

The best mates I've never met

Each day, hundreds of Australians create their own blogs, often based on hobbies and crafts. But those ready to open their hearts are tapping into a vast network of friendship and support. By Stephanie Wood.

On the day that Alison Brookbanks's grandmother died in April, 48 friends got in touch to offer their condolences. Congratulations came from 162 friends when her first daughter, Pia, was born last October. There were 64 friends listening when, a few days later, she shared the most intimate details of the birth. When Brookbanks gave up breastfeeding in agony and distress a couple of weeks later, 101 friends sent her supportive messages. Last month, 50 got in touch to give her a boost when she was going crazy coping with the baby and her energetic four-year-old, Max.

Brookbanks isn't a socialite with a BlackBerry bursting with contacts but a typical busy mum, on maternity leave from her job as an architect. Most of those friends who have been there for her through highs and lows don't even know what she looks like. What they know intimately, though, is her blog, Six and a Half Stitches, or 6.5st, which they flood with comments. Ostensibly, 6.5st is Brookbanks's way of showing off her contemporary

craftwork, from quilting and knitting to children's clothes. But in the three years since she started it, the blog has evolved into something much more.

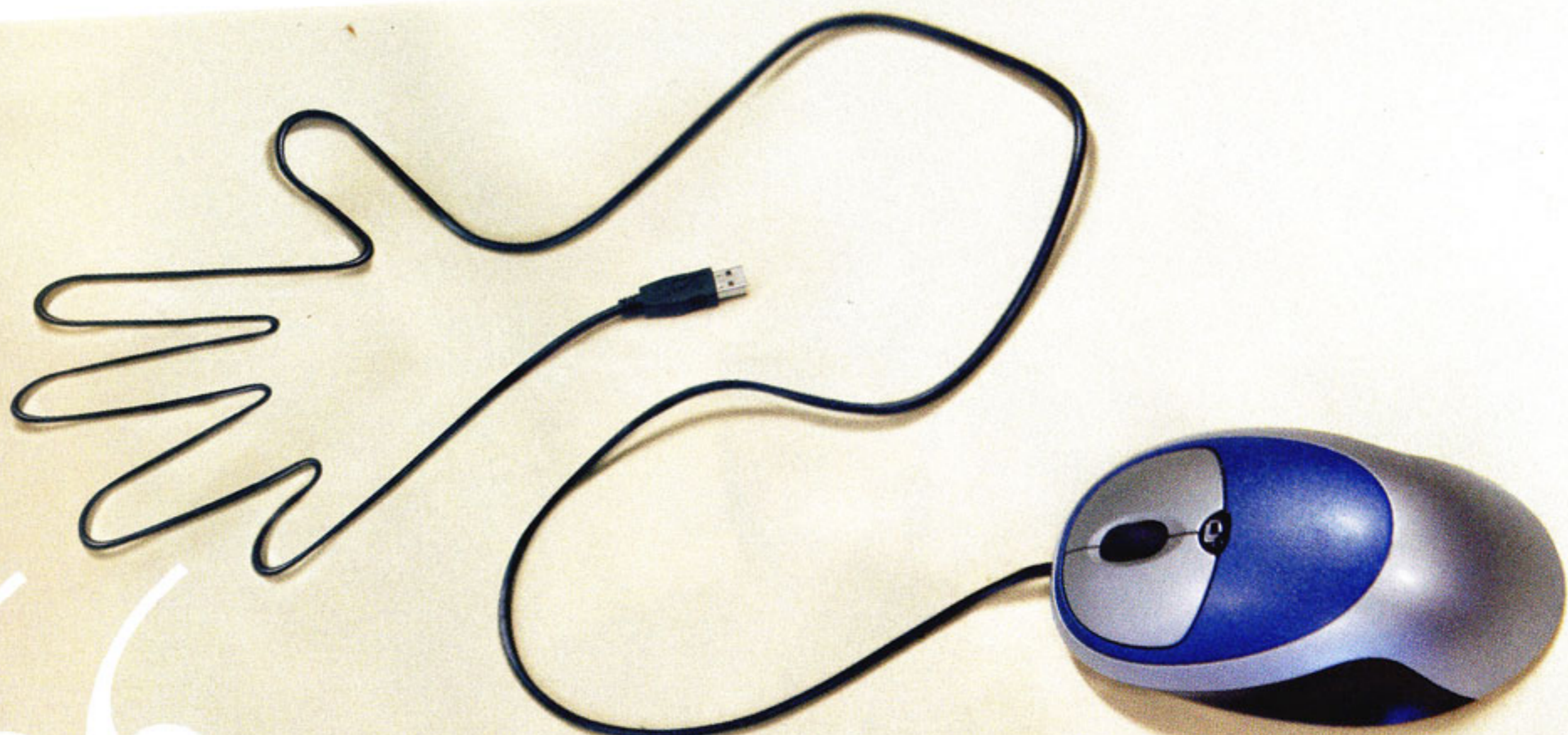
"There are people on the internet that I would consider closer friends than I have in real life," says Brookbanks, 36, who lives in Sydney's inner-west and is co-author of another blog, The Washing Line, about motherhood. "It's a slightly weird concept but once you're into it, it makes sense. There are people who helped me through the whole pregnancy thing, even pre-labour with Pia, and they weren't even in the country."

American search engine company, Technorati, tracks more than 83 million blogs worldwide. According to the ninemsn.com Australian Blogging Survey, conducted online last October, 18 per cent of women in Australia aged between 18 and 39 have a blog. In what might be seen as a positive forecast of the future of blogging, *American Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour reportedly demanded her staff come up with an alternative word for "blog", which she considers vulgar.

