

BALLOONS

I LOVE MY LIFE

After a boring job selling hair removal gel, becoming Mrs Balloonatic put a big smile on my dial!



as we talked, I discovered he'd been travelling around England and Europe as Balloonatic for five years, and was now touring Australia and New Zealand.

We met again for more lessons, and I quickly got the hang of it. 'You're pretty good,' he said, as I fashioned dogs, love hearts and flowers. 'You should come to England and Europe and work with me.'

I was taken aback. 'I'll have to think about it,' I told him.

That night, my mind reeled. I'd always loved working with horses, and I imagined myself clowning to an audience on horseback. By morning, I'd made up my mind, and told my mum over breakfast.

'I'm going to go to London... to ballooniversity!' I said, unveiling my plan.

Mum thought I was crazy, but she knew I was happy.

Four months later I was standing on a London street, dressed in colourful clothes.

While we were only friends, John thought our act would work well if I called myself Mrs Balloonatic.

What would my family say if they saw me now? I wondered.

I had a ball, then returned to Australia, ready for my new career.

I lined up some school holiday performances at local shopping centres.

'You seem to love your work,' said a delighted mum.

I had to agree. I was telling my

friend Kim about it days later. 'I finally have a fun job that makes me smile,' I told her.

'Now, all you need is a man who can make you smile,' she laughed.

Thankfully, I didn't have to wait too long. The following Sunday I noticed a handsome dark-haired guy at my local Christian outreach centre.

'Hi - my name's Peter Patterson, who are you?' he said, holding out his hand.

'Michelle,' I smiled. We got talking and I discovered he was a classical French chef who owned a restaurant called Le Café

Français. 'And what do you do?' Peter asked me.

'I'm a balloonatic!' I answered, laughing.

The conversation then turned to my love of horses.

Peter liked riding too, so we made a date to meet up at a horse-riding day the following week. We had a great time and I just knew Peter was the one for me.

Within weeks, we'd become inseparable - and started planning our first holiday together. We hoped to spend New Year's Day, 2001, in Paris.

It was just weeks away, but Peter insisted on taking me out to a lovely restaurant for a special Christmas dinner.

Lights twinkled around us as the maitre d' handed me a beautiful bouquet of

Michelle Patterson's life was boring - until she discovered the joy of balloons

My eyes fixed on the dock as it clicked to 1pm. 'I'm off!' I chirped to my mum, Jenny.

We worked together selling hair removal gel from a shopping centre display.

I can't believe this is my life, I thought as I pushed through the crowds at the Highpoint Shopping Centre in Melbourne to get a sandwich.

At 31, I'd been doing this work for two years and longed for something different. Just what, I wasn't sure. I bought my lunch and took a seat to watch the centre's main attraction for the school holidays, Balloonatic the clown.

'C'mon kids!' he boomed. Balloonatic's audience was spellbound as he shaped animal hats and flowers out of balloons. The kids couldn't get enough of Balloonatic,

and the sound of his rattling coin tin proved it.

He must be making a fortune, I thought. Just then, Balloonatic caught me staring.

'Do you want a go?' he asked, twisting two balloons into the shape of a dog. 'I can give you a few lessons.'

'You're English,' I said, picking his accent.

'Yep... on a working holiday,' he smiled. I chatted with him for a while, and agreed to take him up on his offer. As I left, I handed him my phone number. 'Give me a call,' I said, waving goodbye.

Later that week, I met Balloonatic for a drink and a balloon twisting lesson.

He looked different without his clown outfit, but his alter ego, John Blackman, was every bit as loud.

Soon I was in hysterics, and



Oi, stop clowning around

Balloon loon My act attracted attention in London.

put me on a **HIGH!**



Look out for Pirate Pete!



PONY PANTOMIME TIME



Am I too big for my boots?

My husband Peter decided to join the pony panto as Pirate Pete.

Training the ponies was hard work, but they're very quick learners!

Kids love the show – almost as much as we love performing in it.

red and orange roses.

Next thing I knew, Peter had leant forward and was holding my hand. 'Marry me,' he said. 'But I want you to think about it first.'

'Oh my God!' I gasped. I knew my answer, but waited until we were standing on top of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris to tell him.

'Yes, I'll marry you,' I smiled, kissing him.

We had a magical trip and returned to Australia to tell everyone our news.

We'd been back a few weeks when I took Peter to meet my miniature, three-month-old pony, Jeramiah.

I know it sounds crazy, but while I love being Mrs Balloonatic – my real dream has always been to work with horses,' I told him. 'So I'm going to launch a travelling pony panto with performing horses – and balloons!'

'Go for it!' Peter said supportively.

Busily I set about planning our wedding, while also developing a plan for my travelling show, and by the time we married in March 2001 – in a romantic garden party and picnic in a park in South Morang, Vic –

my pony Jeramiah was 12 months old and ready for training.

Peter took time off from his restaurant and we drove to the stud at nearby Chirnside Park to begin our work.

'This is Tabitha,' I said, introducing Peter to the palomino I planned to train with Jeramiah.

'I thought I should have two performing ponies so neither one gets too tired.'

I started teaching Jeramiah and Tabitha tricks.

I'd tickle their ears to encourage them to say "no", or pop an apple behind their legs to train them to bend down and take a bow. 'I'm going to use a clicker to train them to nod their heads and say "yes",' I told Peter.

Within a week, both ponies were responding to the clicker and it was time to work on my panto script for Jeramiah Goes on Holiday.

After weeks of coaching, we were ready for a dress rehearsal.

'Have you packed your suitcase for the holiday Jeramiah?' I asked.

The pony nodded "yes".

I emptied the suitcase filled with the pony-sized costumes

I'd made. 'Is this your Superpony suit Jeramiah?'

He nodded.

I held out the giant pony tooth brush I'd made.

'Have you cleaned your teeth Jeramiah?' I scolded.

He hung his head in shame, like I'd taught him.

'The kids will love it,' Peter said, thrilled.

But the ponies weren't the only ones who'd been having special tuition.

I'd been giving Peter balloon lessons – just for fun.

'You're a natural Pete,' I said. 'Join my show... you can be Pirate Pete!'

We were finally ready, and so the pony panto, with Pirate Pete and Mrs Balloonatic, hit the road at Christmas 2002.

'Mum they're soooooo cute!' shouted a little girl.

Today, four years and six ponies later, our panto is our pony

express to the bank! And at 38, I know I wouldn't have achieved my childhood dream if it hadn't been for Peter, 44, and lots of studying at ballooniversity, where I gained my degree in fun.

Never in a million years did I think I'd become a clown, but you need to follow your dreams. It's never too late – you only have one life to live.

Michelle Patterson, 38
Diamond Creek, Vic



Peter and me, happy on our wedding day.

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