

## My Story

### The Journey Begins

1964. The Beatles were gaining momentum, the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, the first Ford Mustang was driven off the lot.....and I was born! I came into this world on October 11<sup>th</sup> of that year. My mother was by herself when she gave birth to me at the hospital in Van Nuys, California - 60 miles away from where she and my father lived on a family ranch. My dad saw me for the first time the next day. Oh no! I was a girl!

### Home on the Range

Home for the entire 18 years of my childhood was a typical ranch style house that actually was on a ranch! A truck stop (a little town called Gorman, California – but really a truck stop!) sat squarely in the middle of the ranch acreage. My great-grandfather purchased the land back in 1898 and steadily continued to purchase parcels until the ranch grew to be about 10,000 acres. His intention was to raise a family away from the “bustle” of

Los Angeles back then. He was the black sheep of the family, choosing to step away from a very successful business – a family-run group of grocery stores that would later become the Ralphs Supermarket chain in Southern California. The ranch produced wheat and cattle. My grandfather also had established some roadside business – a restaurant, store, gas station and small hotel – in the 1930’s and these were still thriving. These businesses plus the ranch provided my parents’ livelihood.

### A Child’s Life

I can only imagine being in this small town was a very isolated life for everyone who lived there. The population was scant and scattered over a large area. A total of only 6 families actually lived in town, although “town” always seemed busy because of its “let’s-stop-here-for-a-rest” appeal to travelers going through on Interstate 5, which ran through the area (about a 200 yards from the house in which I grew up.)

My brother was born in 1966. A friend to play with! In the edges of my memory, I recall long days at home, before I was school age, playing during the day, while evenings grew loud and chaotic with my parents’ drunken fights. I would lay in bed frightened and trying to stay awake. I’d always fall asleep to the sound of their yelling and would wake up in the morning to a strange calm. Later in my childhood, both my parents retreated to the local

bar at night. My brother and I would often fall asleep in the booths there. We would be awakened by them at 2 a.m. and driven home. I knew my parents were drunk and always hoped they could make the drive home ok.

Thankfully, when we were in the car, they always did. They were not always as lucky when they were driving drunk by themselves.

### School Days

Yes, there was a school in that tiny town! My great-grandmother, who wanted to ensure her 9 children received an education, decades before, had established it. Beginning elementary school was a welcome relief for me. I was able to see and visit other people other than my family, which made me happy! The school was small, to be sure. A three-room schoolhouse that served about 24 children a year during my 9 years there – Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I loved learning and did well in school. My best friend was my cousin, my same age, who had moved into town with his family when I was in second grade. We were inseparable for many years. We spent time together in school and after school, building forts, roaming the ranch and, looking back, doing some things that could have gotten us killed!!

My local school days came to an end when I promoted from 8<sup>th</sup> grade. My days were then very different as I commuted into Lancaster about 60 miles away to attend high school. It was often a challenge! I woke at 4 a.m. to

catch the bus at 5 a.m. for a 2-hour bus ride. I still loved school. I also realized during this time that school was my ticket out of the life I was living in a small isolated town surrounded by alcoholism. A huge motivator when the 4 a.m. alarm went off! The household environment was the same during high school.....alcoholic and chaotic. Another little brother was added to the mix. This time of my life seemed to pass very slowly!

At the beginning of my junior year of high school, I met a boy on the first day of school to whom I was immediately drawn. He was cute and funny and we got along well. His name was Joe. He disappeared one day, not to return until the end of that school year. He had suffered an accident in football practice that almost took his life. But senior year came; he was recovered from his accident. Our romance began; I was head over heels. I lost my virginity to him that year. Of course, like so many teenage girls, I was sure I was going to marry him. I had the plan – college, career and then we'd be together. Getting up and getting to school to see him was the highlight of my days. At first, I didn't recognize he was a jealous person. He'd get upset about little things. But compared to the chaos at home, it seemed like nothing. His anger grew; he expressed it physically with holes punched through walls. I grew afraid but I still loved him and stayed with him.

## And It's Off to College

My determination and hard work paid off. I graduated near the top of my class from high school and was accepted into the University of California at San Diego, UCSD, which, thankfully, was my first college choice. I was a biology major and absolutely loved it! I was happy to be out of my family's home and I enjoyed the "peace and quiet" (compared to what I was used to) that dorm life had to offer. I remember the contentedness I felt laying in bed at night listening to the laughter of my suitemates in the room next to mine. I was in heaven!