But blogs (from "web log") are still a mystery to most people. Stumble on one accidentally during a Google search and odds are that you'll find it confusing, esoteric, semi-literate, self-indulgent, smutty or banal (or all of the above), possibly with a strange name: The Celibate Nympho, Groovy Granny, Divorce Diva, The Kelp Patch...

A dictionary may tell you a blog is a DIY online journal in which posts or diary entries are organised so the most recent entry comes first and allows readers to leave comments. But that sort of definition doesn't do justice to what a blog can be.

When I started my food blog, *Elegant Sufficiency*, a year ago, it was on a whim. My first post was written late one night about an article I'd just read in *The New Yorker* magazine about the fashion designer Hedi Slimane who, apparently, eats baby food to stay slim. I was aghast and amused and felt that such hilarious information had to be shared. With a food-writing and cooking background, I decided that *Elegant Sufficiency* would be a forum for recipes and ideas about →



People like a window into who you are.

food. It was also to be a forum for my own writing rather than that which I did for a living; in the back of my mind, I thought it might lead to something interesting. It did, but not to the book deal I might have hoped for, or to a huge daily response ("hit") rate. Instead, it has given me an insight into the power of the personal narrative.

A month after I wrote about Slimane and shared a recipe for an Asian omelet with greens, garlic and ginger, my father was diagnosed with aggressive prostate cancer. Through the trauma of that time, recipes were largely forgotten and the blog became something else, a therapy for me as I grappled with the reality of my father's ill health. Heart-stopping test results and setbacks sent me straight to my laptop to pour out my heart. I discovered that writing, laying down my thoughts and fears without histrionics, was calming. While I worried I might bore my readers by writing about Dad's condition, I received far more responses when I wrote about him than when I posted recipes or food news.

"I know if I put a really personal post out there, my hit count for the day goes up exponentially and [so do] the comments I get. People like to hear a little bit of your life, they like to have a little window into who you are," says Brookbanks, who is still incredulous about the huge response – 65 comments – she got from her readers when she wrote about her missing cat in January last year.

Textile artist Shula Hampson, an irreverent Footscray craft blogger, threw aside all reserve when, in early May, she wrote a post titled "Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Suicide, But Were Afraid To Ask" on Poppalina, her blog of five years. Swerving away from her more typical posts about knitting, embroidery and her

12-year-old daughter's artwork, she detailed her mother's suicide 16 years earlier, writing with black humour about the awfulness of autopsies, funeral-home horrors and of irreversibly damaging tussles over her mother's will.

Hampson, now 43, agonised about revealing her mother's story. "I was also afraid of losing readers. And of freaking people out. It's quite a responsibility to take on. One careless sentence could send a reader who's dangerously close to the edge straight to oblivion. I had to choose my words carefully."

She was not prepared for her readers' response. Forty-three people left comments on Poppalina after her first post about her mother and she subsequently wrote two more entries on the subject. "I'm amazed and overwhelmed," she says. "A lot of people have emailed me privately as they didn't want their story on the public record. Every last one of them with a tragic story to tell."

These new-look virtual communities, undeniably powerful in providing participants with support, warmth and nurturing, frequently segue into real-life ones. Conferences run by the American-based BlogHer, an organisation for women bloggers, are the highest-profile evidence of this but at any time, anywhere in the world, blogs spawn real-world meetings, from pot-luck lunches in Sacramento to barbecues in Sydney.

Still, even diehard bloggers can start to ask themselves, "Why?". Few blogs make money – Brookbanks has never earned a cent from 6.5st. "It would be lovely to get money from it," she says, "but it's not something I'm going out of my way to find."

And despite all the bonuses of blogging – the mastery of new skills to create your own publication; the sheer pleasure of knitting or

cooking something, writing about it, and then being deluged with affirming comments; the new friends and communities forged – blogging is time-consuming and demanding.

Brookbanks understands the pressures. Her days and nights are hectic. "It's not usually until 9.30pm that I'm able to get to the computer or to the sewing machine or knitting needles and I'll work quickly until about 11."

Brookbanks's to-do list is intimidating: the two blogs, some small-scale architectural work with her husband, the design of a family beach house, two quilt commissions, establishing a children's clothes line and a line of knitting patterns, a pitch to a book publisher and a winter wardrobe for Pia.

But despite that, she's not about to walk away from her blog. "There have been times when it's been too demanding, but it's so much part of my life now that it would be hard to stop." ●

SEVEN GREAT AUSTRALIAN CRAFT AND FOOD BLOGS

- **Six and a Half Stitches** Sydney architect Alison Brookbanks's chic, contemporary craft blog: www.sixandahalfstitches.typepad.com.
- **Poppalina** Irreverent, kooky blogger who knits and embroiders: www.poppalina.typepad.com.
- **Nourish Me** Deeply flavoured vegetarian recipes and ideas from former nutrition student, Lucinda Dodds: www.nourish-me.blogspot.com.
- **Stone Soup** Beautifully photographed recipes and menus from Sydney food scientist Jules Clancy: www.thestonesoup.com.
- **OneGirl Designworks** The beautiful craft blog of graphic designer Leslie Keating: www.onegirldesignwrks.blogspot.com.
- **Cook (Almost) Anything At Least Once** "Haalo's" food blog featuring fine photographs plus a farmer's market calendar: www.cookalmostanything.blogspot.com.
- **Elegant Sufficiency** Stephanie Wood's own forum: www.elegantsufficiency.typepad.com.