

# Child star Sarah Monahan I WAS ABUSED ON THE SET OF HEY DAD

The former actress tells STEVE JACKSON about the dark secret she had to keep for years and the betrayal that cruelly followed

She will always be remembered as bright-eyed Jenny Kelly from *Hey Dad..!* but, nearly 20 years on, Sarah Monahan reveals the show still conjures distressing memories of sexual abuse and a trust betrayed.

With comedic timing beyond her years and a contagious smile, Sarah won the

nation's hearts as hockey-mad Jenny after debuting in the show at the age of nine. But behind the scenes, the actress says she was abused before being left in financial ruin after her childhood earnings were squandered.

Indeed, she was so traumatised by her time on the popular program, Sarah has mentally "blocked out" large sections of her youth.

"A lot of people ask me questions about *Hey Dad..!* but I've erased huge portions of my time on the show from my brain," she tells *Woman's Day* in an exclusive interview. "I've literally blocked most of it out."

Most, but not all – Sarah still recalls all too vividly being repeatedly groped by a person involved with *Hey Dad..!* At first, she says, the person, who cannot be named for legal

reasons, made a game of tickling her, but it soon evolved into something more sinister.

"This person used to sit me on his lap, or tickle me," she says. "But then he started putting his arm around me and trying to do this reach around thing and grabbing me [on the breast]. Or he'd just tickle me but, at the same time, try to feel me up."

"He never touched me below the waist because I always tried to make sure we were never alone," she adds. "But he was always there flashing me or trying to cop a feel. I quickly learnt never to be alone in private with him, especially after he started flashing me."

Sarah, now 32, says she was playing behind the sitcom's set when the man first exposed himself to her.

"Behind the living room area is where we used to sit

between scenes," she explains. "I don't know why no-one else was there the first time it happened. I was there drawing and then he came in and did this whole pants-down-to-the-ankles thing ... like full-on dropped them."

"I've tried to block it out but I remember the whole thing. It was hideous. From then on, as soon as I saw the pants were about to come down, I was out of there."

**"This person would sit me on his lap, or tickle me ... but at the same time try to feel me up"**

For years, she says she was subjected to similar abuse until she finally adopted her character's famous defence mechanism.

"This guy was bold and would do it at the studio," she says. "It kept happening until I was about 13 and started kicking him in the shins. It stopped then because he knew I wouldn't put up with it – and that he couldn't get near me without me spitting on him."

Sarah says she also surrounded herself with members of the cast and crew for protection – but even then her ordeal continued.

**"He never touched me below the waist because I tried to make sure we were never alone. But he was always there flashing me or trying to cop a feel."**

"I kept a little circle around myself that stopped anybody getting too close," Sarah explains. "But because he couldn't physically do anything to me any more, he was just verbally the biggest pain he could possibly be."

Sarah's ongoing torment was made all the worse by the fact her father, Brian Monahan, was no longer there to protect her. He died at 36, mere months before the show – about a widower raising three children in suburban Sydney – went to air in 1987. This left Brian's wife, Linda, to look after their young brood.

At age nine, Sarah was the family's main earner. She says this responsibility, coupled with her own guilt, prevented her from revealing the abuse or leaving the show.

"Dad had cardiomyopathy – so he had a massive heart attack," she says. "It was a terrible time because Grandma had died just three weeks before Dad, so we had two members of the ►



Sarah (at front, right), as Jenny, with her *Hey Dad..!* family.





Sarah and Julie McGregor in a scene from the show



**"If there are karmic gods, they looked at everything that happened to me and, to make up for it, they said, 'We're going to give you Matt,' says Sarah of her lovely husband (above).**

family die within a month. We were so poor – because Dad didn't have life insurance – that we went to live with Grandpa. He had a two-bedroom apartment, so he lived in one room and then Mum, my brother, Mark, and I lived in the second bedroom for three years.

"Even at nine, I was the breadwinner in the family, so I couldn't tell anyone what this guy was doing. No-one ever knew. It was always hush-hush because he told me, 'Don't speak about it, because if you speak about it you'll never work in this country again.' And our family really needed me to have that job."

By the time she was 15, however, Sarah says staying on *Hey Dad...!* had become untenable. She quit the show in 1993 and Angela Keep played the role of Jenny for the final season.

But escaping the sitcom was not enough for Sarah, who also fled the country on a student exchange to Honduras. "We had a heap of choices, but Honduras was one of three countries that didn't show *Hey Dad...!*," she says. "[Students travelling to] each country went at a different time. Honduras was the next to leave and I wanted to get out – I was done, I was gone. So that's where I went."

Rejuvenated by her time away, Sarah says she returned home ready to start a new life – only to discover the savings she had accrued while on *Hey Dad...!* had been frittered away.

"When I came home all my money was gone," she says. "We didn't earn that much to start with, but there's the big question of what really did happen to it."

**"No-one ever knew, because he said, 'If you speak about it, you'll never work again'"**

"I remember I moved home and I only had \$4000 left in my account, and that was it. Mum was like, 'You better go down to the CES (Commonwealth Employment Service) and get a job because next week you need to start paying rent.' Two weeks later I moved out."

This time she fled to Sydney's eastern suburbs, where she became close friends with the infamous Bra Boys surf gang at Maroubra, before then moving to Florida at 21 to marry

her pen-pal of five years, US serviceman Mario Rosa, then 24, whom she had met during her time in Central America.

"I lived in Maroubra for a while and hung out with all the Bra Boys, which was fun," she says. "Then, when I went to Florida to visit Mario, he proposed. At first I was like ... no. But I went back and he did the down-on-one-knee thing, so a few days later we got married."

Sadly, due to immigration difficulties, that union did not last, but two years later Sarah met the love of her life, Matt Morris.

They wed in a stunning ceremony in his hometown of San Antonio in Texas in November 2002, where they now produce scuba diving adventure series *Going Down*.

"Matt arranged the whole wedding and even had all Australian natives brought in for my bouquet and other flowers," Sarah says.

But while she is half a world away from *Hey Dad...!* and the man who once preyed on her,

Sarah says her upbringing and time on the show have scarred her so dramatically she never wants to have children of her own.

"I guess I treat all children as adults because I don't really know how to treat a child – having never had much of a childhood myself," she says. "I teach acting classes here for kids, but I'm not equipped to raise a kid of my own. But if I ever did, heaven help the person who ever, ever touched them."

Despite the trauma of her childhood, Sarah is determined to focus on the good in life.

"I always believed in karma. I don't need to do anything to that guy because one day something terrible is going to happen to him," she says. "If there are karmic gods, they looked at everything that happened to me as a child and, to make up for it, they said, 'We're going to give you Matt.'"

"I'm just, you know, happy now, so if you put it all into perspective, things worked out."