

Vanessa Banton | The year I 'lost' my child

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Vanessa Banton and her daughter Lenore at a cricket game at the beginning of the year (Supplied)

*When hard lockdown was announced **Vanessa Banton's** teenage daughter chose to go to her grandfather who lived on his own. She writes about the experience of 'losing' her daughter over this period, but also what she gained.*

On 31 December 2019, like most people, I am sure, I had an idea in my head of how the new year would turn out.

My daughter, Lenore, who had just completed matric was taking a gap year and would go visit my friend in Luxembourg and then head off to Nagoya in Japan to spend some time with my brother, his wife and kids.

Every day as I looked at the cost of air tickets, I also looked at news reports of countries around the world impacted by the spread of Covid-19, which had originated from Wuhan in China. As far as we knew, South Africa remained untouched.

On 5 March, that changed with the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) confirming that a man who had just returned from a trip to Italy had tested positive for Covid-19, becoming the country's first known case.

Eighteen days later, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that the country was going into a hard lockdown at midnight on 27 March for what we believed would only be 21 days.

An agonising decision

For most of the day ahead of lockdown, my child agonised over where she was going to spend that time: with me or with her grandfather who lived on his own after losing his wife three years ago to cancer.

She chose her grandfather. I was a little heartbroken, but consoled myself by saying it will only be 21 days and besides I worked in a newsroom. We were working flat out, with barely any time to eat. At least at her grandfather has Wifi, Netflix and a garden. And he would have company.

It is a bit strange being at home by yourself, when someone has lived with you for 18 years.

It was like suddenly being pushed into empty-nest syndrome. I knew it would happen at some point - just not right now.

During the time away, Lenore learnt to become quite self-sufficient after years of living with her helicopter mom who spoilt her too much by not making her cook or clean. She became an accomplished chef. She was forced into the role of enforcer, hiding car keys away from her grandfather who would try to use any excuse he could to go to the shops, even if he had been there the day before. It was also at this time that his memory loss became quite apparent.

Here was a man whose every day routine was disrupted by lockdown, making the cracks very apparent. He became more distant and it was Lenore who had to now also become his carer. Besides cooking, she was the one now driving him to the shops.

After undergoing some tests, it was revealed that Lenore's grandfather was possibly at the beginning stages of Alzheimer's. He was put on some anti-anxiety meds which seemed to help and is now seeing an occupational therapist who gives him exercises to help with memory loss.

The year Lenore needed

During all of this, the levels of lockdown changed which meant that Lenore could come home.

She is still not back permanently though. Instead she spends part of her week at her grandfather and some with me. In the meantime, Lenore's uncle has now moved back home to assist his dad.

I always tell people it wasn't the year that Lenore wanted, but it was the year she needed.

Maybe the same is true for me.

She is no longer a child. I also no longer have that fear that if I send her out into the world, she won't be able to fly.

Lenore has become who I think who she always was (but was prevented so by mommy). She can cook. Very well I might add, and is even quite creative on this front. She even started a small business of sorts - making pots which became a big seller over Christmas. When she is home with me, she will clean up and wash the supper dishes.

I've learnt that I was too lenient on my kid and she can definitely handle responsibilities. I also sometimes like the quiet of having the house to myself when she is at her grandfather's.

I "lost" my child over lockdown, but in that place grew a beautiful woman. But, she will always remain my baby in my heart though.

- *Vanessa Banton is News24's Opinions Editor.*