

A life in flux

Belinda Love on embracing and accepting change

Belinda Love works in reception administration support at Cook Australia. That is the easy way to describe her, because Belinda is so much more than her job title. She is a traveler, she comes from an all-inclusive family, and is a life-long learner.

"I am the sum of my experiences and I view it all as a gift," Belinda said.

She is the embodiment of tolerance and multiculturalism. Through her, very different cultures have coexisted peacefully and enriched her life by preserving, respecting, and embracing cultural diversity. My interview with her was like a very eventful, colorful, and honest journey. It was a joy to listen to her explain how she retained, passed down, celebrated, and shared her unique cultural ways of life.

First things first

Belinda joined Cook in November 2015 after being out of the workforce for a while. During this period of time, she helped her daughter, who had sustained a head injury when she was six-years-old, through high school. She also quite literally planned and built their house. When she decided to return to work, Belinda came to Cook through an organization that

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► **Belinda Love**, who works in reception administration support at Cook Australia, all geared up for a motorcycle ride.

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specializes in finding employment for people with special circumstances.

While she started out working part-time, she had a change in circumstances shortly after and she needed to make the switch to working full-time. For a few days, she was loaned out to other departments who could use her skills until a permanent full-time position became available. In that time, she worked in Logistics, Finance, and Corporate Governance, which gave her a broad insight into the workings of the greater Cook Group of companies.

She ended up in a full-time position at the reception desk at Cook Australia. She takes care of general administration and reception duties as needed, in addition to caring for departmental training records, updating documentation in product lifecycle management (PLM), and occasionally relieving as an executive assistant (EA).

"It's been a great way to get to know our staff and is a dynamic situation to work in, being a hub for Cook Australia," Belinda said.

Uniquely theirs

Belinda is sixth-generation Australian, but her family has lived all over Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand.

"With my parents having moved to Fiji shortly after starting their married life, my dad adopted the languages and my mum quickly adopted all the wonderful cuisines of Fiji into her cooking," Belinda said. "We were raised on exotic curries, stews, and rice as staples, while most of Australia was still eating a very English diet."

Her family's diet quickly grew to include Asian, Mediterranean, American, and Mexican cuisines as they continued to travel. They brought home knowledge of herbs, spices, and cooking methods that were rare in rural-country Australia in the 1960s and '70s.

"Mum often improvised because it was so hard to find what she



▲ *Belinda in the entry way at Cook Australia.*

needed," Belinda said. "We ended up with a hodge-podge way of eating that was uniquely ours and we all learned to cook our weird food. I still crave mum's minced meat and cabbage stew if I am ever sick. She had some secret ingredient in it that I could never figure out and now she can't remember."



▲ *Belinda catching a rainbow in Wynnum, a coastal suburb of Brisbane in Queensland, Australia.*



▲ *From left: Belinda, her daughter Kushla, Chris (Kushla's dad), her son-in-law Kenny, and her grandson Zephyr, who is now 4 years old.*

Belinda is the second eldest in a family of six siblings, four of which were under the age of five with an eleven-year break before the next two arrived. As they were growing up her father supported them as a street artist, among other things, for a long time. He would set up an easel, paint, and then sell his art to passers-by in a roadside stall. The family would follow the tourists.

"I remember mum sitting out in front of the caravans with the other women, reading cards at a little table, while this assortment of kids would run around like wild things, playing in local ruins, rivers, and beaches and rarely, a playground," Belinda said. "If anything needed doing in life, you just did it, all together. Time was irrelevant, as long as you were home by sundown nobody was worried."

According to Belinda, they had an interesting life, but were not well off by any means. They would start at a new school about every six months and were placed in the local education system's equivalent of the level they were at in the last location.

"This was very difficult academically for the three siblings I had at that time, as they were all dyslexic, but I loved it," Belinda said. "I would be the only one to go on to attend a tertiary institution (such as a university, Technical and Further Education (TAFE), or other vocational college) but that was much later in life."

A large, but close family

Belinda's extended family is extremely close. Her father grew up on a sheep station in the outback of Australia, so the only people around were his siblings, who remained his best friends all through their lives. Likewise, Belinda's cousins were the only constants in her life and they are still close friends even though they are strewn across the world. They remain in touch with their own private group on social media. They try to get together every few years.

"My parents are two siblings from one family who married two siblings from another family, with their children being double cousins," Belinda said. "We were two of the

larger families so, combined that meant there would eventually be eleven of us, and all sorts of stories got bandied about. We learned a lot about our family history that way."

One of the cousins has traced their family back several generations and keeps the family tree updated in an ancestry data base. His mother keeps one side of the family history and Belinda's 90-year-old mother keeps the history of both sides of the family alive in her memories.

