

How do I begin my life story? It seems logical to start with the beginning. We'll look at the chronology later. But first let's look at where I am now, at this moment, in a snapshot, encapsulated by the momentary freezing of time. Here I am, 53 years old, married to Keith for nearly 32 years, mother of two grown up sons, Gavin and Darren, grandmother to Charlie. We live in rural bliss, at our home in Pilling Lane, Preesall, five minutes' walk away from our beloved sea wall, where we love to spend our time walking and savouring the panoramic views of Morecambe Bay, against the beautiful backcloth of the Lakeland Fells.

I work, part-time, for the Lancashire LINK, as a community engagement officer. But here's the exciting bit: I am launching my own professional writing business, "Beautiful Words" Why? Because for me it represents a return to my writing roots, fulfilling a need to seek self-expression and identity through the written word, returning to the creativity I enjoyed when I worked as a journalist. I am also hoping to create something that will be meaningful and lasting for others, by helping individuals to tell their story or provide a tribute to a lost loved one, and in so doing, create a lasting legacy. Perhaps somewhat loftily, I'm branding my business as "social journalism" – journalism that helps others to seek their own identity through telling their own life stories and celebrating the essence of who they truly are. As former journalist, I feel we each have a story to tell and record for future generations. I also believe that life has a habit of turning circles as part of a naturally evolving cycle: we grow, we develop independence, we forge careers, we create families, we age, and slowly but surely we develop the need to rediscover our intrinsic needs and values, to re-connect with who we truly are or who we want to be. For me, writing represents a return to my roots: it feels like I've come home.

So here I am writing my own life story, partially to chart my own voyage of self-discovery and to identify the route marks along on my journey that have shaped my life and created the person I am today, but also, perhaps more significantly, because I feel I have a story that is worth telling. As, indeed, we all do.



I was born in Blackpool Victoria Hospital, in the early hours of November 12, 1956, the eldest daughter of Roy and Norma France. My parents christened me “Angela Dawn” because they likened my arrival to that of “an angel in the morning,” an image that, looking back on, I find poignant and beautifully moving. My childhood was happy and largely carefree. My mother tells me I was a sweet tempered little girl with a sunny disposition, though when I was about four, I set fire to my Granddad’s hair. I was practising my “hairdressing” skills at the time, combing Granddad’s thick black, Brylcreemed hair forward, when, unfortunately, it came into contact with his pipe, resulting in a shower of flames, which my Granny managed to extinguish with commendable efficiency. I grew up at 19 Elletson Terrace, Preesall, with my parents and younger brother, Geoffrey, later moving to Vine Cottage, Pilling.



Me as a little girl

In September 1965, I joined Mrs Mitchell’s junior class at Pilling C.E. School, just a short walk away from home. There was another new starter, a quiet boy with blonde hair who was wearing khaki coloured shorts. His name was Keith Norris and he was the son of the new village policeman, Ted Norris, who had moved with his family to Pilling from Manchester. At the time I didn’t attach much importance to this angelic-faced boy, though he was later to play a significant part of my life – by becoming my husband!

. On leaving Pilling C.E. School in 1968, I went to St Aidan’s CE High School, Preesall, – an archetypal secondary modern. Keith Norris and I were in the same form at secondary school, though at the time we were both quite oblivious to each other. Our first form tutor was George Maund, fresh from teacher training college and with ideals as glossy as his shiny black hair. At school, I shone in English, human biology and religious studies. The human biology teacher, Miss Bennett, had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the structure and functions of the human body and would enunciate the names of anatomical parts clearly – MMUCOUS MMembrane. She was passionate about her subject and managed to instil that passion in her charges, many of whom, myself included, went on to develop careers in health.



My days at secondary modern school were set against a backcloth of vibrant seventies music and fashions. I can remember wearing hot pants in blue velour to a disco at Preesall Youth Club and feeling like the bees knees. During the fifth form, a group of us girls would sneak into the typing room, where audio typing was taught, in our lunch break. There was tape recorder that we sneakily used to set alive the music of David Bowie, the Jackson Five, Gary Glitter, Chris Montez and Barry Blue, in order to practise our dance routines, ready for our weekly Saturday night dance. Dances were held on alternate Saturdays at St Michaels and Cockerham Village Halls. At Cockerham, there was the added bonus of a live band, The Silver Keynotes, whose musical repertoire included a somewhat tame selection of seventies melodies including "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree" and "Knock Three Times" by Dawn. When I was 15, my sister, Karen, was born – and I found myself being called on to bottle feed and "wind" this new arrival – not exactly "cool" for a teenager more interested in boys than babies!



