



TWO OF US

STORY BY Rosamund Burton | PHOTOGRAPH BY Joshua Morris

Maree Smith (left), 60, and Maree Jenner, 59, both have achondroplasia and met 50 years ago at the first national convention of the SSPA, the Short Statured People of Australia. They have supported and helped one another ever since.

MAREE SMITH: I was 10, and Mum took me to the SSPA convention, so I could see I wasn't the only short-statured person in the world. It was at Port Macquarie. We were on the beach and a family came towards us – this chatty, curly-haired girl with her mum and sisters. We had the same name, were similar ages and both from the country.

I came back from the convention feeling that I was six foot tall and could do and become whatever I wanted, and that height had nothing to do with it. My three brothers and I grew up on a farm near Blayney, NSW. I got a diploma in secretarial studies at TAFE and worked for a local solicitor. Then I joined the public service in Canberra and bought a unit in Queanbeyan.

Maree would occasionally visit Canberra and we always got together, and she'd often stay with me. Maree came down when I became president of the Queanbeyan Rotaract Club. She did my face for me, and applied that much makeup that I hardly recognised myself.

Maree was the sophisticated and cool one, and she smoked. We went to a nightclub and I bought a packet of cigarillos to be cool, too.

I lit one and put it in my mouth, then thought I don't even like the smell, let alone the taste.

I admire her immensely for her get up and go. I was blown away that she went into nursing, because I thought that was never a career option for a short-statured person.

When she started going out with this Dutch guy, Hans, they stayed for the weekend with my husband Pete and me. She told me she was unsure about being with a short-statured man. I'd had my reservations about being with Pete, because, apart from Maree and several other people I've met at SSPA, all my friends are tall.

On our first date, Pete took me to the circus. I hate circuses and the stairs up to the stand were so high we had to clamber up virtually on our knees. I don't know why I agreed to a second date, but I did. Soon I realised that it didn't matter that we were the same height, because I could see, like I do with Maree, a beautiful soul.

Maree moved to Holland, where she was with Hans for 10 years, then stayed there another four years. When she came back in 2015, she sent me an email. It's been like starting a whole new friendship.

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I love Maree's hearty laugh and that she can strike up a conversation with anyone. She brings me out of myself, because I've got to get a word in somehow. I admire her determination – she's just like a little tornado.

She's a vegetarian and I love a lamb chop. But we relish our differences and there's a huge respect for one another. I'm looking forward to going to the SSPA 50 year anniversary celebration with her in September. I'm very lucky that she keeps walking into my life.

MAREE JENNER: It was such a coincidence, when we met 50 years ago, that we had the same name and same condition. I grew in country NSW, Uralla, near Armidale, and before that convention, like Maree, I hadn't seen anyone else with dwarfism.

She's a very solid, stable person. She's quite conservative, but she's always enthusiastic about us doing things together, and it doesn't matter if it's five or eight years since we've seen one another. We both have a dry sense of humour and feed off one another.

She was a great role model, successfully working in positions within the Australian Government here and in Moscow and then Tokyo. I was so impressed she was working overseas, as this was something I aspired to. Maree was blown out by me being a nurse. I was the first person of short stature to register with the NSW Nurses Registration Board.

In 1999, when I fell in love with Hans, I got in contact with Maree, because by then she'd married Pete. I'd had relationships with average-height men, and with Hans it felt right, seeing eye to eye, holding hands like lovers and not like parent and child. But as a pair I thought we looked like a set of salt and pepper shakers. Spending time with Maree and Pete assisted me feel comfortable about being out with Hans.

Maree and I are often mistaken for one another. Strangers have asked me, "Are you Maree? And are you from Blayney?" And I reply, "Yes, and no, but I know who you think I am." On one occasion I was concerned that I had a serious memory problem, as a man was certain that we had been on a couple of dates together. Fortunately, Maree provided clarity.

In 2016 I started working as a local area coordinator, transiting people with a disability on to the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Maree doesn't see herself as someone with a disability. But the NDIS recognises dwarfism as a disability, because we need modifications to cars, homes, offices, not to mention clothes.

In my 20s I didn't consider I had a disability and I wanted to be equal. Now I see I do have one, but it doesn't stop me from doing anything. When I was young I wanted to be a tall woman like my sisters. I used to say, "Why is it me?" But now I love my life and the person that I am.

For both of us, family is very important. In 2012, Maree took early retirement, and she and Pete moved back to Blayney to be near her parents. Maree is extremely considerate, and has such love and compassion for Pete, who is now in a retirement home because of dementia and loss of mobility.

She is someone I can rely on and I've always appreciated her opinion. I look up to her – she's taller than me by six centimetres. ■