walking in a trick introduced by a dolphin, Billie, who spent time in captivity and was thought to have watched trained dolphins do it. She would also see the same groups turn into a lethal strike team, herding fish towards shore and into the shallow water to make them easy prey.

"I knew I was changing," Horrill says. "I probably couldn't have put my finger on the one thing that was making it happen but I could feel myself evolving. I knew that I was learning lessons."

They became her family during that time and Horrill took her first concrete step into public life by setting up, with Bossley, the Australian Dolphin Research Foundation.

She became a spokeswoman and advocate for the dolphins in the Port River. Channel 9 became the foundation's first sponsors and she began doing dolphin stories for TV, then broadened her journalism into other environment issues such as kerbside recycling, which was being rolled out. "I started going on daytime TV, they wanted me to talk about other things – the environment, catchments, worms, birds, recycling," Horrill says.

She found her voice. After being told for so many years she had nothing to say and never would, now she was speaking and people were listening. "It was remarkable, I couldn't believe it," she says. "I still felt that I wasn't good enough to do it but it was important, so I would do it anyway. To have that voice was life-changing for me."

Jock taught Horrill another memorable lesson. He would follow Bossley's boat to an invisible border that marked the limit of his safe haven but Bossley decided to build his confidence in the hope he might one day swim into the river. Jock followed the boat further each time, doing tricks in the air, flinging himself into the sky and flopping back into the water before Bossley would turn the boat around. One day, he led Jock on and kept going. A pod surrounded him, their sonars going off madly as they checked each other out. Then Jock went back to his haven.

It happened a few times and then, one day when they went to the channels, he was gone. The next time they saw him, he was swimming among other dolphins and had no interest in playing with Horrill or the boat.

"Well, I guess this is quite the day," said Bossley, tears in his eyes.

It was a lesson hard won, but important. "When he went out of his comfort zone and met the other dolphins, he taught me about bravery, about how to leave the area," Horrill says. "I learnt all about the necessity of doing that because I saw Jock do it."

She fell into being the Channel 7 weather presenter after working at channels 9 and 10 doing mainly environmental stories. Whenever she changed jobs and went to another network, the dolphins went with her and she would have written into her contract their sponsorship of the foundation. While at Channel 10, she was asked to make a documentary and decided it had to be about the Port River dolphins – not her personal story but a more dispassionate piece about what how unusual it was to find dolphins living harmoniously so close to industry and to people.

"The story was really about the Port River and why it was such a special place and why we must protect it," Horrill says. "I remember sitting in a room with old tapes of me with Jock

MY FRIENDSHIP with Jock developed over three years while working as an assistant to Dr Bossley's dolphin research program on the Port River.

I swam and played with Jock many, many times, enjoying his caring, gentle and often mischievous personality.

He touched my heart and my life so very deeply that to put such feelings into words would not do them justice.

He allowed me experiences I will never forget and memories that are irreplaceable. He made me feel so special because he was there for no other reason than he wanted to be.

One of the most rewarding times was not so long ago when I aided in cutting off a mass of fishing line and hooks that had become entangled in his already mangled dorsal fin.

Jock was a dolphin who liked and trusted people so fully, perhaps too fully, and gave so much of his special friendship.

Farewell Jock, I know that I and others who knew you will miss you and your caring, giving nature terribly. My only hope is that, in his life, Jock gained half as much joy, love and happiness from my company and others like me as I did from his.

MELODY DIANE HORRILL

and it was a reflective moment for me because I realised how much I had learned from him and the other dolphins in the river."

The documentary was picked up nationally and then CNN bought it, resulting in a trip to Atlanta and a personal meeting with one of the documentary's fans, CNN head Ted Turner. Partly because of that, and the generally higher awareness of the significance of the dolphins, in 2005 the Rann government declared the Port River the Adelaide Dolphin Sanctuary.

One day, when her friend Jane Reilly was on leave, she was asked to step into her role and present the weather on Channel 10. "You're a natural fit Mel," her chief of staff said. "You do all the environmental stuff."

As a result of occasionally filling in, she was approached by Channel 7 to be their full-time weather presenter and took the job because its ratings were higher and she could reach more people, again on the condition they sponsor the foundation. She became a nightly fixture at the end of the news, giving an informative rundown of the weather and what lay in store.

"I was happier in myself and I always felt so grateful," Horrill says. "Sometimes I would think, 'How did this girl from Brighton who was a bit lost, dealing with these issues, end up here?'"

After moving to Melbourne in 2014, where she worked until last year at the Bureau of Meteorology, Horrill, 53, has decided to use her voice again, in a book that has already got a US publishing deal. This time, she is telling her very personal story and she did it not just to continue her support of the dolphins – who are still afflicted by mysterious illnesses despite the sanctuary – but also to inspire and encourage others who might feel as lost as she once did.

"It is easy to feel enveloped by hopelessness," she says. "I'm not saying I have the answers but I am saying I found some light through the total unconditional acceptance of a dolphin and his mates. For me, that was my salvation." ■

A Dolphin Called Jock by Melody Horrill: Allen & Unwin, $33

FEARS FOR PORT RIVER DOLPHINS

Dolphin deaths in the Port River section of the Adelaide Dolphin Sanctuary are mystifying SA government scientists while their unofficial custodian, marine scientist Dr Mike Bossley, fears a potentially fatal decline in the colony.

The Port River colony of around 30 dolphins – all of which Bossley knows by name – has dropped to 20 since 2017 when Bossley began noticing that few calves were surviving. "None of the calves born in the past two years have survived to be weaned and, in the last three or four years, 16 calves have been born and 13 have died," Bossley says. "Three haven't been weaned yet and they are still with their mums."

On top of that, five young males died in a short time last year. Researchers who autopsied the bodies identified a myriad of underlying problems, including ulcers, parasite infections, malnutrition, and hearing and vision loss, but no single cause. Background pollution, depleted prey in the Port River and encounters with foreign objects, including boat strikes and swallowed fish hooks, all appeared to contribute.

The calves could not be autopsied because the mothers keep their dead babies with them while they grieve. Bossley says mothers typically protected their dead infants for more than a week, making retrieval difficult.

"We don't want to body-snatch because the mother needs to do her grieving," he says. "By the time she is ready to let go we usually can't find (the body)."

Bossley says if the source of the problem is not discovered and fixed, the Port River dolphins faced a potentially terminal population decline.

"I am very hopeful that it won't be that but I am quite anxious about it, to be honest," he says.

Bossley, who co-founded the Australian Dolphin Rescue Foundation with Melody Horrill, said he still kept records of the dolphins in the Port River estuary but this was just one section of the dolphin sanctuary. The welfare of dolphins in other parts of the sanctuary was not as well known.

Bossley has done more than anyone in the past 30 years to advocate for the Port River colony and promote the significance of dolphins coexisting so closely with people and industry in a major city. The Adelaide Dolphin Sanctuary is well respected internationally, which means Adelaide's success in working out how to live alongside them will be closely watched.

"If we can find a way of living sympathetically with the dolphins – which means controlling what we do so we don't have a negative impact on them – I think that will be extremely valuable," Bossley says.

One concern, he says, may be the presence of contaminants from Garden Island – a former refuse dump – which was where the five adults spent a lot of their time.

Dolphins, Whales and Me by Mike Bossley: Moonglow Publishing, $35

A mother dolphin grieves over the body of her calf in the Port River. This mourning period typically lasts a week, making autopsies difficult.