

My name: Helen Smith

My town: Melbourne

My COVID experience

I've been driving big vehicles for over 30 years. I love it. I love being on the road. I love driving. I would rather drive a truck that do anything else. I deliver groceries for a supermarket. I have been doing it for about 14 months. I'm 60 and I've got multiple disabilities. Over 20 years ago I had spinal surgery and I have nerve damage. I have a lot of pain and have to push through it. I worked through as best I could.

I meet lots of lovely people. I love going to the retirement villages. Their faces light up when I arrive with their groceries. We chat for a minute and it brightens their day. I get a lot out of it because brightens their day. I know what it's like to be down, so if I can brighten up someone's day, I will do it.

When I first started food deliveries they were delivered to the bench – right inside the house. As soon COVID came that changed and we don't go inside – unless it's a person who has a disability. Big, big changes. People became very afraid because of COVID. No more chats at the door. They wouldn't come out to get their groceries until after I had gone. That made me sad. People were still lonely but didn't feel safe to chat. It isolated them so much. I could see the sorrow in their eyes. Some of them had no one to talk to. For some people it's the highlight of their day and they had that taken away from them as well. It made the job quicker – but it was that interaction that I missed. And we were busy. Absolutely. Our business trebled. They put extra staff on.

I am transgender and I find that most people are quite accepting of me as I am which is quite fantastic. Particularly the older people in the retirement villages. Some people not so much. Some people, once they realise I am transgender they stop coming to the door – but hey – that's their problem. I'm just doing my job.

I wasn't frightened of COVID, I've lived a good life. This body is so full of pain, if I had died of COVID it would have been ok. I've been dealt a rough hand in life. I soldier on. What got me through COVID was absolute bloody determination. Do the work. Come home. Collapse. Repeat. The work is heavy and my body is sore and tired. The support of my wife has been the big thing that has also got me through. She stopped nursing during COVID because she had burnout. Because she couldn't work, we were on lower income and I had to work more hours. That's what wore me out.

Act of Kindness

The nicest thing that happened to me was when I was driving one day and a car pulled up, a guy got out and gave me \$20. He said: you guys are working hard, we value what you do, go and treat yourself. It came from his heart. He appreciated what we do and that felt good.

This Christmas two of my regulars gave me little gifts when I dropped off their groceries. That was lovely. Chocolates and shortbread. I was very happy for that. It meant the world. It meant that I was appreciated. Knowing that my work was appreciated gives me strength to keep going.