

I HAD QUEEN'S FEAR...

Four years ago, the King and Kate's cancer battles and Meghan's public statements would have been Samantha Cohen's business, as adviser to the Queen

Danielle Gusmaroli
in London

Samantha Cohen's eyes well up when she recalls the Christmases and summers she and her family shared with the late Queen Elizabeth II. The 54-year-old spent 18 years with The Firm, much of that time as the assistant private secretary to the longest reigning monarch in British history.

Their relationship was close – they saw each other almost daily – and for nearly a decade, she had her own bedroom at Windsor Castle.

"I was away working a lot with a young family but the Queen made it easy, if there was an evening function I'd stay over and sleep in my bedroom at Windsor so I didn't have to drive back to London at night," she said.

"When we were on duty at Balmoral we could bring our families, my children had summer holidays there and, when I was on duty every two years at Sandringham, they came there for Christmas. The Queen and I used to talk a lot. I miss her, she was a special woman."

SAMANTHA PANTHER

The Queen dubbed her "Samantha Panther" for her no-nonsense work attitude, so when she suggested the royal family modernise by launching YouTube and social media accounts, they conformed.

"I suppose I did move the royal family onto social media," she says of working as deputy communications secretary for HM in 2007.

"We needed to modernise the way the family had done things, things had been done in a certain way for a long time so we proposed a royal channel on YouTube.

"We did a mock up and showed The Queen what YouTube was. She said: 'Fantastic', she was up for it.

"The first Christmas broadcast on YouTube in 2007 was a little scary because we didn't really know what we were doing, setting up a royal channel for the first time. The



The Queen presents Samantha Cohen with Commander of the Order of Victoria in 2016.

broadcast got a million hits in not very long. As part of that package we put them on Instagram and then Twitter."

Soon afterwards Ms Cohen, who now works as chief of staff for mining giant Rio Tinto, received calls from The Vatican and White House saying: "The Queen had a channel on YouTube before we did".

So successful was the launch, Ms Cohen was subsequently invited to the headquarters of the Catholic Church in Vatican City to help Pope Benedict XVI start his own channel.



Samantha Cohen with Prince Harry, when she was working for the Sussexes.



Samantha Cohen arrives for the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle.

THE WRITE STUFF

Born to a general surgeon father and university academic mother in England, Ms Cohen, who was raised in Brisbane, began her career as a journalist at the Sunshine Coast Daily. She then dabbled in politics, notably as media adviser for Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Liberal Senator John Herron, before moving to England for a public relation position.

But it was an innocuous advert in PR Week for a two-year position as media officer to the royal household that would change her life.

She landed the role, then went on

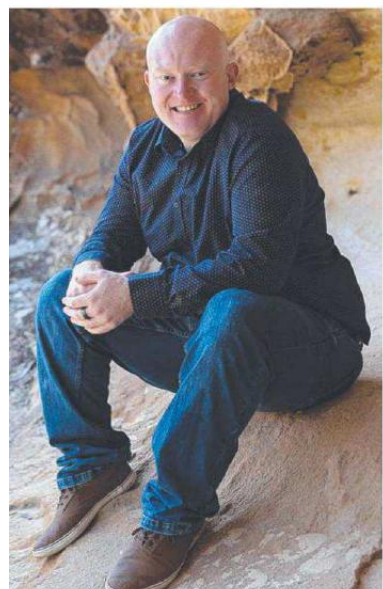
to become head of royal communications and, eventually, assistant and deputy private secretary to the Queen.

ON TOUR WITH MEGHAN

Ms Cohen recalls as "the best times" her two royal tours accompanying her majesty to Australia.

In 2002, the Queen and her husband Prince Philip visited South Australia and Queensland.

In 2011, the couple went to Canberra, Brisbane and Melbourne before heading to Perth for the Commonwealth Heads of



Adam Blum is now a deputy fire captain with the NSW RFS and podcaster.

