

My name: Jessi

My town: Melbourne

My COVID experience

As a person who is self-employed, COVID19 was scary. Hairdressing has always been my way of supporting myself financially as an artist. I'm a performer, a singer, a dancer. A story teller. I made the decision early on, to never put pressure on my art to provide me with an income – I never want to compromise taking a gig I didn't want, for the sake of being able to pay the rent. So, I started hairdressing. A career that still encouraged my creativity but provided a steady income, and taking that career to the level of self employment allowed me the flexibility to be available for performance opportunities when they presented.

Supporting myself financially has always been a priority of mine. For the first time in my life that was taken away. I didn't have anyone else to pay my rent or put food in my belly. It was scary – but it also showed me how adaptable I can be. The first lockdown I shut down voluntarily – even though other salons were still open. When I closed, I had people offering me black market deals to get their hair done. They thought their regrowth was more important than the safety of the community. I was furious that they were being that selfish, but on reflection I realised it was more than regrowth – it was identity. To be stripped of that for a year put a lot of people in the dumps. For some people hairdressing is the only luxury they allow for themselves – and not being able to go to the hairdresser tipped some people into self-loathing.

When I did re open between lockdowns, clients would walk to the salon feeling low, shoulders hunched – for a couple of hours I would show them love and kindness and help them to see how beautiful they are, and when they were finished, they would almost skip to their cars they were feeling so refreshed and revitalised. It helped me to realise how important hairdressing is to people. I connect with my clients and give them all of myself. It's one on one. Some of my clients tell me things they've never told another person in the world. People lighten their loads and walk away freer. I am still hairdressing because I want to show people love in a way, they don't often receive it. That's where my job satisfaction comes from.

The call to help people this year was so strong. Every day during the first 6 weeks of the second lockdown, I made videos about self care and body positivity on social media. One man told me he shared the videos I make with his daughters to remind them to be proud of who they are. It blew my mind that my words were resonating with people.

I have an online store that I didn't do much with before COVID – so I dedicated my days to creating content and growing the retail client base. The brand now has a successful online presence and global reach. How adaptable we are under pressure. I couldn't leave the house. There were no jobs available, no one was hiring. There were no gigs, and for the first time I couldn't do what I have always relied on for an income. So, I took the last \$50 from my account and bought some fabric and made head scarves and made a profit and kept myself afloat. The money I made from that allowed me to create more product to sell and I quickly grew my online store into a thriving business all on its own.

A lot of people want to throw 2020 in the bin, but I am pleased to have had the opportunity to try things that I would not have done in a normal year. I would have been too busy trying to get by before – now I see how capable I am. It was hard – but how amazing are we to have battled through and we are still here. The act of kindness that stands out to me the most happened quite a few times, I had complete strangers contacting me to say thankyou for the content I was posting and to tell me how it had impacted on them. In our society people don't often stop to give positive feedback, for them to take the time to acknowledge what my videos meant to them – exploded my heart. While I was busy quite literally finding things to distract myself from loneliness and going completely insane, the subjects I was discussing and the messages I was sending were resonating so much with people that they took time out of their day to let me know. It was such a spin out that people were so into me playing dress ups and talking about my life experiences. It made me identify how important it is for me to be working with people moving forward, something I potentially never would have discovered had the pandemic never happened.

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