# EXTRA

Anj Barker with her mother, Helen [illegible]; before and after the attack by her ex-boyfriend.

# The butterfly effect

**Nine years after a vicious beating left her in a coma, Anj Barker is inspiring others to end domestic violence, writes Ash Anand.**

IT'S early morning in Anj Barker's Melbourne home and despite the rising humidity outside, Anj's house is a hive of activity. Her carer, Michelle, and Anj's mother, Helen, 51, scurry between the living room and bedroom: clearing up, swivelling the fans and helping Anj get ready.

She emerges in a wheelchair: splints on both her calves and a butterfly tattoo etched on her right ankle. Bracelets adorn her wrists; her left arm lies contorted against her frame, her slim fingers splayed out.

Lifting her good arm to push strands of blonde hair away from her face, Anj smiles widely, her eyes bold, bright and full of a cheeky warmth. "It's so hot, isn't it!" she cries fiercely. The brain injuries responsible for paralysing Anj's limbs have also torn the hard edges from her speech.

In 2002, when she was 18, Anj was bashed by her 20-year-old ex-boyfriend. As she lay in intensive care, eyes open but unresponsive, her body rigid with spasticity, doctors warned she would remain in a vegetative state forever. But they hadn't counted on Anj's resolve and tenacity.

It took five months before Anj responded and 15 months of intense physiotherapy to begin unfurling her limbs. It was five years before she spoke her first words. This year she took her first steps.

Nine years after the near-fatal attack, she has moved from her parents' home in the country to her own home in Melbourne. Her eyes burn, not just with a desire to be alive, but to truly live her life.

With a disarming and engaging sense of humour, Anj glances through her hospital photos. "That's me at my most beautiful," she quips.

"You'll see she's got quite a dark sense of humour," her mother says. "Luckily the injuries didn't affect Anj's personality."

Her bright and optimistic manner has led Anj to work with schools across the state and beyond, sharing her story with more than 10,000 teenagers to educate them about domestic violence. With the Australian Bureau of Statistics figures showing that one in seven women will be attacked by their current or former partner, Anj's message could be saving lives. In one of her family's proudest moments, last November Anj was voted Victoria's Young Australian of the Year for 2011.

At school, Anj was a popular student: by her own admission, a bit of a rebel, but fun and personable with a mischievous sense of humour. She played centre in netball, was an accomplished high jumper and loved soccer. Her mother fondly recalls how each day after school Anj would sit on the kitchen bench, animatedly entertaining her with stories from her day.

She fell for her boyfriend when she was 14. "He was one of the cool guys and that drew me to him," she remembers. "We had a lot of fun together at the beginning but sometimes he'd pick a fight with me and lose his temper."

The first time was when Anj took a lift home from school with her mother instead of him. As both cars drove away from the school gates, his broke down and Anj went to help. "He shouted that I hadn't cared about him two minutes ago so why was I here now. He wouldn't stop screaming at me."

"She came back to the car shaking and crying," continues Helen. "I said, if he speaks to you like that Anj, he'll be belting you in six months. I was disgusted and Anj was really upset too — but even though they broke up, they were back together within three weeks."

It was a familiar cycle throughout their relationship. "He was such a charmer each time we broke up. He'd shower me with gifts and make me stay best friends," says Anj. "He didn't like me spending time with my friends, he'd always say that he was all I needed. When he then went and got my name tattooed across his stomach, I thought it was romantic ... that it must've meant he loved me."

"I thought it was sick," adds Helen. "I tried to keep Anj away from him but each time we made him stay away, they became more infatuated with each other. How can you stop a 16-year-old girl seeing who she wants to? We didn't have any control."

Anj was confused and hurt by her boyfriend's behaviour. He would overwhelm her with attention and impassioned pleas that he couldn't live without her. Then he'd dictate who she could and couldn't speak to, saying she was lucky to have him and that she wasn't pretty enough to get another boyfriend. "Once you hear it that many times, you start believing it," Anj says.

"Patterns of abusive behaviour include attempting to control who you speak to, where you go out and when you go out," explains Dr Lorana Bartels, senior research analyst from the Australian Institute of Criminology. "Often this is to try to weaken the partner's confidence and independence, so that they feel isolated from family and friends. It's insidious and subtle and can be long before any physical violence manifests itself."

And inevitably for Anj, after the verbal abuse came the physical. Before the 2002 attack Anj was on different occasions strangled, beaten and dragged out to the backyard by her hair. Every time, her boyfriend apologised profusely, promising to change and even threatening to kill himself if she left him.

"I know I should've told someone what was going on but I really thought that I needed him ... and that he needed me," she says. Family and friends had no idea.

"I didn't like him but I never dreamt he'd be treating Anj like that. I found out much later, after she was in hospital, that she'd cover up her bruises with long-sleeved tops or scarves. I didn't have a clue," her mother says.

"There's often a co-dependency in these relationships where the victim thinks, 'Well, he said he won't do it again and I want to believe him — I'll be the one who makes him stop,'" Dr Bartels says.

"Many victims and survivors say that their partner is a good partner, other than when they're violent, so there's a sense of wanting to take the good over the bad. For those living with their abusive partners, there are also the logistical issues of where would they go and would the abuser follow them? How would they support themselves financially and so on. A lot of people are just too fearful to leave."

But Anj did leave. "I told him we weren't going to get back together until he proved that he'd stopped being violent," she says. On his insistence, the two stayed friends and on a cool March night in 2002 they met, ending up at the deserted school grounds in Benalla. "He wanted to get back together and when I said no, he did this." Leaning her head forward, eyes blazing, Anj explains.

