

## Special Section

### An Introduction: Sasha Alysha Stumpers

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Dr Sasha Alysha Stumpers, emerging academic, psychologist and well-respected researcher, died on September 23rd, 2012. She was 33 years of age.

I first met Sasha in 2002. We met quite by chance outside a lecture hall on a warm summer evening at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Western Australia (WA). While waiting for our lecturer to arrive, we spent twenty minutes or so sitting on a bench, watching birds collect nectar from the nearby wattles while the sun went down. We talked about our partiality for travel, the coming year of study, work, and possible future

career pathways. Little did I know at the time that our chance meeting would grow into a deeply loving relationship and that I would spend the next 10 years of my life with this fascinating woman. Sasha shaped my being as man in such a way, that I have yet been unable to satisfactorily put into words the extent of my gratitude and feelings for her. So that said, and as her colleague, friend, and fiancé, it is my great honour to write the introduction to this special section of the Australian Community Psychologist (ACP) showcasing Sasha's PhD work and to share a small insight into her life as a person, as well as her academic journey as a student and

development as a psychologist.

Known for her compassionate and kind-hearted spirit, Sasha was a graduate of the community psychology program at ECU and completed her PhD studies under the supervision of Professor Lynne Cohen and Associate Professor Julie Ann Pooley. Achieving a Bachelor of Arts with first class honours, she was a member of the Golden Key National Honour Society for scholastic achievement and excellence, and was recognised in 2008 as being in the top 100 students at ECU. A recipient of a full-time Australian Postgraduate Scholarship Award, she was also a sessional lecturer with both the School of Psychology and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) at ECU, as well as an associate member of the Australian Psychological Society (APS).

Sasha was born two months premature on April 21st 1979 and weighed only 1350 grams. She grew up in the Northern suburb of Balga, Perth and by the time she was 10 years of age she had already married a boy at her primary school in a mock wedding ceremony, although the photos suggest she was a little more enthusiastic about it than her young suitor. A curious, sociable and happy child, during her primary school years Sasha achieved well academically and made a smooth transition into secondary school. In addition to the usual secondary school subjects she also studied aviation, was elected to the Student Council and won several school and rotary citizenship awards. By and large, school for Sasha was a positive experience, full of fun and laughter and she would often fondly reminisce about how it had foremost given her many close and cherished lifelong friendships.

Entering university Sasha initially enrolled in a media studies degree but feeling out of place and surrounded by what she described as “self important egos” (Stumpers, personal reflection, 2008) she transferred a year later into the psychology program at ECU. As a student she excelled and found the structure of the ECU undergraduate psychology program resonated closely with her strong sense of social justice and desire

for learning opportunities that had real world applications. It was during her undergraduate that she also began working part-time in a trendy Perth café which allowed her to finance and pursue her one great passion in life, travel. Sasha found the opportunity to explore somewhere new, meet new people, learn a language, and form a connection with different places enthralling. During her life she managed to travel to Canada, Chile, New Zealand, to most countries in Europe, and to the United States of America, as well as extensively across Australia and her home state of WA.

In 2003 Sasha was invited onto the psychology honours program at ECU. As a part of her fourth year studies she selected a community psychology unit because of its practical component as it gave her the opportunity to gain direct experience working with children. It was during this time that she also undertook volunteer work with the Red Cross SHARK program supporting and helping vulnerable children. Her ability to reach out and connect with young people was quickly recognised by the Principal of Balga Senior High School (BSHS). He subsequently employed her at the Balga Youth Program (BYP) to work with some of the most educationally at risk and disadvantaged youth in Perth. Instead of forcing already disengaged youth to attend school, BYP took schooling to their homes and Sasha worked tirelessly to forge genuine, trusting relationships, and a sense of connectedness with the merits of education. Her gentle but committed approach would often rapidly dissolve the resistance of the young people she worked with, and both parents and school staff highly valued her compassionate nature.