## Decisions, Decisions

As I grew older, the "plan" I had set into motion in high school, started to change, as most do! I was flourishing away from home and enjoying my college classes. But I made a fateful trip one day to my academic advisor to review my classes for the following year. What a life changer! My counselor asked my career plans. I replied that I was looking to graduate with a degree in biology and then wanted to work in a laboratory setting for a few years and go from there. He simply mentioned that I would have a difficult time as a lab tech supporting myself, because of the low salary. A mere comment from him, but I went away from our meeting immediately concerned! My goal since I had been in elementary school was to be able to support

myself.....always. To hear that my career choice might not allow me to do that, well, it scared me to death!! I talked with a friend of my aunt's who lived near by who counseled me about a career decision. She knew that being able to support myself was my biggest concern.....so she suggested a business degree. I finished out the year and left biology and UCSD behind (and have regretted that decision ever since!).

The next year, I transferred to San Diego State University. It had the business degree that UCSD did not. I plunged into my new courses and did well, but the familiar enjoyment was no longer there. I was torn! Afraid that if I didn't have a career where I could support myself, I'd end up back at my parent's house. I did not want that.....so a business degree it was. Two years of classes - I did well, but I had no interest! I finished up in 1986, knowing I had made a mistake. I grabbed my degree and knew the following year, I would do something where I could incorporate my love of science with my desire to share my love of learning with kids. I picked up the books again and headed off to get my teaching credential!

During that same time, I was also giving thought to the part of my plan that included marriage to Joe, my high school boyfriend. We were still together and I was still very much considering my plan to marry him. But I had started to realize that his tendency toward anger as a result of what turned

out to be his low self-esteem resembled many of the tendencies toward violence I had grown up with. I had been accepting the violent outbursts, I think, because that was what I was used to, and realized I didn't want to accept them for the rest of my life. So I ended our relationship. We've remained friends throughout the years. It was a very difficult time for me, ending something so significant in my life. I felt lost for a good time after, but knew I had to redirect my life from that point on.

### New Directions

While in the midst of getting my business degree, I'd often stop in and visit my friends I had gotten to know while going to UCSD. One night, I stopped by for a visit and some people I had never met before were also visiting, two young men who were "friends of friends". I introduced myself and left to visit my friend in another room. The next day, I received a phone call that the "friend of a friend"-Bob- whom I had met the night before, wanted to ask me out. He was 5 years older than me, out of college and was firmly into his career. I promptly said "No". He was too old! And I couldn't figure out for the life of me why someone who was just starting his career would want to date someone still in college. I figured he was after just one thing! But he soon became a fixture at gatherings. We became friends. It took a very long while for me to agree to a date. I was still recovering from my last

relationship; the one that was supposed to have ended in marriage! I needed to take it slow. Time went on. I grew to see Bob's sweet qualities. We dated for 2 years before he asked me to marry him. I said, "Yes".

### The Young Marrieds

We married in 1988. I was starting in my teaching career. We had a little condominium together and life was good. We were enjoying our time in San Diego.

Bob's parents lived in Fresno, California. They were older and we encouraged them to move into a retirement community near us in San Diego. They attempted to sell their home, but the house being on the market simply put a toll on Bob's mother. They canceled the escrow for their new place in San Diego and decided to stay in Fresno.

Bob grew increasingly concerned about their health and age. His parents were still in their house and no one lived near by. They didn't want to move. We decided that we needed to move up there to help them out. So the condo was sold, good jobs were left and off we went. Not the best of decisions.

### Life in The Valley

The day I left San Diego to move to Fresno, I had lunch with a dear friend who I was going to miss! Four hours later, I was in a 117 degree hell hole, ha!! And I had to live there. Very probably the worst day of the year for a

move to the Central Valley! I did get a job at a local school district and I made wonderful friends. But it was never my home. I would cry every time I returned from a visit somewhere. The summers were harsh and the winters covered in tule fog. I begged my husband to move, but he wouldn't leave his parents. It was a very hard time on our marriage. We attended counseling and the counselor suggested we start a family during this time. It was something we hadn't even discussed in almost 7 years of marriage. It was a quick decision, to try to get pregnant. I really thought there was a lot to it actually, back then!! I had heard many friends say they were "trying". Yes, we are "trying" to have a baby right now. Well, "trying" took less than a week and then I took the pregnancy test. My life was about to change drastically!! But for the better! A baby!

### Baby Girls

Although I was unhappy living where I was living, my life was good. There wasn't any chaos in my household, no drinking and abuse. And my confidence was growing about my ability to be a good parent as my pregnancy progressed.

My water broke 7 days before my due date. Off to the hospital I went. My body didn't want to deliver a baby, so I received a shot of Pitocin and a lovely epidural and I promptly went to sleep. Slept through my entire labor!