"He strangled me. Then he repeatedly bashed my head against a steel park bench. He kicked me in the face and then jumped on my cheek, snapping my jaw."

Afterwards, Anj lay unconscious beside a tree, her ex's footprint embossed on her cheek. As blood and brain fluid gushed from her right ear, a passerby stumbled across her as Anj's attacker spat out, "You can f---ing look after it now", before running from the scene. He later turned himself in to the police.

Anj spent eight weeks in the Royal Melbourne Hospital, five months in rehab and two years in a nursing home. "It was pure hell," she recalls, grimacing.

At his trial, her attacker showed no remorse, and has never apologised to Anj or her family. He was sentenced to serve a minimum of 7½ years in prison and was released in August 2009, aged 28. Anj shakes her head. "I want to feel nothing for him, to erase him completely, but every day I'm reminded of what he did to me. He never got a life sentence — I did."

As Anj was a victim of crime, rather than a survivor of an accident, she wasn't eligible for government financial support to help pay for rehabilitation.

Helen wonders how much better Anj might have recovered with appropriate aid. "What might have been if they'd given it to Anj when she needed it?"

For the first year of her recovery, Anj couldn't move her body, couldn't communicate in any way and had to be fed via a tube through her stomach. "My bullet wound," she says wryly, as she lifts her vest to reveal a small scar on her abdomen.

There were few signs of progress until, at a doctor's suggestion, Anj's medication, pain-killers and drugs to relieve the spasticity of her limbs, were stopped. "Two months later Anj moved her thumb and not long after, could press the bell for her nurses," Helen says. A year later she could lift a pen for the first time. "I had a spelling board where I had to point out letters," Anj explains, "then I got so fast that I was given a Lightwriter, where you type everything you want to say."

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>
> ANJ BARKER

"We couldn't keep up with her!" Helen adds, laughing. "We kept saying, Anj, slow down! She wouldn't put any full stops at the end of her sentences, she was in such a rush to get the words out!"

Anj says: "It was amazing to communicate with my family again." Her voice came five years later. And her first word? "Mum," she recalls, with a smile.

Encouraged by her steady recovery, Anj's parents took her home to Benalla. Restricted financially, her father has developed a do-it-yourself physiotherapy program, setting up an elaborate rope and pulley system in the backyard to help Anj walk again. It worked.

Anj now lives in a modified flat in Melbourne and with the aid of her family and carers, explores the city in the van she's dubbed "The Anj-mobile". Living more independently and mobile has made it easier for her to forge new friendships too. "I did a leadership course at RMIT and met some good people there. We've been out for meals and to the cinema; it's great," she says.

She doesn't really see her old school friends any more. "When you come out of hospital, you're normally better but when Anj came out, she wasn't," Helen says. "I think the guilt took over. It was hard for her friends to see her the way she was and to know she couldn't do the same things as them."

There's a pause as Helen adds: "Not having friends over the last few years has nearly broken Anj's heart." Gazing at her hands, Anj sits quietly before admitting how much she misses them.

Threat of isolation can be acute for brain injury victims but Anj's determination has seen her reconnect with society and touch the lives of others in spectacular ways. "I run training sessions for young people and meet with youth workers and police to visit schools. I talk about what I've been through and discuss having healthy relationships — I don't want anyone to go through an experience like mine."

Cases like hers are no rarity in Australia. The latest figures, released by the Australian Institute of Criminology last December, show that 62 women and 18 men were murdered at the hands of their partner in 2007-08. That's at least one woman killed every week. Moreover, research by VicHealth shows that in Victoria domestic violence is the biggest single contributor to death, illness and disability in women aged 15 to 44.

The response to Anj's talks has been overwhelming: one young girl wrote a letter to her explaining how she'd been sexually abused and hearing Anj's story gave her the courage to report it. Another young teenager dragged his mother into school with him the day after hearing Anj speak, asking for help because she was a victim of domestic violence. "It's so encouraging to know that I'm helping people and that what I've been through hasn't been for nothing," Anj says.

Now, she says, "I want to eventually have a job, get a boyfriend and be fully independent." Her mother adds: "She doesn't want me around her house all the time, butting into her life. I suppose my friends went through this with their grown-up daughters a few years ago but still ..." she pauses before laughing. "I'm devastated!"

As we head towards The Anj-mobile for a rehab appointment, Anj motions to her butterfly tattoo, explaining how it reminds her that she can do anything. "The butterfly represents me ... they come from a cocoon, which is how I was when I was in hospital, and gradually they get to spread their wings and fly, which is what I'm doing now."

Contemplating how far Anj has come in her recovery, Helen says: "You know, just the other day Anj was trying to hop up onto the kitchen bench ... it brought tears to my eyes."

Her face lights up. "I haven't seen her do that for nine years. When I asked: 'What are you doing, Anj?' she replied really matter of factly, 'I'm getting up on the bench, aren't I?' It was just so beautiful to see her do that again."

As Michelle helps Anj into the van, Helen says: "People always ask me what our relationship is like. They think I've got a raw deal because of Anj's difficulties. But yes, our relationship is different to the one I thought I'd have with my daughter at this age. But we're still incredibly close. We've had our bad times and we've experienced things that no mother and daughter should have to but we've got through it.

"We joke a lot, we talk about everything and we can finish each other's sentences; it's amazing. I'll always miss the daughter I had but you know what? I absolutely love the daughter I've got."

*[illegible]*