Sasha’s experiences at BYP shaped the focus of her honours project. It explored the perceptions of students finishing primary school about the impending transition to secondary school. She achieved first class honours and subsequently later published the findings of her research in the *International Journal Community, Work & Family*, titled: *‘A critical exploration of the school context for young adolescents completing primary*

*education*' (Stumpers, Breen, Pooley, Cohen, & Pike, 2005). This success encouraged Sasha to consider the community psychology masters program at ECU and while she did not initially see herself as a post-graduate student, it seemed to too good an opportunity to pass up. Balancing full-time employment at BYP with part-time study in the masters program, Sasha described this time in her life as "so personally rewarding and important for my development as a professional and a person" (Stumpers, personal reflection, 2008). To her great surprise, two years into the masters program Sasha was asked to consider transferring into the PhD program at ECU and she later recalled, "so here I was... this little girl from Balga contemplating a PhD" (Stumpers, personal reflection, 2008).

For Sasha, the opportunity to complete a PhD foremost caused her to ask what does a PhD mean, and how would a further four years of study change me? She later reflected, "it is a strange thing to consider undertaking such a feat especially when you have never had such an inclination" (Stumpers, personal reflection, 2008). Comforted by the support and guidance offered by Professor Cohen and Associate Professor Pooley, Sasha began her PhD studies and for the first time started to genuinely acknowledge her own personal growth and professional progress as an emerging academic and researcher. Near this time, Sasha also made a career change and began working as a Research Officer with the Australian Indigenous HealthInfonet at Kurungkurl Katitjin, ECU. During her seven years with the HealthInfoNet she promoted and disseminated research about health and wellbeing issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and coordinated the publication of an annual overview on the health of Aboriginal people in WA.

While still passionate about education and working with children and young people, and after much deliberation, Sasha decided her PhD would investigate social constructions of ageing. A decision that came about after consultation in 2007 with the Council on the Ageing in WA and the Living Longer Living Stronger program of the Vario Wellness Clinic at ECU. In 2008, Sasha

joined the Australian Research Council/ National Health and Medical Research Council Research Network in Ageing Well and also become involved with the Emerging Researchers in Ageing (ERA), an initiative of Professor Helen Bartlett and the Australasian Centre on Ageing at the University of Queensland. She also attended the 41st National Conference of the Australian Association of Gerontology in 2008. This enabled Sasha to network with leading international experts in the ageing field and in particular to meet Professor Judith Phillips of Swansea University, Wales, UK and then President of the British Society for Gerontology.

Following this, Sasha applied for one of 25 placements to attend a week long ERA Master Class held in Brisbane at the University of Queensland and then secured a \$10,000 funding grant from the ERA International Exchange Program so she could extend her PhD project to include an international component. In 2009, and hosted by Professor Judith Phillips, Sasha took part in a 9-week exchange with the Centre for Innovative Ageing at Swansea University, Wales, UK and collected data from several different Welsh communities for her PhD project. While there, Sasha presented her research at the 2009 annual British Society for Gerontology conference and visited government and non-government ageing research centres in Bath, Cardiff, Keele, London, Oxford, and Sheffield, as well as visiting the Beth Johnson Foundation, the Welsh Government Assembly, and attending the AGM for Age Concern. On her return she attended an ERA gathering in Melbourne to disseminate the findings from her international exchange. Sasha subsequently submitted her PhD in early 2012.

Sasha received the news that she had passed her PhD by email while we were in Las Vegas, USA. We had just arrived at our hotel and were preparing to undertake a three-week road trip camping and hiking trails in several of the national parks on the East Coast of America. I cannot remember what we excitedly spoke about at the time, but after she had digested the feedback from the

reviewers, I do recall that we spent a quiet moment that evening just sitting and watching an orange and red sunset settle in over the busy strip below. While we sat there, I could not only see the relief in her face but also feel her personal sense of accomplishment. The PhD journey for Sasha was a challenging and rewarding experience that she chipped away at each day, but one that was driven by her compassion for others and a genuine belief in the value of community psychology. So I sincerely hope the following article does justice to all of her hard work and that it goes some way to highlighting “the importance of investigating the experience of ageing from the perspective of those who have experience with it” (Stumpers, 2012).

Following her passing, Sasha was posthumously awarded the Robin Winkler Award in 2013 for her outstanding doctoral research project, *An exploration of the experience and social construction of ageing: Perspectives from older adults in a healthy ageing program and those from Western Australian and Welsh communities*. Sasha’s work and engagement with the field of psychology and ageing was deemed as going “beyond the level that is normally expected of a doctoral student” (personal communication, selection committee, 2014).

### References

- Stumpers, S. A. (2008). Forum speech – personal reflections. Edith Cowan University.
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