My dead gran saved me from taking my life

Adam Blum has rebuilt his life and has a positive message for others

Mitch Fink

Adam Blum was moments from taking his life. Then fate stepped in.

The clouds parted and he saw a vision of his late grandmother appear in the sky, telling him to: "Stop it, step back and pick up the phone". So that's what he did. Blum called an old mate,

who talked him down for four hours, reaffirming his life was worth living.

It was a transformational moment in an inspiring story, which has seen Blum become a deputy captain at the NSW Rural Fire Service, a successful podcaster and – most recently – a published author.

"I rejected myself that day, and the

old Adam died that day," said Blum, who lives in the foothills of the Blue Mountains. "I'm comfortable with who I am as a person now."

Growing up with several complicated health issues as a child, Blum underwent a number of medical operations at a young age and struggled with weight issues. He was also diagnosed with ADHD. The result was cruel, relentless bullying from his classmates at school. Even some of his teachers ostracised him, including a sixth grade teacher who told an 11-year-old Blum that he "would amount to nothing in life."

The bullying only intensified when Blum took a job as a construction worker, from his peers and especially from his boss. One day in 2014, Blum was cleaning the kerb and gutter along the side of the street when he stopped for a sip of water. His boss stepped forward and unleashed on

Blum, calling him a "liar, a bludger and a thief".

"Those three things that just catastrophically broke my soul," Blum said. "Just the sheer years and years of being told you are useless and that the world would be a better place without you. I decided on that day that I would end my life."

He planned to make his suicide attempt, before seeing the vision from his grandmother who "saved his life".

Blum still vividly remembers spending time with his grandmother. She passed away when he was 12 years old. Together, they would paint ceramic plates, knit, or just have a chat around the kitchen table. She even taught him to tie his shoes.

"I miss her every day but I know she's with me every day," Blum said. "She's on my left shoulder."

After the incident, Blum began to get his life back on track. He saw a

SHE HAD MY HEART



Samantha Cohen worked for both Queen Elizabeth II and the Duchess of Sussex Meghan Markle. Picture: Danny Lawson/ Getty Images

“

I have to be tough sometimes – but I’m not the caricature

Samantha Cohen

bringing order to Number 10.

“I was brought in because there had been a lot of change,” she said.

“I have to be tough sometimes – but I’m not the caricature of Samantha the Panther.

“The name came about when I was in a junior position at Buckingham Palace and overseeing an event with high profile celebrities when an agent called asking if someone was on the guest list and I said: ‘Sorry they’re not’. They kept phoning back and I said: ‘I’m sorry we can’t invite everyone’. The next day I was in the press. I hadn’t shouted. If anything, I was new and trying hard to be nice.”

Her best job to date?

“I loved, loved, loved the job as the Queen’s assistant private secretary, they were happy times because the Queen was in great form,” she said.

AND A REPUBLIC?

Ms Cohen was made a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order by the Queen in November 2016 and last May was awarded the British-Australia Society Award for Contribution to Anglo-Australian relations for her outstanding contribution to strengthening relations between the United Kingdom and Australia.

“I was in the palace for a long time and was keen on strengthening the relationships between Australia and the UK ... I was the Aussie in the house who made them feel comfortable,” she said.

Does she think Australia should become a republic?

“I think the royals do an extraordinary job and the relationship between the two countries is special, it’s always been symbiotic,” she said. “I think they are a wonderful asset for this country.”

Government Meeting (CHOGM). It would be her last tour down under.

“The Queen had no ego, she was so comfortable in herself, yet she loved it when things went wrong, if a cake was not cutting, or a plaque didn’t unveil, because everything was so perfectly organised, it spiced her life up when things went wrong,” she said.

After helping organise CHOGM in London in 2018, the Queen asked Ms Cohen to stay on as private secretary to the Duke and Duchess of Sussex.

She left amid allegations of bullying against the Duchess, Meghan Markle, which Meghan strenuously denied.

But in his book *Courtiers: The Hidden Power Behind the Crown* author Valentine Low alleged Ms Cohen was “screamed at” before and during the pair’s first official tour of Australia, Fiji, Tonga and New Zealand, despite organising it.