Pictured with Dad, Mum, Geoff, and Granny

I left St Aidan's in 1973, with a handful of reasonable grade GCE 'O' levels and GCSEs, enough to be considered worthy of developing a career in teaching. Indeed my parents wanted me to be a teacher, and my teachers conspired with them to make this seem an attractive proposition. But this would have meant staying on and doing 'A' levels and most of my friends were excitedly preparing to make the leap from the drudgery of learning, uniform and petty rules into the heady world of work, sophistication and a weekly wage. Remember, this was the 1970s and, as secondary modern girls, our career horizons rarely extended beyond office work, hairdressing, or shop work, with the alluring promise of eventual marriage and starting a family.

My parents finally relented and allowed me to leave school at 16; it was something that I profoundly regretted years later and which influenced my decision to go to college as a mature student at the age of 34. They insisted that I find a job "with prospects." This led to me joining the civil service as an administrative assistant at the age of 16. To say I hated the work was an under statement. I found the days to be dreary, monotonous and fatiguing. My work colleagues were a motley crew of mainly older people, including a louche bachelor and a religious spinster who lived with a sick mother. It was no environment for a young girl on the precipice of adulthood.



Escape came in the form of an advert in the local newspaper, The Garstang Courier, for a junior reporter. It felt like the answer to my prayers. I'd always enjoyed English at school and harboured a secret ambition to write. Here was a chance. I wrote a letter to the editor outlining my hopes and desire to make my mark in the world of journalism. I was highly delighted when a letter plopped through the door inviting me for interview.

Bill Dover, the editor, told me after the interview that he was impressed by my keenness and also by the fact that I said I enjoyed writing poetry, a little bit of fabrication on my part, but I was prepared to go to any lengths to impress! On my first day at the Courier, Wednesday May 5, 1974, I climbed the stairs to the shabby first storey office, in Church St, Garstang, with trepidation. Bill showed me to my office, a small, windowless room, with a linoleum floor, in faded green. It contained a single desk with a typewriter and a telephone. Wednesday was press day, the day the paper was "put to bed," and everything was finalised, ready to go to the printer's. My first task was to type up some cricket reports from Garstang Cricket Club, ready for the sports page. As someone who had never touched a typewriter before, I felt my shaking fingers fumbling nervously with the keys. It took me two hours to complete a single paragraph cricket report.

To say I loved my job was an understatement. It sounds a cliché, but it was a way of life and my work life and my social life became merged, though, as a team, we genuinely worked hard, often toiling long into the evenings. Because much of the news was generated out of office hours, we would find ourselves going to evening council meetings, weekend fairs and fetes, and covering emergency call outs – fires, accidents, criminal investigations - so the boundary between work and non-work was often blurred. In a sense we were never "off duty"; we were constantly on the lookout for newsworthy items, frequently finding them in casual conversation in the local pub.

Living in a semi-rural area, "hard news," such as serious crime and major incidents, was relatively scarce. We were largely reliant on "soft" news generated through attending parish council meetings, creating links with the Women's Institute and local churches, and cultivating a network of local contacts – police officers, clergy, fire crews – who were able to feed us with a steady trickle of gossip that we could somehow create into appealing human interest stories. One of my local contacts was Pilling policeman, Ted Norris, who I used to visit regularly. On more than one occasion I would knock on the door of the village police station, only to find it was his son, Keith, the shy blonde-haired boy I'd been at school with, who answered the door, gazing at me in a strange way.

Keith officially asked me out a few months later, after a chance meeting at St Michaels Village Hall fortnightly dance. By this time I'd started driving and was the owner of a blue Mini. I'd gone to the dance on my own, expecting to meet up with friends there, but when I arrived there was just a couple of acquaintances I knew. Keith was part of that wider crowd and I could see him slowly edging towards me. Just as the DJ was playing the final record, he shyly asked me if I was doing anything the next evening. We've never been apart since.



