

## Stephanie, 30

### Office manager and opera singer who battled anorexia nervosa for more than 15 years, SYDNEY

Office manager and opera singer, Stephanie, 30, Sydney, fought the potentially devastating mental illness, anorexia nervosa, for more than half of her life.

Raised with her younger sister Carmen in Albury, NSW, by loving parents, Stephanie began her battle with the illness at 15 years of age.

In 2005, after her distressed mother discovered diet pills in Stephanie's bedroom drawer, she was taken to The Oak House in Victoria, where she began a 12-month-long rehabilitation process.

Because she was still living in Albury at the time, Stephanie's rehabilitation included four-hour-long, return day trips to Melbourne every Tuesday.

After graduating from high school, Stephanie regained her physical health, but says she continued to battle the psychological ramifications of anorexia nervosa.

At 20 years of age, Stephanie chose to relocate to Canberra to undertake a three-year-long Bachelor of Music in Classical Voice at the Australian National University (ANU) focusing on theatre studies, from which she graduated with high distinction in 2013.

In October 2015, while working as a full-time make-up artist in Sydney, Stephanie was continuing to battle the mental demons associated with anorexia nervosa. After experiencing an epiphany, Stephanie became determined to seek professional help and seize control of her health.

**This is Stephanie's story.**

"It's something that enters so quietly and takes over your entire life. You become really selfish, and before you know it, you've given up everything, and you've got nothing to show for it," said Stephanie.

When an anxious Stephanie began high school, she began to severely restrict her food intake. Over time, she developed an obsession with remaining underweight.

"My anorexia nervosa developed really slowly. I was always very shy and nervous.

"When I was in year six, I became terrified of starting high school. At the time, I found comfort in the feeling of being curled up in a ball with hunger. This allowed me to deal with my anxiety, and in my young brain at the time, the rules of my eating disorder allowed me to stop my emotions from overwhelming me," Stephanie said.

"After starting high school, my anorexia nervosa slowly escalated. My behaviours became obsessive.



**more#**

I had rules which precluded me from sitting on chairs, and for always eating with my fingers.”

The daughter of what she describes as “very strict, protective parents”, Stephanie could only perform her obsessive weight loss practices at night, including exercising in her bedroom.

When Stephanie was 15, her mother, who battles anxiety, confronted her about the diet pills in her bedroom and shortly after, Stephanie was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa by a local doctor.

In May 2005, Stephanie and her family drove together to The Oak House in Melbourne to commence a year of rehabilitation, which included gaining weight. Her rehabilitation involved waking up at seven o'clock every Tuesday to drive four hours to Melbourne for an afternoon therapy session.

“My rehabilitation focused purely on gaining weight, without touching on my mental problems.

“Unfortunately, I felt that I wasn't provided support for my psychological health. So I felt like I had just exchanged one problem for another, because I had grown to hate the weight I had gained,” said Stephanie.

“I knew the stress I was causing my sister and parents, so rather than focusing on getting better, I considered gaining weight to be my punishment.”

Much to Stephanie's dismay, at the conclusion of her therapy she was released from rehabilitation as her treating health professionals considered her to be well enough to continue to mount her own recovery.

Two years after graduating from high school, and highly conscious of her anorexia nervosa, Stephanie moved to Canberra to commence her studies at ANU. After graduating, she chose to pursue a career as a make-up artist and to relocate to Sydney for work.

Towards the end of 2015, Stephanie finally realised that her life was too precious to live under the “list of rules” controlled by her anorexia nervosa.

“I realised no one else could help me, but me.

“From the outside, people thought I was fine because I'd gained weight. But in reality, I had a huge amount of anxiety completely ruling my life,” Stephanie said.

Stephanie has chosen to participate in the Eating Disorders Genetics Initiative (EDGI) – the world's largest genetic investigation of eating disorders ever performed. The study is aiming to identify the hundreds of genes that influence a person's risk of developing anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder to improve treatment, and ultimately, save lives. She is hoping her contribution will help others living with, or predisposed to developing eating disorders.

“EDGI is a really important initiative investigating the genes that cause eating disorders. Personally, I believe eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, are a product of genetics and an individual's environment.

“If the EDGI researchers can identify the genes that cause eating disorders, this could help to improve treatment, and most importantly, save lives. It's an amazing study to be contributing to,” said Stephanie.

“All it takes is a small amount of time to complete the survey, and if you qualify, to provide a saliva sample.

“I urge anyone who is living with, or has recovered from an eating disorder, to participate,” Stephanie said.

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Should you suspect that you, or a loved one, may be living with an eating disorder, speak to your local healthcare professional without delay, or head to [www.insideoutinstitute.org.au](http://www.insideoutinstitute.org.au) to [complete their screener and assessment, and to access more information and professional support.](#)

Australian professional patient support services offering 24/7 helpline services include:

- Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636
- LifeLine: 13 11 14
- Men's Line Australia: 1300 78 99 78
- Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800.

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