

2022 Mental Health Month ACT Community Ambassadors



Beth Gaswood (they/them or she/hes)

I feel like the luckiest human being on the planet to get to live the life I live. I am an avid gym junkie, who loves music and has a passion for self-development and empowering others to lead happier, healthier and fulfilling lives. This includes volunteering with and now working for Mental Illness Education ACT.

But a few years ago, I was in a very different situation.

Growing up in Tasmania, I always wanted to be a police officer, so I could help people and make a difference in the community. At 20, I moved to Alice Springs to start my policing career.

A few years later, I found myself in the remote Aboriginal community of Tennant Creek, about five hours north of Alice Springs. For a small town of 3000 people, the 50 police in Tennant Creek are still under-resourced to deal with extremely high rates of crime.

The community is remote and isolated, and there wasn't anything to do except work, so I worked A LOT. Long hours, day after day, for months without leave. Because as horrible and stressful as my job could be, I loved it. I lived and breathed it.

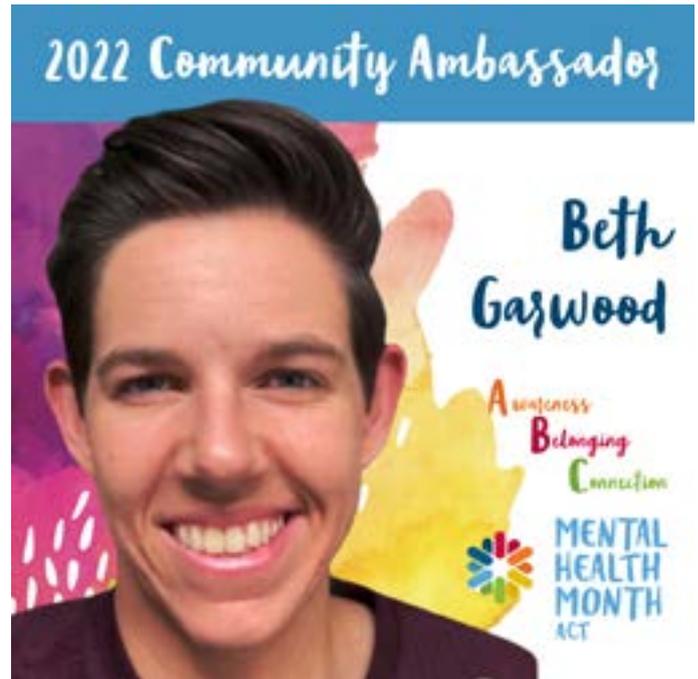
I was also good at it. After a year, I was appointed the officer in charge of an operation to address the high rates of alcohol-fuelled violence, mainly domestic violence and child abuse, on top of my large workload investigating serious crimes.

Being who I am, I not only jumped at the chance to make a difference but took it to the next level. I worked harder and longer. I stopped exercising and eating properly. I regularly had broken sleep from callouts at night, but soon found I didn't need sleep. I could work non-stop and to a high standard. Everyone thought I was superhuman.

But I had become so angry and irritable when I'm usually an easy-going, happy and fun-loving person. I got frustrated with people who couldn't keep up with my ideas or standards, things not happening as quickly as I wanted, poor decision-making of management, etc. This was definitely a sign that something was very wrong, but those around me only saw the hard-working, motivated, passionate person who got things done.

In 2018, former PM Malcolm Turnbull visited Tennant Creek after the serious issues in town hit the mainstream media. When I briefed him on my op, he said my passion and dedication were an inspiration. He wanted me to stay on for another three years and would give me the resources to make it work on a larger scale.

Years later, I was watching an episode of Q+A, and suddenly the PM was talking about how my work inspired him to develop what is now known as the 'Barkly Region Deal'—something he also wrote about in his book *A Bigger Picture* (2020).



At the time, I honestly believed I would 'save' everyone living in remote communities under these conditions, faced with so much disadvantage, and that it was my mission in life to do so. (I would later learn this was visions of grandiosity and an unrealistic sense of superiority.)

But a month later, the PM was ousted from office, and I was faced with three horrific incidents involving children in the community in as many weeks. As my operation focused on protecting children, I felt like it was MY fault, that I had failed to protect them. I felt incredibly guilty, worthless. It broke me.

I went to the doctor, thinking I just needed a few days off to get back on my A game. The doctor handed me a medical certificate with 'three months' written on it. I looked at her dumbfounded, and all she said was, "You're done."

I remember thinking, "You don't know what you are talking about, doctor." So I took the medical certificate, marched down the road to the police station and handed it to my boss. I expected him to fight, to say, "We don't want to/can't lose you."

Instead, all I got was "No worries". He didn't even look at me, just took the certificate, looked at it, dumped it on his desk and continued with what he was doing.

My world came crashing down around me. In my head, I had failed every person living in a remote community, and my job, which was all I had, didn't care that I wasn't coping.

This was my lowest point. I actively planned to end my life.

Somehow, I got myself home to Tasmania. Thinking I had depression associated with stress and burnout, I went on holiday for a couple of weeks. By the time I got home, I was back 'up' again. I remember walking on the beach with my mother, excitedly and passionately explaining my plans:

1. Return to Tennant Creek and 'save the children'.
2. Buy a Nissan 370z (really practical in the dessert... Not).
3. Open and run a gym at the same time.

I felt invincible, but mum was worried. So I agreed to go to the doctor even though I couldn't understand why. People don't go to the doctor when they are happy!

I will never forget the experience in the doctor's office. I was sitting there with the biggest, stupidest grin on my face and my poor mum was in tears. The doctor could not look at either of us, just stared at his computer. A short time later, I was in hospital and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, triggered by PTSD.

To some people, that news may be heartbreaking (due to stigma). But I have never felt so relieved in my life. To have an explanation for how I had been feeling and the extreme ups and downs. To learn that I did not have to continue living that way.

Then began the long journey of recovery and management. I was lucky with medication, but I also had A LOT to learn about balance and self care.

I finally started listening to my mother's advice. She had been telling me about this damn '[pie idea](#)' for years. Essentially, the pie is a circle made up of segments (or pieces) of all the little things you do every day to keep well and better manage when stressors come up. I know that as long as I keep doing all of these things and taking my medication, I can stay on top of my mental health and tackle anything life throws at me. But if these things start to drop off, it's an early warning sign that things may be headed off track.

Analysing my pie has helped me balance the things I need to do to keep me well, and I can adapt and change the sizes of the pieces of pie to respond to whatever circumstances I am faced with (like COVID lockdowns).

The pie isn't something you can just refer to when things go wrong. It's something I do every day. I used to use an app to track my activities (pieces of pie), but it has now become a way of life: routine, structure and habits that help me prepare and respond to the uncertainty of life.

I was able to go back to policing for another 18 months. I moved into non-operational roles to limit exposure to triggers (excessive stress, trauma and irregular sleep schedules). But stigma is a serious issue for those living with bipolar, and I felt that my mental health was something I had to hide and be ashamed of. Sadly, this culture is still ingrained in front-line first responder and defence agencies.

Two years on, the pie and other strategies I use to manage my mental health have gotten me through leaving policing, COVID lockdown and two different periods in which I found myself homeless, jobless, directionless and without a support network outside of my parents.

Today, I can honestly say I am living my most authentic, happy, healthy and fulfilling life, more so than I could have ever hoped for before my diagnosis.

