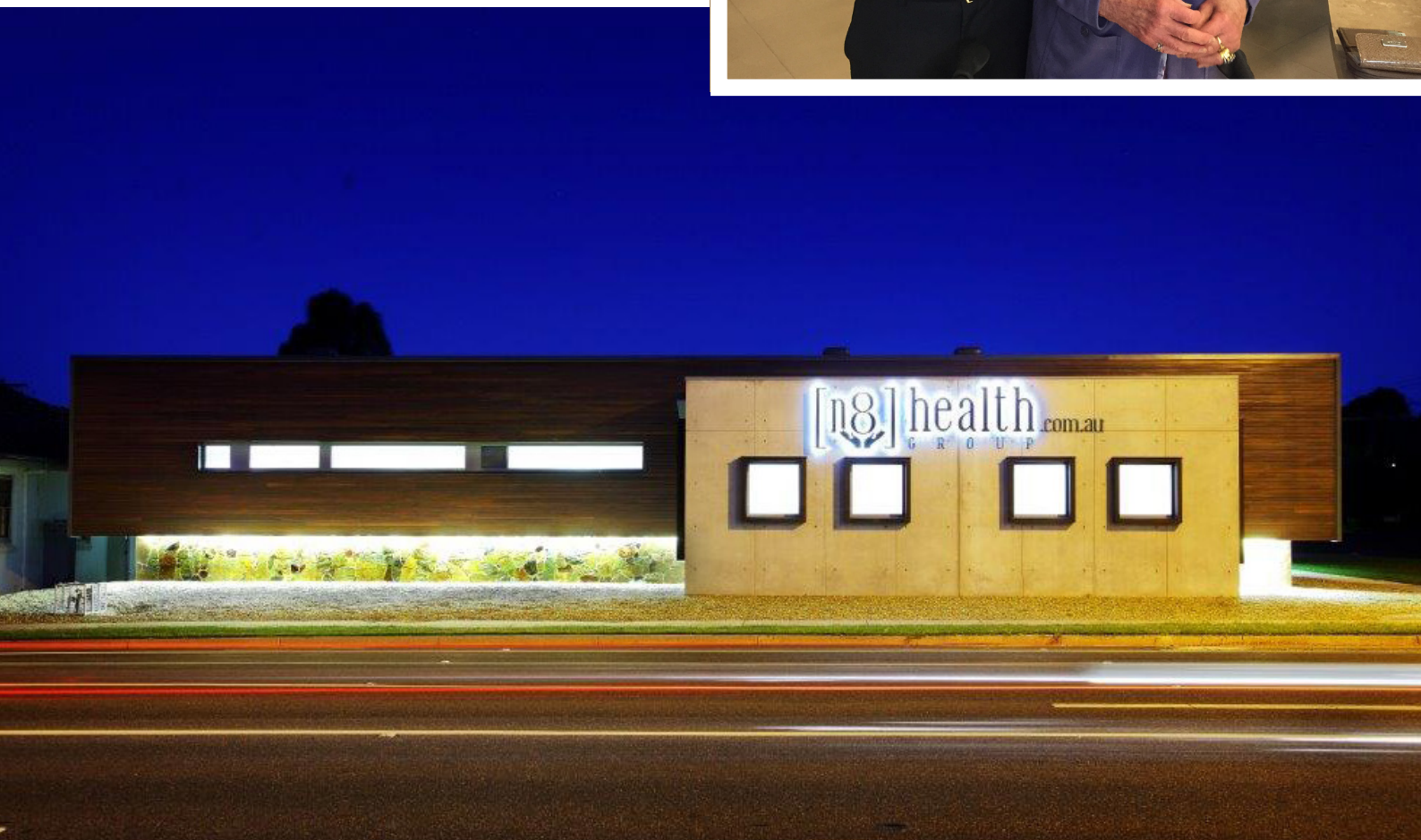
NANNA'S STORY
THE BACKBONE OF MY WHY.

Introduction

Dr Andrew Cameron was inspired to become a chiropractor after treatment he received as a child helped overcome the difficulties he had walking and running, and finally allowed him to play sport like all the other kids.

But the n8 Health practice he has built up in Bendigo and Echuca – from the design of its buildings to the philosophies embraced within those walls – has been shaped by the life of a grand lady who holds a special place in Dr Cameron's heart, his late Nanna Joyce Blake.

This is the story of a courageous lady who endured much pain, indignity and frustration throughout her final two decades, but whose experiences influenced her grandson to create a holistic health clinic where all patients, but especially those fondly referred to as "oldies", are welcomed with open arms and treated like members of one big extended family.



Chapter 1: Nanna's story

Joyce Blake adored every one of her seven grandchildren. But a spinal injury that led to degeneration and three unsuccessful surgeries to correct it left her unable to enjoy the full delights of being a Nanna.

She could not pick any of us grandkids up to give us a cuddle – we were always lifted and placed onto her lap to be nursed. She loved to cook and garden, but wasn't able to stand in the kitchen and teach us to bake her favourite treats or get down on her hands and knees with us to plant seedlings in the earth.

