

Jillian Staton, writer, Walkerville

My story is about me grabbing hold of the unexpected – and the power of collaboration.

It begins with a toilet block in a South Gippsland caravan park. We had bought a holiday house at Walkerville and I was looking for a way of getting involved in the local community.

I was 36 with three young children and a very busy husband.

I joined the foreshore committee of management, not knowing that I was the one woman – and one of only two people under the age of 60 – on the committee.

Somehow at the first meeting (which finished at 1am) I found myself as treasurer.

It seemed an easy enough gig – except that I hadn't appreciated I'd also be doing the books for the caravan park which, unbeknown to me, was run by the committee.

What a steep learning curve for a person, who despite having a masters in tax, is terrified of numbers (I think I am numerically dyslexic!).

Anyway, one of my first tasks was to organise receipt of funding for a toilet block that the committee had recently built. One of the committee members had handwritten on a torn out piece of paper: "We have built our toilet block, it really is a beaut, now can we have our 65 grand?"

Not surprisingly, the council said no. So I did the report. Photos of the men's urinal, disabled loo, stainless steel tap fittings and the blurb – 10 pages in total.

The council gave us the \$65,000 – and they also offered me a job. We live in Prahran so accepting the offer wasn't an option, but it was a huge confidence boost for a woman who was slowly losing her mind in the suburbs.

The big turning point was mentioning the job offer to my new found friend, Jenny O'Sullivan. I had recently started horse riding and Jenny was letting me ride her horse. She asked me to show her the report – and then she asked if could write a case study for one of her projects.

I didn't know what a case study was, let alone how to write one, but somehow, managed to pull something together.

Jenny gave me a few other jobs after that, all involving agriculture and sustainability.

I was rapt. I couldn't believe that I was being paid to talk to people *and* to write, and about subjects that I was genuinely interested in! It was a job made in heaven.

Then we collaborated on a book together. Suddenly I really was a writer, something I had always wanted to be, but never had the guts to pursue. I did case studies, newsletters, funding submissions and press releases, all involving farms and farmers.

Then some of Jenny's clients of Jenny began approaching me, asking them to write for them. Suddenly, I was learning about rotational grazing, dairy effluent systems and agricultural greenhouse gas emissions.

It was a far cry from my life as a Prahran Trophy Wife and I was loving it.

A few years on and I can honestly say that my career is the thing I am most proud of.

I meet and talk with the most amazing people and I am constantly learning. Almost every time I finish an interview, I find myself thinking: "And I get paid to do this?*"

My role within Gippsland Ag is very much a support role – to people like Jenny, and organisations like Melbourne Water, DPI and GippsDairy - but I love it and am inspired by it. I don't think I have an interesting story to tell but I love helping people to share theirs. And it would have never happened without the encouragement of someone who saw what I had to offer.

** which was exactly what I was thinking the other day, taking photos at a dairy farm, when I accidentally stepped into an effluent pond...*