Take5

# REAL LIFE: Meet the special Australian dolphin helped this woman heal

He had physical scars while mine were mental

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***Content Warning: This article discusses domestic violence and suicide which may be triggering for some readers.***

## Melody Horrill, 53, from Melbourne, Victoria, shares her story with Take 5's Mitchell Jordan:

Tears began to well up in my eyes as my uni lecturer, Dr Mike Bossley, showed our class images of dolphins that had been kept at theme parks.

"Keeping marine animals in concrete pools is inhumane," he said.

I worried I was the only one crying but, looking around, I saw other students were just as affected.

Who wouldn't be?

One photo of an adult dolphin in a tiny pool hardly wider than the length of its body with a blow-up alligator tied to its dorsal fin for company had us all crying.

Mike explained how he had been studying the behaviour of dolphins at Adelaide's Port River for years after reading about one swimming in the river with a racehorse and a dog.

At 21 years old, I'd gone to uni to study psychology.

Steve & Melody with Jock (Image: supplied)

I hadn't expected to be so drawn to dolphins, the subject of many of Mike's lectures, but he was right when he told us: "Humans could learn a thing or two from dolphins."

My own family life had been far from happy. My father, John, was violent towards my mother, Doreen.

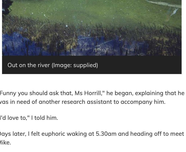
On many occasions, I'd witnessed them fighting.

When my mother had enough and we left, my father had soon tracked us down and attacked Mum.

In 1987, he was found guilty of unlawful wounding and given 18 months in prison.

He later died by suicide, leaving a note to my younger brother, Mark, and me, disowning us.

I hoped that uni would be the start of a new life for me, and after class one day, I approached Mike to ask if he ever took students out to visit the dolphins.



Out on the river (Image: supplied)

"Funny you should ask that, Ms Horrill," he began, explaining that he was in need of another research assistant to accompany him.

"I'd love to," I told him.

Days later, I felt euphoric waking at 5.30am and heading off to meet Mike.

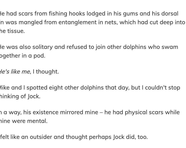
We took a dinghy out onto the water and were putting along in silence when I saw a blobby clump kissing the surface just a few feet away.

"That sort of looks like a dorsal fin," I said.

Mike stopped the motor.

"Yep," he replied. "That's Jock. He lives in this small part of the river."

Jock the dolphin circled the boat curiously.



A special bond (Image: supplied)

He had scars from fishing hooks lodged in his gums and his dorsal fin was mangled from entanglement in nets, which had cut deep into the tissue.

He was also solitary and refused to join other dolphins who swam together in a pod.

*He's like me,* I thought.

Mike and I spotted eight other dolphins that day, but I couldn't stop thinking of Jock.

In a way, his existence mirrored mine – he had physical scars while mine were mental.

I felt like an outsider and thought perhaps Jock did, too.

After a few weeks, Mike let me jump into the water with Jock.

Sidling up to me, Jock let me run a hand over his side, which felt like satin.

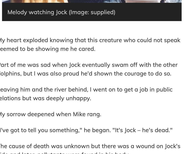
For almost three years, I visited Jock as often as I could.

He'd dive beside me, allowing me to touch him.

One time, he nudged at my feet which were on the sea floor.

"What's he doing?" I asked.

"He thinks you're in trouble," Mike explained.



Melody watching Jock (Image: supplied)

My heart exploded knowing that this creature who could not speak seemed to be showing me he cared.

Part of me was sad when Jock eventually swam off with the other dolphins, but I was also proud he'd shown the courage to do so.

Leaving him and the river behind, I went on to get a job in public relations but was deeply unhappy.

My sorrow deepened when Mike rang.

"I've got to tell you something," he began. "It's Jock – he's dead."

The cause of death was unknown but there was a wound on Jock's side and later, pollutants were found in his body.

"He was my best friend," I wept, thinking back to our time together.

Although my father had died by suicide years before, the depth of my grief for Jock was unlike anything I'd ever felt; it was like someone had ripped out my heart.

Weeks passed and I was an emotional wreck, but I soon realised I had to do something positive.

So, later that year, Mike and I formed the Australian Dolphin Research Foundation.

Melody has published her memoir, A Dolphin Named Jock (Image: Supplied)

We developed a program for people to sponsor a Port River dolphin and campaign for their wellbeing.

Later, investigations were launched by the government to look into the death toll of local dolphins, which is still ongoing.

Knowing I was doing something proactive made life more worthwhile.

Recently, I've published my memoir, *A Dolphin Called Jock,* (Allen & Unwin) to tell his story and to share the plight of local dolphins. Jock really did heal me.

His boldness in venturing out of his comfort zone to connect with other dolphins taught me that courage is the most important quality in life.

Despite my scars, when I smile now, it's genuine.

And for that I have Jock to thank.

***If you or someone you know needs support, contact Lifeline 13 11 14, Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800 or Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636.***