I would stay with my grandparents every school holidays. One incident that still really hits home occurred during a visit when I was about 12. I came down with a bout of gastro and didn't quite make it to the toilet so I vomited all over the floor. Because of her own health, Nanna couldn't clean it up and she was sitting there crying, watching me do it even though I still felt really crook. I knew exactly what she was thinking by the look on her face: "What kind of terrible grandmother can't even clean up for her sick grandson?" She was so embarrassed.

I don't know what caused Nanna's spinal issues originally, but I think it started out as a relatively minor back problem from bearing and raising children and keeping house. She had five children, including one who was stillborn, and they were big babies so her general day-to-day duties probably led to initial back pain. She had surgery to put screws in her spine to fix the bones in place, which was the trend at the time, followed by two more operations but it was all to no avail. Her back became weaker and weaker and it ended up being impossible for her to recover.

Nanna was just 62 when she died from a heart attack, having lived in pain and heavily medicated for more than two decades. I was 18 at the time and for all those years, I saw her lying on a couch or sitting in a chair, unable to participate in ordinary life the way she wanted to. Her quality of life was reduced to about two out of ten. She was unable to do any of the things that gave her satisfaction and a sense of self-worth.

During my childhood, I didn't even realise all this was unusual. I thought the way she lived was normal but obviously it was not normal at all. And after she passed away and I started my chiropractic course at university, I began to understand that Nanna didn't have to put up with what she endured. What a waste of her potential – her life just didn't have to be like that.

Chapter 2: Spinal health – the backbone of wellbeing

Anyone who has owned an older dog knows that when their hind legs start to wither and waste, their lives spiral downhill rather quickly. They lose their mobility and become incontinent because the nerves from the spine that power their legs and control their bladder become compromised.

We humans understand this about our canine companions, but many don't realise that the same theory applies to us. When our spine degenerates, everything else is impacted. It affects those major nerves in our lower body, eventually leading to instability, incontinence and immobility. With this comes a complete loss of independence.

People who are less stable on their feet are also much more prone to falling and suffering a hip fracture. The biggest potential side effect from this is death. In older adults, a hip fracture can be such a blow to the immune system that there is a massive risk of pneumonia or other infections and these can prove fatal.

My passion in chiropractic practice is looking after our amazing "oldies" who come through our door, particularly related to their spinal health. A big proportion of my patients – as much as 40 or 50 per cent – are older clients, which I have found out is quite unusual in my profession. My aim is to help them maintain their independence for as long as possible or ensure any loss of independence is only short-term.

There are many ways to treat spinal problems. I am really good at what I do, but other trained professionals can do the same things within their own modality. My focus, however, is offering respect for the oldies as people who make a valuable contribution to society and I want them to be able to continue to do that for as long as they can.

Chapter 3: The hidden toll

When someone suffers loss of independence through spinal deterioration, it also creates incredible challenges for their partner or other family members, who then have to look after them. They must lift their loved one in and out of bed, wipe their bottom, help them shower and dress, take over the household chores. They often can't go out any more, they have zero love life – all the things that help maintain healthy relationships start to disappear.

The number one eroding factor is embarrassment and loss of self-confidence and self-esteem.

Not only does the condition cause great frustration for the person who is unwell, but also the partner who is caring for them. This was certainly true for my grandparents.

My grandfather Johnny had to do everything. He was a sleeper cutter, so he worked out in the bush every day then would come home to do all the housework. It was hard for him. He had minimal social life, because when he wasn't working, he was at home caring for Nanna. They slept in two single beds, not together. The strain all this must have put on him was huge.

They lived in Robinvale, where there were very few services at the time, and it was an hour drive to go anywhere. The family had to get a big Ford Fairlane so Nanna could lie on the back seat to travel, but then it would take her several days to recover from the ordeal of the drive.

They also had to move from their original house because it was not suitable and Nanna could not even walk up the two steps to the front door. My grandfather and uncle built a special house to accommodate her with ramps, wide doorways, all flat and facilities easily accessible.

I can't emphasis enough the terrible toll spinal degeneration can have on everyone else around the person who is actually suffering from it, but especially their partner. The effects of embarrassment, lack of self-respect and social shutdown (friends disappear, not deliberately, but they also find it difficult) are wide reaching.

I never saw my grandfather angry about it until after Nanna died, then it all came out. I wish I still had her X-rays, as you could see the four screws that were put in her spine with a cordless drill, but he threw them out. In fact, they were the first things he got rid of. He died four years later – a fit, strong man who didn't drink or smoke, ate fruit and vegies and was at one with nature, but my uncle insists he died of a broken heart. And there's much to be said for that.

Chapter 4: Respect and dignity

Nanna's journey is the underlying reason that n8 Health was created as an easily accessible clinic with core values of dignity and respect among both staff and patients.

Older people often don't want to be a hindrance to others and think they are putting people out when they ask for help. Some avoid seeking treatment because they don't want to be a bother. Or they ignore symptoms because they are embarrassed about something as basic as having to climb onto an examination table if they are physically impaired, or worried their mobility aids will get in everyone's way.

