

Breaking my neck was start of a new journey



Sabrina Gwynn

Sabrina Gwynn thought she might be paralysed when one of her vertebrae snapped. In fact it was just the start of something new

SABRINA Gwynn can clearly remember what happened when her neck broke. She woke up on 6th July 2017 to discover that one of the vertebrae in her neck had simply snapped. She was in incredible pain, and feared that she would be permanently paralysed.

Sabrina spent 10 weeks in hospital, where they discovered a cancerous growth had eaten the bone away. She'd briefly thought about whether she had the courage to commit suicide. Fortunately, her spinal cord hadn't been severed, so she retained full use of her limbs.

Her Christian faith became very important during her rehabilitation. Her regular routine allowed her to read, to pray and to appreciate silence. Her faith also supported her through a second series of cancer treatments.

Since then, Sabrina has learnt to seize the moment, and a prompt

from her vicar, Canon Jane Isaac, led her to lead worship at her churches in Wickham and Shedfield.

"Life is short and now I just want to get on with things," she said. "I don't do 'eventually' anymore. I get tired, because my neck won't turn, but I know that God is behind me and will give me the strength to do it."

Sabrina grew up as a Christian, attending church every Sunday with her mother and grandmother until she was eight. Her mum, who was widowed when Sabrina was eight months old, remarried a Church of England priest in Wiltshire, so she experienced life in a vicarage. Among her two boarding schools was Rookesbury Park School in Wickham.

She met John, who would become her husband, while at university in Bristol. Sabrina fancied becoming a detective and spent five years with Warwickshire Police. Meanwhile

John, after working in industry in London, decided to join his father and brother at AE Roberts fruit growing nursery, adjacent to where he had grown up in Wickham.

John and Sabrina married in 1982 and moved back to Hampshire. In 1990 the Gwynn family bought the business from Mr Roberts' grandson. They and Sabrina took over the firm, and continued to supply fruit trees, soft fruit and ornamental shrubs for the wholesale and retail markets. The nursery needed more space and moved to Shirrell Heath in 1993 then to Wintershill, Dursley in February 2017. It has now been taken over and become Winters Hill Nurseries, while John and David ease into a well-earned retirement.

Sabrina's spiritual life took a dip in the early years of their marriage. They were both busy with work and John hadn't yet discovered faith, but Sabrina knew to leave it until he was ready.

After the birth of their second child in 1988, an Anglo-Indian friend came to stay. She was a devout Christian, concerned by John's lack of faith, and asked to pray with them. Sabrina felt a strong sense of God's presence that evening.

Although nothing changed immediately, Sabrina's parents moved nearby in 1990. Her stepfather had recruited her for church activities when she was young, including reading lessons and singing in the choir, and she felt guilty that these had lapsed. John also enjoyed singing, so they took the family to worship at St Nicholas, Wickham and eventually, as the children became more independent, joined the choir.

Sure enough, after 10 years of marriage, in 1993, John asked if he could be confirmed. He ultimately went on to chair our diocesan finance committee and become a Lay Canon of our cathedral. Sabrina was a chalice assistant, is deanery synod representative and both are on their PCC.

"In the early part of 2017, I developed pain in my neck which forced me to stop playing tennis and made driving difficult," she said. "The doctor said it was just a stiff neck. One afternoon while watching Wimbledon, I fell asleep. When I woke up, my neck snapped, and I was in so much pain.

"My neck had broken owing to a cancerous growth, which required 10 weeks of radiotherapy in hospital. I wanted to pray, but was on so much morphine that I couldn't remember anything except the Lord's Prayer.

"I did think about suicide at one point, but I knew I had family and friends who would look after me. There was one night that I hit rock bottom and I prayed to God: 'Get me out of this and I'll do whatever you want'.

"I ended up with two titanium rods

in the back of my neck, which prevent my head from turning, and I couldn't drive for five years. I felt very special when Bishop Christopher came to visit me, once in hospital and again a few months later at home. I had a lot of time to fill and, once the morphine had worn off, I was reading a lot. I developed a regular routine of reading, praying and silence.

"I realised I'd been overworking, and that I needed to make some changes in my lifestyle. I didn't want to go back to work, as I wasn't physically or mentally up for the daily grind. Although I felt I was deserting John, we had started to build a team to take over the business, and I hoped they would cope without me!

"In a quiet moment it came to me that I could now join the Mothers' Union, and that I had leadership skills to offer. The previous leader of the Wickham group had been looking to step down for some time so I took over; apparently, I was the answer to prayer. I was commissioned as branch leader in November 2019.

"Immediately after that service, my vicar Canon Jane Isaac approached me in the church car park. She said that I have a gift, and asked what I was going to do about it. I already played a part in leading intercessions and thought about other ways in which I could lead worship.

"When the parish was in interregnum, we had started lay-led Evensong, on fifth Sundays, which John was leading, so I took the opportunity to talk in the sermon slot. I felt called to use what I'd read and my own experiences in life to help lead others."

Sabrina had regular checks to see if there were cancerous cells elsewhere in her body. She was



Sabrina Gwynn in our cathedral with the local Mothers' Union banner

a vulnerable person during the Covid pandemic, and then in 2021, doctors discovered cancerous cells in her pelvis and sternum.

She needed five months of chemotherapy, starting in October 2021 and then a stem cell transplant in March 2022, followed by a year of isolating at home. Sabrina is now in remission, but has a low dose of chemotherapy treatment regularly, as her myeloma can't be totally cured.

Jane Isaac was also diagnosed with cancer and sadly died in the summer of 2023. But her challenge in the car park was still relevant. Sabrina and John joined a course for Lay Worship Leaders led by Canon David Isaac, and the group were commissioned into their new roles earlier this year.

"The course helped me to learn a lot about myself and the gifts I have," she said. "It gave us the confidence that God would be supporting us. I have assisted in leading worship at Sunday morning services and Evensong, and I also led Compline in Holy Week this year, which was very moving.

"I do think God has taken me through all of this for a reason and I am grateful. I feel I have a different perspective on life as a result and I'm determined to make the most of it."