



"I have always had a sense of adventure," says Neil (graduating from Goulburn Police Academy in 1987).

neck, threatening to stab and kill me," Neil recalls. "Suddenly [he] lunged at me. I froze. I couldn't move. The knife was about 30cm away from me when the tactical boys pushed me out of the way." It was one of the myriad terrors that would haunt Neil for years.

If her professional life was a tightrope, her private life wasn't any easier. Neil fell in love with fellow police officer "Rob" (not his real name), but three weeks before they wed in 1993 he was shot during a stand-off. He survived the incident, but Rob became moody and angry and six months into the marriage, they split, the first of three occasions. (Rob, too, was later diagnosed with PTSD.) "The reason the marriage fell apart? Two cops in the one house with post-traumatic stress," says Neil. "We were just at each other."

It wasn't until May 2003, back with Rob and juggling work with raising a young son and daughter, that Neil broke down completely. She blames it on a period in 1996 when she witnessed a multitude of horrific murder scenes within two months. The first was 18-year-old Matthew de Gruchy's bludgeoning of his mother and two siblings in Wollongong. "I carried that

crime scene with me," Neil says quietly. In quick succession she attended three more homicides, including the tragic case of Kim Meredith, a 19-year-old who had been found with her throat cut in southern NSW. "It was," says Neil, "a horrible image."

Seven years later, that very case featured in Neil's breakdown. Kim Meredith's killer was due for sentencing, but an increasingly unstable Neil forgot to attend the hearing. She then received the news her grandfather had died and she also had a raging argument with Rob. She walked out of the marriage on a Sunday and stayed at her mother's house. The following morning she awoke shaking and struggling to breathe. Neil sought respite at the Solar Springs retreat in NSW's Southern Highlands. However, the clearness of mind the peaceful bush environment gave her brought the disturbing images swirling through her head into even sharper focus.

One afternoon she wrote a note that was simply the word "sorry" with three kisses—one each for her children and Rob—as she contemplated ending her life from a cliff top she'd seen on an earlier bushwalk. The "pull" to leap was "really an intense feeling," Neil says, choking back tears. "It was only my training as an investigator that got me through it."

After surviving that nadir, Neil started seeing a psychologist and taking medication. Nowadays, she is much better, on a police pension and cherishing her life as a full-time single mother of a teenage son and daughter. Some days are still a struggle, though. "The exposure makes you vulnerable," she explains. "But I've turned it around and I think I'm now in a position to help people. If people get something out of my story, it's been worth it."

■ *By Emma Martin and Craig Henderson*

For help with depression and suicidal thoughts:
Lifeline 1311 114; Beyond Blue beyondblue.com.au

"Suddenly he lunged at me. I froze"
—Belinda Neil



"I used to thrive on pressure," says Neil (at a tactical training course in Singleton, NSW, in 1994).

job nearly KILLED ME