



Snapshot ... Rosemary Brown, her sister Pauline, left, and parents, Dorothy and Kenneth, in 1978.
Photograph: Rosemary Brown

Snapshot: The day of my sister's diagnosis

The camera couldn't see the pain. But I did. As soon as my father walked through the front door with my sister, I knew. I could sense that the news wasn't good, but I never imagined it would be so bad.

On that sweltering hot day in August 1978, I was determined to take a family portrait. We'd been wanting to send one with our Christmas cards for a very long time, but had never got around to posing for it. Balancing the camera on a chair, I set the self-timer and made a dash to the sofa to complete the family foursome.

It's not too bad for an amateur photographer like me. In fact, under the circumstances to follow, this family portrait would be countless times more meaningful than a holiday card enclosure. It would become a reminder of the confirmation of our greatest fears.

We're all smiling. Even my father. But considering the events that had happened that summer morning, he must have been clenching his teeth to hold back the hurt.

He had just been told by a neurologist that my sister Pauline, 22, had multiple sclerosis and a very severe case of it.

She had been experiencing occasional numbness in her legs, shaking hands, blurred vision and slurred speech – all the symptoms of the illness. Their slow but sure occurrence played hide and seek with my sister until one day, without warning, Pauline's hands refused to move.

That's when she came back home from art school and the reality of her illness came home to all of us.

Multiple sclerosis bulldozed my sister and dared her to get up again. She did for several years ... until the condition overwhelmed her.

Pauline's motto was "Keep on keeping on." She avoided crutches – spiritually and physically. She seldom leaned on anyone and when she did it was lightly. But she always knew we were there.

It's 35 years since I took our family portrait. It still devastates me. *Rosemary Brown*