PC Ted Norris, my future father in law, (although obviously I did not know this at the time), proved to be a useful contact. He would regularly tip me off when he picked anything up on his police radio. On one particular evening he phoned me just as I'd gone to bed to tell me he had heard on his radio that there had been a major fire in Garstang. I grabbed my clothes, got dressed and sped to Garstang, where I found out that the CCM factory, a major employer in the town, had burned down. I spent the evening interviewing devastated owners and staff, heartbroken at the loss of their livelihood and a reputable family business.

In November 1977, there was more drama, when the unseasonably high tides breached the sea defences at Pilling, resulting in large-scale flooding of homes, when water up to 18 inches high seeped into houses, my own home included. I found myself juggling helping my parents clear the flood-damaged carpets and furnishings of our downstairs rooms, with interviewing other residents about their own flood experiences. For my 21st birthday, on November 12, Keith had booked a romantic meal for two at the Old Ship Hotel, Pilling. We dined by candlelight – but this owed more to the power cuts caused by the floods than to any notions of romance on our part.

By and large, though, news tended to be of a less dramatic nature. We were reliant on “human interest” stories, such as the local vicar keeping bees as his hobby, or a primary school head teacher retiring after 36 years, or a child actor getting a part in a West End musical, as our main source of news. Bill's maxim was that it was this human element that sold papers. I subscribe to this view, feeling that, as human beings, we are naturally curious about others: why else would people seize on celebrity gossip with such relish? Obituaries were also part of our stock in trade. Bill teasingly referred to me as the “death expert” because of the sensitive way I spoke to distressed family members over the telephone. In my experience, I found people enjoyed talking about their loved one as part of their grieving process and valued the fact that someone was going to pay a written tribute. I suppose it is one of the reasons why I'm now drawn to life story and tribute writing – because I genuinely believe it can make a meaningful difference.

As part of my training to be a journalist, I attended college in Liverpool for two years on a day-release basis, eventually passing the obligatory exams in public administration, interviewing, law, newspaper practice and shorthand to earn myself the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) Proficiency Certificate. I still have this memory of me sauntering along the Liverpool streets, with studied insouciance, chiffon scarf flowing, wide-flared trousers flapping, the hauntingly beautiful melodies of 10cc's “I'm Not in Love” ringing in my ears, a young woman captured in a fragment of time when love, career, youth and the promise of a vibrant future are not just possibilities, but real and alive in that thrilling, dizzying moment.



People often used to comment to me that being a newspaper reporter must be quite glamorous and exciting. It's true that the job was exciting and no two days were ever the same. But glamorous? Perhaps the nearest I ever got to glamour and the heady world of show business was when I was invited to attend the Manchester premiere of the James Bond film "The Man with the Golden Gun." I was fortunate enough to interview the film's villain, Salamander, played by actor Christopher Lee, and to have my photograph taken pointing the eponymous "golden gun" menacingly towards him. Lee, in real life, is just as he appears on screen, urbane, smooth and slightly aloof. "Lift the catch and point this way, dear," he commanded, in his plummy actor's voice, as I haplessly tried to re-enact the part of a Bond villain for the benefit of waiting photographers.

In another premiere, I met and interviewed the pop band, Slade, who were big names in the pop charts at the time and had just made their first film, "Flame". They were down to earth, daft but likeable lads, who didn't seem at all tarnished by their celebrity status. Guitarist Dave Hill kept putting his arm around me and pestered me for my number. Needless to say, he didn't get it!



Meeting the pop group, Slade, at a film premiere

Keith and I were married at St John the Baptist Church, Pilling, on a cold spring day in 1978. It is normally the bride's prerogative to arrive late on her wedding day, but this particular bride and her father were early, by about five minutes. Because our house was next door to the church, there were no grand arrivals in a taxi for us. Nervous and jittery with waiting, and emboldened by a shared whisky, we decided to take the plunge and walk to the ceremony sooner rather than later. After the wedding, Keith and I had a short honeymoon in the Lake District, but couldn't wait to get back to our new house, a tiny semi in Catterall. Looking back, we were ludicrously young, at 21, to embark on marriage, though we weren't untypical of our generation. Nor we were particularly unusual in having our first child, Gavin, at the age of 23.



Gavin was born at Preston Royal Infirmary on November 28, 1979. He had a shock of spiky auburn hair and a puckered up, pinched expression that reminded me a wizened old man. He quickly blossomed into a beautiful baby and a mischievous toddler who knew how to charm people with his disarming smile and cheeky “show off” mannerisms.



