



DANIELLE  
LAIDLEY  
EXCLUSIVE

# ‘WE’RE A VERY HAPPY FAMILY’

Opening up about life  
and love, the former  
AFL star is finally  
in a great place

**A**t Perth’s Optus Stadium in March, while Danielle Laidley and her partner Donna Leckie were cheering on their beloved North Melbourne Kangaroos, a father and his kids approached the couple.

The dad had recognised Dani as the former AFL star and one of Australia’s most famous trans women and asked for a photo.

“While it was being taken, the father turned to us and said, ‘My youngest daughter is transgender,’” Dani tells *Woman’s Day*. “He gave me a hug and said, ‘Thank you, I read your book. I now understand my daughter.’”

Since her public “outing” through the hurtful and distressing release of photos taken while she was in police custody in



Dani and Donna appear together in the new doco.



Dani was a half-back flank and hopes to coach again.



only in Woman's Day

been in relationships with women.

Dani and Donna, both 56, chose to take part in the documentary to "take control of the narrative," explains Dani, a gifted sportswoman who was in the inaugural West Coast Eagles team in 1987. "We always wanted to tell the story in our own words."

The pair, who grew up in the Perth working-class suburb of Balga and have known each other since primary school, had reconnected before Dani's arrest in Melbourne in 2020 for allegedly stalking a woman and possessing methamphetamine.

### 'We've built our relationship on being ourselves'

That low point in Dani's life came after she had been diagnosed with gender dysphoria - when a person's gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth - and she was working on a plan to reveal her true self to her family.

"I started to spiral with my mental health," says Dani, who famously won the 1996 AFL premiership with North Melbourne, alongside teammates such as Wayne Carey and Anthony Stephens, who is a close friend.

"I self-harmed and I thought, 'Perhaps it's easier if I'm not here.' It was just after that that I got arrested."

While she was in custody wearing a dress and a wig, a police officer secretly took photos of the former AFL player and coach.

The snaps were reprinted in newspapers and the secret Dani had harboured for years was out - and not on her terms.

"The opportunity to sit down with my family in private and discuss it, was taken away from me," says Dani, who's divorced and has two adult daughters and a son.

The drug charges against Dani were dropped on condition she undertook rehabilitation. After rehab, she reached out to her close friend, Donna, a divorced mum and grandmother.

The pair had dated on-and-off in high school and their lives had "crossed a few times" before they reconnected as friends.

Donna, who has a nursing and aged-care background, accepted her friend's gender transition without question. The "childhood sweethearts" became partners in 2021.

"I've loved Dani since I was six years old," she tells *Woman's Day*.

### LIVING IN THE PRESENT

"I didn't I know that I would be interested in a woman, transgender woman, whatever the case," said Donna. "I just knew that I've always loved this person."

The couple, who split their time between Melbourne and Perth and run a business providing supported independent living accommodation for disabled people, now conduct corporate diversity inclusion training, speaking at companies such as BHP and Google.

"We just enjoy living in the present, and that's been a little while in the making," says Dani.

But their lives sadly fall short of being perfect. While Dani's son and Donna's sons are a treasured part of their lives, it's different for Dani's daughters.

Dani explains in the documentary that in 2019 her daughters had "no idea" of her transition when she accidentally posted glamorous pictures of herself on Snapchat, the social media platform she was using to chat with her girls. Since then, she's had no communication with the women.

Is it getting any better? "Not really," she admits.

The pair's ideal world "would be to have all of our children and grandchildren for a lunch or a Christmas dinner," says Dani. "We hold hope every single day."

Until then, the couple will continue spreading their message of inclusion and love.

"We have a lot of fun together," says Dani. "The reality of it is - I love her, and she loves

2020, Dani is on a mission to spread awareness - and love.

Having released her memoir *Don't Look Away* last year, she and Donna are now the focus of an emotional and candid documentary, released on Stan on September 19.

### BEING HERSELF

*Danielle Laidley: Two Tribes* delves into Dani's struggle with her identity, her headline-making arrest in 2020, and her unique bond and homelife with Donna.

"We've built our relationship on just being ourselves," says Dani, who has always

Words: Michael Crooks. Pictures: Alex Coppell/Newspix.