"We are of Scandinavian, Scottish, English, Irish, French, and Spanish Romani heritage," Belinda said.

Belinda's mother had made friends many years ago with a group of Romani women who she constantly met on their travels. She loved and embraced elements of their culture and had always felt a connection. She later found out that her great-grandparents were Flamenco dancers (traditionally the Romani were the only ones to dance the

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▲ Belinda is pictured front right with four of her five siblings.



▲ Belinda during her travels to Morocco.

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Flamenco).

Her mother was an internationally-known dollmaker who had collaborated with the designers of Princess Diana's gowns to create a series of dolls called "The Queen of Hearts." Although the series was cut short due to Diana's death, the initial dolls were released. Because of this fame, she was later asked to create a 45-inch Flamenco dancer doll that took up the entire top of a baby grand piano in a New York penthouse apartment.

"It was one of her proudest achievements," Belinda said. "It turned out that both of my parents were professional artists. We weren't a traditional family in many ways at all I suppose."

Like everyone, Covid has kept her family apart physically, but they are still able to connect virtually as the world opens up again. Belinda's youngest sister, who is 14 years younger than her, is married to a Native American man

and lives in Arizona. It's been hard being separated for all this time, but they have virtual visits. They also had a wedding recently that was zoomed all around the world so that her family could attend virtually. However, Belinda does miss traveling.

A more colorful life

Belinda believes that travel is like a human snowball.

"Our family accumulated stray people, bringing them home with us and adopting them," she said. "People who were isolated or seemed to be alone became part of our clan. Over time, a few of them married into our family and became the real deal, but truly, we didn't care. There was always room for one more."

This is how Belinda met the man who would become her husband. They had been living in New Zealand and he moved back to Australia with her. That introduced him to a life of travel.

Belinda believes that travel makes

life more colorful and can broaden your outlook on life. It also makes you aware of how lucky you are if you live in a land with relative stability.

She remembers a time when she was walking through the streets of Marrakesh, Morocco with her daughter. They were on their way to buy souvenirs for everyone back home when they saw a beautiful woman who was begging.

"She had her blind son on her lap as she sat in the gutter," Belinda said. "I continued on, but when we got to the store I was distracted and my head and heart were in turmoil. I couldn't justify spending money on these trinkets, for people who needed nothing, while this woman begged in the streets for her son to be able to eat. I didn't buy any souvenirs that day, or for a long time afterwards, and very rarely do now. Instead, I walked back and handed all that cash to that woman and walked away feeling shame at my lack of awareness. It was an epiphany. It changed my values."

Travel can also provide a humbling



▲ Belinda with a few of her cousins pictured at a reunion held at her family's pub in Victoria, Australia.

lesson on speaking different languages. Belinda recounted a time when living on Koh Phangnan, an island in the gulf of Thailand, when she thought she would try her hand at learning Thai.

"I don't know if this is a thing or not, but I have a very modulated voice with a lot of inflection, and Thai, like all tonal languages, is all about where you put that inflection," she explained. "I failed. Miserably. My dad and sister could master a language in no time flat, but not me."

Because of this experience she tries to be understanding with other people who are struggling with a language and always takes time to help them with the nuances.

"Be kind. English is such a hard language to learn," Belinda said.

New ventures

Belinda's life has always fed her curiosity and set her up to love the challenge and thrill of learning and experiencing new things. It enhanced the welcoming and

outgoing personalities that she and her siblings developed.

"I believe that new ventures are never daunting in our lives," she said. "We resiliently take change in our stride as the next adventure. It also is one of the reasons why, I believe, we are so accepting of all sorts of people. We know what it's like to be the stranger, to be different, to be poor, to eat differently, to speak differently."

Enculturation – the process by which an individual learns the traditional content of a culture and assimilates its practices and values¹.

1. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enculturation>.

According to Belinda, there were times as a child where it was difficult for her to fit in, and, at the time, she did not understand why because her parents accepted everyone as equals.

"I think that's where my way of accepting someone exactly as they present themselves to me with no judgment has its origins," she said. "That inspired me later in life to embrace what **enculturation** and natural talent I had and become qualified as a counselor."

Belinda explained that there have been many lessons that she could share with others, but there have been two main takeaways from her life thus far. One is to make sure to tell the people you love that you love them and that you are happy with the last words you said to them. The second is that change has defined her life.

"Life is in flux," Belinda said. "You will never be happy if you can't accept and embrace change."

• **Vanessa Marengo** (*Vanessa.Marengo@CookMedical.com*) is a Reimbursement manager based in Italy.



▲ Belinda took this photo of her son-in-law during a visit to New Zealand.



▲ Belinda doing one of her side hustles, judging trucks.