Keith and me on our wedding day

When Gavin was a few weeks’ old, I decided to return to my job on the Garstang Courier, working part-time whilst Gavin was cared for by his doting grandmothers. Three years later, Keith and I decided to try for another child. For some time I’d been thinking of leaving my job, feeling I wanted to devote more time to motherhood and to extending our family. To prioritise family over career was by no means exceptional at the time. I left the Courier in April, 1982, after working there for eight happy years, though I carried on doing freelance work for several years after.

Our second son, Darren, was born on New Year’s Day, 1983, at Royal Lancaster Infirmary, weighing just less than nine pounds. He had a thick mop of brown wavy hair and a beautiful bow-shaped mouth. As a toddler, his hair was a mass of gorgeous curls, which I was reluctant to have cut. Whereas Gavin was a chatterbox and loved to sit on my knee listening to stories, Darren was a mini whirlwind, who walked at eight months’ old and was into everything he could lay his chubby little hands on.

For the next few years, I relished being a full-time mum, enjoying taking the boys to toddler group, playgroup, swimming sessions and walks to the park. In 1986, Keith decided to start his own electrical business. I helped with the clerical side, but by this stage a nagging realisation that I wasn’t doing anything to further my own career was beginning to build. I started to think about where I wanted to go. Suddenly journalism no longer seemed an attractive option; I felt I was simply becoming too old to be chasing fire engines, though I was only in my early thirties. I needed to be doing something worthwhile and of value to other people, but I wasn’t sure what. Teaching began to emerge as a possibility. With my growing restlessness, I realised that, in order to move forwards in any career, I needed to look at my qualifications. This was when I decided to become a mature student and overcome the regrets I’d had about not staying on at school at 16.





On holiday in Wales with Gavin and Darren

In 1990, I became a full-time mature student at the Adult College, Lancaster, where I studied English language and literature and criminology as Open College 'B' units (A level equivalent) and took a GCSE in maths. This secured me with a passport to study for a degree at St Martin's College, Lancaster. I graduated in July 1995 with a First Class BA (Hons) degree in Health Promotion Studies with Community and Youth Studies, at the age of 39.

Within months I was offered a part-time job as a health promotion specialist within the NHS, working for Lancaster Priority Services NHS Trust. I was responsible for working with primary schools to support them in becoming "healthy schools". This meant touring the 55 schools in Lancaster and Morecambe, helping staff to organise health fairs, displays and curriculum activities. In the early days, I used to go into the classroom and talk to the children about smoking, alcohol, sex health and drugs. Later the idea of "healthy schools" became a key Government priority, with the launch of the National Healthy Schools Standard in 1999, and I became involved in working alongside colleagues from Lancashire Education Authority to develop the Lancashire Healthy Schools Programme.

In July 1996, we moved to our current home in Pilling Lane Preesall, April 2001, feeling that we'd outgrown our previous home in Sandy Lane. By this time Gavin and Darren were teenagers and needed more space. But though house moves are notoriously stressful at the best of times, ours was particularly fraught. We'd bought the house from an old man, Mr Fletcher, who was patently in no hurry to move out. We ended up helping him to move his bedding and furniture out of the house whilst simultaneously moving our own belongings in. The house, with its lovely gardens, was stuck in a 1960's time warp and required major surgery in order to restore it to its charm and elegance. Keith set about the task with a relish and worked day and night to transform it into the lovely family home we have today. Alas within what seemed like no time at all, the boys were moving out of our lives to a whole new world – Gavin to Lancaster University, and three years later, Darren to St Martin's College.





A family portrait

In 2001, I took up a new position as health promotion specialist for secondary schools and young people. This role saw me going into colleges and prisons, including Lancaster Farms Young Offenders' Institution, to support them in becoming healthy organisations. Gradually, though, the role shifted, becoming less "hands on" and more strategic and management-focused. I found myself talking in a language that was alien to me and I felt I was losing the creativity and sense of working with people at the coal face that had attracted me to the job. Primary Care Trusts were also undergoing reorganisation and public health and health promotion faced an uncertain future. In 2006, with my 50 birthday looming and, with it, recognition of my working life mortality, I decided to leave to explore other career options.