“Sam always made clear that it was like working for a couple of teenagers,” a source is said to have told Low. “They (Meghan and Prince Harry) were impossible and pushed her to the limit. She was miserable.”

Ms Cohen won’t elaborate on the claims except to confirm she was one of 10 aides interviewed by the palace

after a bullying complaint was made by the then head of communications Jason Knauf, in October 2018.

The results of the investigation were never made public, despite the palace saying they would be.

A NEW START

After departing the royal family, Ms Cohen went on to do work for the environmental charity Cool Earth.

Two years later, she was appointed chief executive of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council. While in the job, she set up The Queens Green Canopy

Project, which saw three million trees planted throughout the UK in honour of the Queen.

“It was my gift to The Queen,” she said, adding, “She loved trees and nature and knew every tree in the Buckingham Palace gardens.”

Around that time, Ms Cohen was plucked on the recommendation of Australian political strategist Sir Lynton Crosby to become director of office for British prime minister Boris Johnson’s Conservative Party after the Covid “partygate” scandal. Johnson was reportedly excited at the prospect of “Samantha Panther”

psychologist, who diagnosed him with severe depression and severe anxiety. He has worked through it, becoming more comfortable in his own skin as time has rolled along.

He implemented a new circle of friends and supporters – “a new tribe,” as he puts it – and focused on putting together a series of small wins each day. Getting up and making a coffee, for instance, was a win. Taking a walk down the street was another win. For Blum, stacking those little victories made a big difference.

He bounced around a few earthmoving companies, while simultaneously picking volunteer firefighting in 2011 in order to give back to his community and following his family’s tradition. Blum is a fourth-generation firefighter.

“That’s why I chose the path, really,” Blum said. “Because I just had a willingness to give back.”

He was named a deputy captain of the fire service six years ago.

“I’ve worked so hard, and overcome so much adversity to become a deputy captain,” he added.

He entered the media space in 2020 with a podcast called *True Blue Conversations*, a podcast focused on Australian history where Blum interviews historians and special force veterans.

“I always had a sense of military history, and sharing our military history, so people could learn from our battles and what we’ve done as a country,” Blum said, calling the experience “cathartic”.

“The podcast started as purely a hobby, and it has turned into a labour of love. Now it’s a passion.”

A year after he began the podcast, Blum decided to write an autobiography. It started from a conversation with his mentor, Janine

Garner. Blum was hesitant at first, but Garner maintained that Blum would make a positive difference by publishing his experience.

“There were times when the impostor syndrome came in, the self-doubt. There were times when I went: ‘I just can’t do this — it’s too hard,’” Blum said. “But I had Janine saying: ‘No, you can do this, you’ve absolutely got this. Just keep going, keep pushing.’ That’s what I did.”

The book *Easy Target: Taming the Black Dog* was published last week with endorsements from Deborah Knight and Johanna Griggs and actor Paul de Gelder.

Blum was overcome with emotion when a complete stranger attended his book’s launch to tell Blum she had contemplated ending her life but Blum’s story “gave her hope there was light at the end of the tunnel.”

“I was just overwhelmed,” Blum

said. “It just gave me a sense that my whole journey has been worth it, and that sharing my story has helped and inspired others to change. It’s a feeling of pure joy.”

Blum hopes others can take away a willingness to speak up about their mental health and life’s challenges.

“10 years ago, if I had spoken up I probably would have been ridiculed for it. You were classed as weak and attention-seeking, and we are getting better now but there’s still work to be done,” Blum said. “I wear my suicide survival as a badge of honour, to be here and to help others.”

That vulnerability, Blum says, can save a life: “Anyone who is struggling, just speak up and someone is always there to listen. You are not alone. You can go from surviving to thriving. Speak up and ask for help, because asking for help saved my life”.

LIFELINE: 131114



Adam Blum with Nanna Stanton, whose image saved him from suicide.