I awoke to a nurse saying, “Honey, it’s time to push!” An hour later, I was holding my daughter in my arms. Taylor McKenzie Bawcombe, born June 11, 1994.

Soon, I was back at home. I discovered babies slept a lot. Except at night. It took about 6 weeks, but we finally got settled in. We were parents now. I soon made friends with other new moms and we watched each other raise babies. It made life where I was living more bearable. Taylor’s sister, Kelsey, was born 2 years later. And we were done. Or so we thought.

### The Move I Was Waiting For

Bob’s father passed away in the late 1990’s. He had been the chief caregiver for his wife – Bob’s mom. The day after he passed away, I was given the caregiver job he had left behind (of course, I realize, I had to agree to it!) She was a Type 1 diabetic, very brittle and had health issues related to her diabetes almost weekly. My daughters were troupers and would wait in the doctor’s offices with me while their grandmother was taken care of. It was another tough time in our marriage. It seemed as though I was the only person willing to take care of my mother-in-law. And, with 2 little girls to raise, it was beginning to take a toll on me. Bob’s mom was more agreeable to the idea of a move now. I took that and ran with it and insisted that Bob look for a job out of Fresno. He quickly found one, but wanted to back out.

He was very comfortable in Fresno and didn't want to leave. I told him I was leaving anyway. He decided to make the move.

### Back To The Old Familiar Territory

We settled in Temecula, about an hour north of San Diego, in 1999. I was able to get a job teaching in the school district where I had taught 10 years earlier. I was excited! But I was still mom to 2 little girls and caregiver to my mother-in-law. Soon after we had moved into our new home, my mother-in-law was diagnosed with dementia. She could no longer live in her retirement home and had to move in with us. When I look back on this time, I can't believe I survived it. Taking care of a home, 2 small children and someone with dementia was the most stressful thing I had experienced, even compared with all the chaos I had lived through growing. My husband was simply not supportive and would disappear to his workplace during this time. Of course, with reflection, I would have lived these years very differently and made different decisions if I had them to do over again!

### Strange Changes

My mother-in-law passed away in 2004, having lived in the hell of dementia for 5 years. She eventually did have to move to a lockdown facility. It was unsafe for her to live in our home without a health care professional on site at all times and with her tendency to wander away. Her last few weeks alive

were hellish and I feel like I would have done anything to have saved her from that.

I had gotten another job right before she had passed away. I was enjoying teaching and was relieved not to have the stress of being a caregiver for someone so ill anymore.

In 2005, I started to have some strange health issues. I was experiencing muscle twitching in my legs and pain so intense in my hip, I could hardly move. I had to leave my teaching job.

An initial EMG indicated that it could be ALS. A very stressful month I lived through until that diagnosis was proved incorrect!! Next came the possible diagnosis of MS. I could live with that! But a MRI image struck that diagnosis down. Next I had a blood test that indicated I tested positive for scleroderma. Finally, a test that showed something positive for what I was experiencing! But when I did the research, I realized, it was a fatal disease. My local doctor directed me to an expert at UCLA. It was another long month of agony (and talking to a Schlerderma Support Group as my doctor suggested) before the physician at UCLA proved I did not have schlerderma. We never figured out what happened there. Lab error?

Thankfully, my neighbor, who had watched me go through the months of not knowing what was going on, suggested I visit a friend of hers who was

an orthopedist. He did an exam and suggested my sciatic nerve was piercing a muscle. With movement came nerve pain. A series of cortisone shots to my area of pain was suggested. Viola. Six months of agony, now gone. Mystery solved. Not without a lot of emotional distress, but I was so very thankful to be “cured”.

Several months after my health issues passed and I was enjoying life “getting back on track”, I got another big surprise. A happy one this time. I found out I was pregnant with my third child. Initially, I was upset and concerned about being pregnant at the advanced age of 42 and about the health of the baby (yes, it was a surprise!), but that soon gave way to joy! Our little guy was born via c -section on July 25, 2006. I had some complications soon after, that landed me in the hospital and I wasn’t able to nurse. I felt like I was depriving him and I soon fell into a depression. Badly. After a few months, I accepted that I needed help and saw a psychiatrist for medication. I had known friends who suffered with post-partum depression, and I’m ashamed to admit I could not understand it - until I suffered through it myself.

### New Start

These past few years have been happy for me. My children are doing well. My marriage is stabilized. I am looking forward to taking classes I love,

finishing school and possible having a new career. I may be “middle-aged” (such a boring term for such an exciting time of life) but I feel like I’m getting to start from the beginning again in many ways.