked me what I was going to do with them I told her I wanted to die an alcoholic's death.

Of course I look back and see her suffering too but at the time I didn't

want to live. I began to suffer from paranoia, shakes and feel ill unless I drank. Somehow, I managed to keep the café running – but only just. Life was utterly miserable.

Then three years after Steve died something shifted. At last an element of self preservation pierced

my blackness. I realised I'd lose everything unless I did something dramatic. I decided to give myself a year to sort my life out. In a moment of madness I enrolled in an Ironman triathlon – which is a 2.4 mile swim, a 112-mile bicycle ride and a marathon – in a year's time. I got myself a trainer. I was still drinking, but I managed to do the Ironman in May 2010.

TURNING POINT

The road to recovery for my drinking came later. My friends persuaded me to try online dating. My first date was with a man called Alan, who was a business coach. After two dates I realised he was really nice – and obviously serious about me. Even though I had never said it out loud before, I phoned him up and said, "I can't go out with you because I've got a drinking problem". He said, "I know" – I was shocked to realise it was obvious. I thought he'd run a mile, but he said, 'I like you. If you are willing to address it, I'd rather know now what your baggage is'.

Alan started helping me with the business and teaching me new skills. Slowly but surely we started to turn the

it happened to me

company around. It wasn't easy – things were in a mess. Eventually, I asked a friend who was a recovering alcoholic for help and she took me to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. That first meeting was life changing. The people there had something that I didn't have: a sense of pride in themselves. I was in awe of them and realised I was ready to stop drinking. It was hard but I had help and support and I'm proud to say that I haven't had a drink since.

As my self-confidence grew, I started focusing on growing the business. We built an extension with a wood-burning stove which increased winter trade. I've got 12 employees in winter and 28 in the summer, including some people who are socially excluded, as supporting our local community is hugely important to me. When Alan met me I was very vulnerable and so was the business. He helped fix me and the business, but as I began to get better I changed – I became emancipated, which was difficult for him to deal with. We still work together and get on very well but our relationship ended last March, which is a great sadness to me.

But I've totally turned my life around and I'm happy. This year is the tenth anniversary of us opening. I have improved profitability by over 200%. Our turnover this year will be more than £1m, and we've twice won The National Fish & Chips Award, plus Great Taste Awards for our baking and soup. At the end of last year I won the Everywoman Athena Award, which was the first award I've won for myself – and one of the highlights of my 30-year career.

I have exciting plans for the future, including two books and a production unit to make take-away sauces and soups. I'm fitter than ever and love where I live. I'm determined to make the very most of life while I can. therealfoodcafe.com



Sarah and Steve's wedding day

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