

What it's like to Come Out Later in Life

After being married for 25 years, having four children and remaining a committed Christian, Nicola came out at 49.

While there were clues over the years, her sexuality was something she couldn't even admit to herself until her mid-40s.

"I was really good at shoving it down and avoiding it and pretending it wasn't there, to the point that I completely convinced myself along with everybody else," the now 50-year-old from Gosford explains.

Nicola got in touch through the ABC Everyday Facebook group when she heard about Bill and Melinda Gates divorcing after 27 years together.

After decades of pretending to be someone she's not, she says she has found a new lease on life as an openly queer woman.

Nicola's story

I grew up in quite a conservative family, politically and religiously.

I didn't even know being attracted to the same gender was a possibility, because it was never talked about. I didn't have any language or experience to explain what I was feeling, so I ignored it.

I just felt different. I overlooked the many crushes on girls at school. I even pretended to have a boyfriend a couple of times, who went to a different school.

Teenage Nicola smiles at the camera, in a big blue 80s dress. Nicola felt different from her classmates growing up. (Supplied) There were some gay males at the local musical society I was involved with as a child, and there was discussion among the parents about whether these people were safe to be allowed to mix with the children in the show. So I knew [gay men] existed, but in that very negative way.

I remember the first time I found out lesbians existed.

I was at university and discovered the "women's room". I heard that you could go if you were caught out on your period because there were pads and tampons there. But in the same breath, I was warned to avoid it because that's "where all the dykes hang out".

I didn't even know what a dyke was, I had to look up what it meant. And I was fascinated, but like the good Christian girl I was, I avoided the place as I was told.

Married Life

The first time I saw my husband, I thought he was really cute, and that had only happened a few times with males, so I noticed it.

But on our honeymoon, I remember going on a walk and sitting down on the beach and crying because something didn't feel right. And I couldn't really put a finger on what. But I just felt like there was something wrong with me.

I did love my husband very much, and I will never regret the time I spent with him. We had four kids together and they're amazing.

Nicola smiles, holding one of her kids as a baby.

Nicola is a Mum to four kids, who are young adults now.

I was just so caught up in the whole being a wife, being a mother, work and my social life that my sexuality faded into the background.

Then I met a woman who changed everything.

Nothing happened between us. She was a heterosexual, happily married friend of mine and never knew anything of my feelings for her. But I fell so hard that I could no longer deny the attraction I had to women.

I really started to look at myself and go, is there something else going on here that I have not been prepared to admit until this point?

It was still probably at least five years after meeting her before I could admit to myself in my very, very internal world that I might not be straight.

Once I knew for myself, I wanted people in my life to know, but I was really scared of what that would mean for my marriage and my kids and close friendships.

It was very difficult. There were lots of tears, lots of yelling and screaming in the car or crying in the shower. It was very secret, just inside me. I couldn't tell anybody. So it was just me.

Coming out

I told my husband in about May 2019 and he was really supportive and made me feel accepted. He said he still loved me, and I still loved him and we wanted to make it work.

We had a lot of love and respect for each other, and a lot to lose. But in the end I couldn't do it anymore. It was one of the factors in deciding to ask for a separation.

I still struggle with the pain of knowing I threw his life, and the kids', into disarray, and caused so much hurt. Part of me wishes I had worked it out as a teen because that may have avoided this. But it would also mean giving up on the beautiful moments from the 25 years we were married, and I don't want that.

I mustered up all my courage and told the people close to me — my kids, my extended family, my close friends. And then at midnight on New Year's Eve I did a good old-fashioned outing on Facebook, and woke up the next morning to a hundred messages, all of which were positive.

It felt amazing. There was just this massive sense of relief that I could finally be my authentic self.

Moving forward

I still would, if I'm going to use a label, call myself a Christian.

And that has been a really tough journey, but faith has been a massive part of my life for my whole 50 years. So I didn't want to give that up.

It's something that is foundational to who I am, but so is my sexuality. So I had to find a way to make both of those things work.

I haven't done any dating, but I've joined some queer women's groups and have found a fully inclusive church where I feel safe to explore the intersection of my sexuality and my faith.

At the moment I'm trying to take responsibility for my own healing and my own reframing of my life.

For the last 50 years I've tried to be the person I thought I was expected to be. Now, I want to have the courage to say: Who do I want to be?

Ultimately, I think you're responsible for your own life and you can't sit around in a relationship or a job or a situation just waiting for the world to change for you.

My counsellor says to "put myself into queer spaces" and see how it feels. And it feels good and right.