That year, 2006, was my *annus horribilus*. By this time both boys were grown up and living independent lives, so I felt devoid of my status as a mother. I'd also seen my career identity dissipate, following my decision to leave a job that was no longer offering fulfilment, and was unsure of the direction my life and career were taking. To compound issues, our beloved cat, Gazza, died after 12 wonderful years. There were some brighter moments among the gloom. Determined not to be beaten by depression, I entered the Great North Run and embarked on a rigorous training programme that saw me complete the half marathon in two hours and twenty three minutes, and raise over £1200 for the coronary care unit at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary. It was a fantastic feeling and great way to celebrate my 50th birthday.

In 2009, after working in various roles as a freelance researcher and adult and further education lecturer, I spotted an advert for a part-time community engagement officer for the Lancashire LINK. Seeing this as an opportunity to return to working with communities at grassroots level as well as building on my experiences in health and social care, I applied for and was offered the post. This is where I am now: working part-time, as a community engagement officer, but looking to develop my business writing life stories and tributes, after a growing compulsion to get back to my writing roots, and reconnect with that part of my identity that I feel I have denied to myself for so many years.



Telling my life story would be incomplete without paying homage to my family who have played such a significant part in my life's rich and varied experiences. I can look back with pride on my sons' first steps, their first days at school, Carter's Charity School, in Pilling Lane, Preesall, and then St Aidan's School. I can remember with a smile the family holidays we shared – eating a bag of chips on a rainswept hillside in the Yorkshire Dales; staying in a farmhouse in Cornwall; visiting the Castle Museum at York; driving through mountains shrouded in damp and grey drizzle in North Wales. In 1989, tired of holidays punctuated by rain, we had our first holiday abroad, flying to Majorca. Other holidays swiftly followed, to Minorca, Rhodes and Cyprus. It was during our holiday in Rhodes that we took a donkey ride up the precariously narrow pathway to the Acropolis in Lindos. Darren and I shared a particularly frisky donkey that would insist on trying to edge Keith's donkey nearer to the cliffside, using its head as a battering ram. Needless to say, when we reached the top, we decided to take the safer option of walking down!



Gavin with his bride, Anna, on their wedding day

When the boys left home to go to university it seemed a sad but inevitable part of growing up that was compensated for by the sense of pride we felt when they graduated from university. That pride was intensified in 2007 when Gavin married his long-term partner and fellow student, Anna, at Bartle Hall, Preston, and was sealed with the arrival of our first grandson, Charlie, on September 23rd, 2008. Darren, who lives with his long-term partner, Jess, in Lancaster, decided to train to be an electrician after finishing his degree and now works for Keith in the business. It's a bonus for me in that I get to see him most days.

With both boys growing up, Keith and I determined to enjoy life. We've holidayed abroad to some of the most beautiful places – the Italian Lakes, Croatia, the Greek islands, Sardinia, Sicily. Perhaps our most memorable holiday was the four-week visit we made to Australia to see Keith's youngster brother, Gary and his wife, Mary, who live in Busselton, three hours away from Perth. During our stay, we visited Port Douglas and enjoyed a hot air balloon ride over the rainforest, before moving on to Sydney, where we toured the Opera House and climbed Sydney Harbour Bridge. But the highlight of the trip for me was watching the sun rise above Ayres Rock in the shimmering heat of the dessert, sensing the spiritual allure and mysteries of this aboriginal sacred site, with nothing to separate us from nature and vastness and the distant howling of a dingo heralding the new dawn.



For our 50th birthday, we enjoyed an altogether more sedate holiday touring Boston and New England in the Fall. We shared the coach with a group of geriatrics, who, despite their advancing years, were surprisingly lively and full of earthy humour and kept us laughing from start to finish.



Keith and me during our holiday in Australia

So there it is: my life story so far. Writing this has been an extremely powerful, life-affirming process; it has reinforced for me how much I've been blessed with a rich and, largely, happy life, supported by a loving family and friends and a hugely varied career. And it's not over yet! As I prepare for a new chapter in my life, developing a business offering life stories and tributes, I am thrilled and excited by the possibilities of helping others to re-connect with the essence of who they truly all, to celebrate and affirm their own lives and to create their own unique piece of personal history to pass on to future generations. As I hope my family will do with this story.



Having chocolate fun with grandson Charlie