We have designed our practice and our policies to eliminate as many of the barriers – real or perceived – that might stop an older client attending for an appointment.

From our car park to our cubicles, there are zero steps and extra-wide doors and corridors that allow our oldies to come in with their walking frames or scooters with ease. We offer seats of a certain height with arm rests that make it more comfortable to transfer in and out of. We also have a Zenith high-low treatment table that allows patients to be gently reclined from a standing position to horizontal, removing the need to get onto a traditional table which can be intimidating and potentially difficult for someone with mobility issues.

We make it as smooth as possible for them to come in, receive their treatment, and return home. Clients have been known to charge the battery of their mobility scooter during a consultation! But the number one ingredient for us and our patients is the respect we offer them as resourceful, vibrant humans who make a valuable contribution to the world we share.

We care for them, but we also joke with them, call them our "oldies" and encourage them to pick on me as much as they like. Our team at the front desk interact with them, we share stories with them, celebrate milestones with them, often with flowers and a card. That personal relationship is so important to maintaining their dignity. We know our clients' names, we laugh with them, we laugh at them, they laugh at us. Laughter is a big part of our treatment. We take our clients seriously but we don't take ourselves too seriously.

Overall, Nanna has had an intuitive influence on my career and my practice. Sometimes It hasn't even been a conscious choice, but without realising it I just naturally made it easier for older people to access treatment. I think from seeing my grandparents' experiences, I have a natural understanding of why it is important to respect and honour them when they need our help.

Chapter 5: Don't wait until it's too late

I have a piece of timber floorboard with termite damage that I sometimes show my patients. It's a simple way to explain to them that while the damage has been slowly building unseen below the wood's surface, it is often ignored until you walk across the kitchen floor one day and fall straight through.

A back injury is very similar. Left untreated, it will start to degenerate – nerves become compressed and this slows the body and its responses. This can happen very slowly so it doesn't necessarily hurt like the original injury, and even if it does there is such an array of pain medication available that we can chemically modify the senses so we ignore the problem for years until it's too late.

Too many people wait too long before they act and one of my greatest frustrations is watching that slow train crash. That's why I can be very blunt, to the point of sitting someone down and telling them they have to give priority to their health because this is the path they are headed down. In the past 20-odd years, I have seen the same story over and over – embarrassment, lack of respect, relationship strains. "Til death do us part" is all well and good on the wedding day, but it can get terribly hard. And it doesn't need to if action is taken early enough.

I used to say it was around 40 that people needed to take charge of their spinal health, but I think it might be even earlier now. That's based on looking after people for two decades and witnessing a deterioration in the health of spines in much younger people, even teenagers. It is likely a result of our general lifestyle, which is more sedentary than it once was thanks to the prevalence of computers and other technology that takes our time and attention away from more physical pursuits.

We haven't had to address the issue of actively looking after younger people's spines so much in the past, but we have to start talking about it now to avoid bigger problems in later life.

Chapter 6: Taking charge of self–care

Everyone can play a role in maintaining their own optimal health, regardless of whether they choose to supplement their daily activities with chiropractic treatment or another form of spinal care. This becomes even more important as we age.

Learn about spinal health: Educate yourself about proactive spinal care and become more aware of how you can take responsibility for it. Take time to understand that your spine protects your spinal cord, which is the lifeline from your brain to EVERY cell in your body.

Eat well: A sensible, balanced diet is vital for every aspect of your health. You don't have to give up the things you love, but use common sense and choose everything in moderation.

Know the value of resting: Your body heals during periods of rest, so maintain a regular bedtime routine to allow plenty of time for recovery. Feel free to take a "nanna nap" if your body demands it, but make sure you then get up and do something active, though not excessive, afterwards.

Stay mentally active: Be constantly curious and socially engaged to keep your mind sharp. Read, write, solve crosswords and number puzzles, join an activity group or interact with those around you to get the conversation flowing. Mental health is every bit as important as your physical state.

Get moving: If your lifestyle is not conducive to ideal spinal health (for example constant sitting at work, lifting heavy objects or performing hard manual labor), do something about it. Whether you enjoy yoga, bike riding, going to the gym, swimming, walking, orienteering, whatever it is, incorporate that into your everyday life.

Chapter 7: Nanna's legacy

One of my patients who had heard a little about my Nanna and her life declared to me one day: "Thank God for that." I was a little taken aback at first, but she went on to explain that she felt without everything my grandparents went through, she might not be receiving the care I was now able to provide her. The connotation was that she was truly grateful that I really understood her situation and her emotional needs as well as her physical condition. Encounters like that make me think that perhaps we are here doing what we do for a greater reason.

While speaking to an interviewer for this story, I was asked what my Nanna might make of my work if she could see what I have achieved and what we have created here at n8 Health. I'm not ashamed to admit the question made me quite emotional, as I had never stopped to consider that before.

But on reflection, I think she'd be pretty proud. Actually, she'd definitely be proud and so would my grandfather, because his life was also shut down prematurely because of her condition.

Joyce and Johnny, this one's for both of you.