

## Two of us



Interviews by Linley Wilkie Published: June 21, 2014 - 3:00AM

**Melbourne identical twins Emma Gee, 33, and Bec Majernik have always been quite different, but even more so since Emma suffered a stroke. The former occupational therapist now runs a motivational-speaking business, while her sister juggles its marketing with her own young family.**

**Emma's story** When we were preschoolers, Bec and I won a "most identical twins in Victoria" competition, but she has always been the more daring and dominant person. I'd dive off the diving board if she did first, she would always climb the highest tree and I'd try to keep up. If we were arguing, I would sulk and Bec would yell.

In our 20s, we did one-on-one things together, such as running. I studied occupational therapy at university and eventually worked with neuro outpatients, including stroke survivors.

When I was 24, I went to Borneo with three girlfriends and we climbed Mount Kinabalu. The high altitude, combined with dehydration, caused an arteriovenous malformation (AVM) - a tangled web of arteries and veins in the brain that usually forms in utero - to bleed. This wasn't discovered for a month, during which time I was misdiagnosed with everything. An angiogram finally revealed the time bomb in my head.

Bec was waiting at our aunty and uncle's house while I had the AVM

removed. When the doctor rang my family to say all went well, Bec said, "Something's not right with Em", then she collapsed to the ground. Meanwhile, I was returned to theatre after an unexpected bleed and that's when I stroked.

I woke up nine days later and my vision was blurred and I couldn't speak properly. People thought Bec might be able to understand me, but she couldn't. My intense rehab lasted nine months and I had to relearn everything, including how to walk and talk. I was permanently left with poor balance, limited sensation on my left side and significant vision and speech difficulties. There were days when I wasn't motivated and doctors would suggest antidepressants, but that was me grieving and forming a new identity, separate from Bec, in a way.

Physically I couldn't do much because I was in a wheelchair and mentally I was going insane. Despite getting tired, my memory was really sharp. I couldn't relate to my friends, and I had to force myself to visit cafes and work out new ways of doing things, like drinking. Otherwise I'd be left behind. As an occupational therapist, I'd worked with families of stroke survivors and had seen how it affected them as well. I was very mindful of that.

After Bec moved to London she helped me start Shoestrings, an organisation aimed at tying communities together. That's how I first made contact with the National Stroke Foundation, where I managed its online support program. I also gave my first public speech at the Shoestrings launch and Bec flew from London to surprise me.

I run an inspirational-speaking business that presents talks at schools, businesses and hospitals.

My business can make a difference by educating people about disability and how to integrate it into everyday life. Bec does my marketing and we also do yoga together. I think Bec feels guilty for not being there much, but she has her own family. I totally respect that.

I was maid of honour at Bec's wedding and one of my goals while I was in rehab was to walk unaided down the aisle. I practised on a cricket pitch and when the day came, I was able to walk.

I was scared that when she had her first baby, it would really differentiate us but her three children absolutely love me and they're so important to me.

I babysit when I can, but it's always in the back of my head that I can't do as much as a normal aunty.

Bec's someone who's very positive and open to possibilities and she has definitely instilled that in me. Now we're so different, I know I need to be strong.

**Bec's story** Emma was always into the twin thing, but I saw myself as an individual, which is why I dyed my hair dark. As kids, Em showed me a sensitivity that I needed.

Before her operation, we were told she might have brain damage, not be able to move properly, or possibly die and I had to say goodbye. When the doctors rang us afterwards and said everything went well, I couldn't believe it. I was ringing friends with the news, but suddenly I couldn't breathe properly and fell to the ground. The phone rang and Dad told us, "Em's not good, they've opened her up again."

After doctors discovered Em's AVM, I had an MRI out of paranoia. I couldn't sit there knowing I might have a time bomb in my head. It might sound selfish, but I just needed to know what the situation was. It was horrible telling her I was okay, almost like slapping her in the face.

I think she was surprised I chose her as my maid of honour. For her it was so important to walk down the aisle, but it didn't bother me if she crawled, I was happy she was there.

While I was in London I helped Em start Shoestrings and with the photography exhibition at its launch. It was the first thing she did, just out of rehab and just speaking. I needed to be there for her, despite the distance, and wanted to give her a sense of purpose, because she had so much in her and had survived so much. Part of it was probably guilt.

I surprised her and flew back for the photography exhibition. Because I was in marketing, I contacted the National Stroke Foundation and asked for their support. After that Em started her job at the Foundation, which gave her something to focus on.

As the person who does the marketing for her inspirational-speaking business, I get to promote someone who's a survivor, someone who will influence and inspire people. I've always felt my role is to push Emma.

I haven't run since her stroke. I would have felt bad because it was so important to her. Now we do yoga together, which is awesome because she's so inspiring.

I have days where I don't sleep because of the kids and I'm frustrated and angry; then I think of Em. She teaches you to be in the moment every day and to appreciate it.

Our twinship doesn't matter as much any more. But we have a friendship and connection that no one could ever replace.

*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/lifestyle/two-of-us-20140616-3a6fz.html>*