

# 'I'll never take my wellbeing for granted again'

Having recently overcome throat cancer, comedian and broadcaster **JULIE McCROSSIN, 59**, is focused on regaining her strength – and she's using fitness to fuel her recovery, writes *Amelia Saw*

**W**hen I turn 60 in October, I will celebrate," says Julie McCrossin, her brown eyes resolute as she looks out over a grey and windswept Freshwater Beach on Sydney's northern shoreline.

But Julie's desire to celebrate the milestone birthday is driven by more than a lust for gifts: 18 months ago, the former *Good News Week* host and ABC radio broadcaster was informed she might not be alive to see it.

In April 2013, after suffering from what she thought was nothing more than a persistent sore throat, Julie was diagnosed with stage four throat cancer.

"I was told I had an 80 per cent chance of recovery. So if there's 10 people in the room, two of them will die... I found that a very startling piece of information."

Suddenly, the woman who'd spent two decades interviewing Australians about their hardships for her radio shows on health, welfare and social equality found herself in the hot seat – she'd discovered an injustice she couldn't fight with her "gift of the gab". Worse still, she knew the effects of losing this particular battle would be felt by the people closest to her: Melissa, her partner of 18 years; the two children they raised together, Amelia, 22, and Luke, 24; and her poorly 89-year-old mother Marjorie, who Julie regularly visits and cares for.

"I was very focused on not frightening them," says Julie, explaining that within months she went from being fit and

healthy "Miss Walking Pole", taking part in marathon fundraising walks for Coastrek, to being unable to eat.

"It would take me 45 minutes to swallow half a glass of pink liquid. So I really got a taste of what it was like to lose some of your faculties: I love driving and I couldn't drive. I couldn't swallow and I completely lost my voice for two months."

The threat that she may be rendered silent, as is sometimes the case with throat cancer survivors, was a particularly devastating consequence for a woman who now makes her living as a speaker and forum facilitator at events on mental health, palliative care, gay rights and family law, amongst other topics.

"There's no question that thinking you might die, or that you might have a shortened lifespan is very, very grounding," she says with a contemplative smile.

Julie first realised something was wrong when she was unable to complete her fourth Coastrek in 2013. The annual event, held in March, sees teams of four walk between 50-100km of stunning Sydney coastline to raise money for The Fred Hollows Foundation. Despite being otherwise fit for the event, Julie had to stop at the 30km mark.

"I would have kept going but one of the women walking with me, who comes from the medical profession, asked me: 'How bad do you feel, on a scale of one to 10, if 10 is the best you could feel?' And I said, 'I guess about a three,' and



*'I wouldn't describe myself as super-fit. I'd describe myself as the red-faced, panting older woman at the back of a slimmer, faster-moving group of women'*



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On her wedding day in New York with wife Melissa and kids Luke and Amelia

she said, 'I think you'd better stop then.'

While Julie's faltering participation in Coastrek alerted her that something was wrong, the event has also played a significant part in helping her get better.

"I'd had a lot of chemotherapy and radiation, so I was really battered both physically and psychologically, but getting ready for Coastrek 2014 was a fantastic recovery tool," reflects Julie, who was well enough to participate in a reduced walk of 10km this year.

Besides the physical exercise, Julie believes the "incredible comradeship" and reconnection with the wild makes the event spiritually nourishing, and a helpful combatant to the anxiousness and sadness that often accompanies a cancer diagnosis.

Now a year out of treatment, Julie is still "not as strong as I used to be" but is determined to keep training and building up her strength. She's back at work on a part-time basis and in April, she and Melissa celebrated their lives together with a New York wedding. They've also just bought a 45-acre block of land in Wellington, NSW, where they plan to set-up a transportable home and enjoy regular time-out.

After a turbulent year-and-a-half, life is back on track for Julie; but the legacy of her illness still lives on.

"I met people who were being treated at the same time as me who I've since watched die, so I know I'm lucky. I'm talking, I'm swallowing and I'm working. And I don't take that for granted for one single day." ●

*To register for the 2015 Coastrek challenge, visit [coastrek.com.au](http://coastrek.com.au)*