



Cooking without looking

Ironically, it wasn't until then that Julie discovered her purpose. "With help from the Foundation of the Blind, I suddenly belonged to a community of people. I had some clarity. I knew who I was and what I wanted to do."

Importantly, Julie had one-year-old and three-year-old boys to take care of. They were everything to her. "I wanted to be a mum, a sister, a daughter – and keeping house and cooking was my place at the time."

With help, she took the first small steps to culinary independence. She learnt how to pour a cup of tea, touching the outside of the cup to feel the warmth of how far the water level had reached. She learnt, painstakingly, how to butter toast. "At first it took about two minutes – a laborious task that did not suit my personality," she admits.

Now her sons Zachary (17) and Sebastian (15) are typical teenagers who ask "Mum, what's for dinner?" the minute they walk through the door. And Julie readily keeps pace with their appetites. She's not only mastered toast and tea, but stews and casseroles, too, and is well known for her deliciously decadent truffles.

She's a speaker and coach and has set up a business called That Blind Woman where she demonstrates her Cooking Without Looking skills to groups such as dieticians, business associations and peer support organisations. "I use it as an awareness tool for sighted people to focus on what they can do rather than what they can't do!"

Recently, she hosted a demonstration for CanTeen, because blindness is a side-effect of some cancers. It's her way of encouraging others to look beyond their daily setbacks.

Julie Woods is blind – but that doesn't stop this Dunedin-based dynamo from creating yummy meals for her ravenous teenage sons

When Julie Woods noticed the writing on the blackboard at the University of Otago was fuzzy, it didn't phase her. She simply moved from the back to the front row of the classroom. Diagnosed with Stargardt's Disease aged

18, a juvenile form of macular degeneration, Julie had to adapt to life as a partially sighted student. "In those days, there were no support services at the University so I fumbled my way through my degree," she says.

There were certainly difficulties – reading tutorials or recognising friends across a smoky, crowded pub, for instance – but Julie persisted and graduated with a degree in Commerce, majoring in Economics.

In time, she married and had two children. Life was pretty much normal. So imagine the shock when one day, aged 31, she noticed the black and white vinyl in the bathroom of their home shimmering. It was the first sign her eyes were giving up completely. "Within three months I was declared legally blind."

Have you altered your kitchen set up since going blind?

My kitchen is standard but I do have raised plastic dots on my microwave to make my way around the flat-screen display. I also have a dot at 180 degrees C so I know how far to turn the oven dial. Otherwise it's all done by memory, especially the layout of the pantry and fridge. The boys have learnt to put everything back exactly in its place. It's the only way I can function.

How do you know when things are cooked?

I use my other senses: smell, hearing, taste and touch. I can tell when chicken is cooked by tapping its skin, the same for bread; I can tell when roast lamb is cooked by tasting it; I can tell when pasta is cooked by hearing it come to the boil and then timing it. I know when cheese scones are ready by their smell.

Do you ever burn yourself?

Probably on a weekly basis. I have permanent burn marks on my hands from knocking them on the oven tray when taking it out of the oven. Proper gloves would help this but I'm too lazy to put them on. Sometimes the steam from the jug has an uncanny way of directing itself skilfully onto my hand.

What does cooking bring to your life?

Cooking brings creativity and love. When you have teenage boys, food equals love. It's the way I communicate with them. It is a creative outlet – and it's also my haven. I know where everything is, so I can be fully independent.

Can you try out new recipes?

My mum gives me them all the time. Plus I get some emailed from friends and family. I run back and forth from the kitchen to hear the recipe spoken to me on my computer, remembering the ingredients. Once I've tested a recipe and like it, I transcribe it into braille.

How do you go grocery shopping?

With my sister; have done for 16 years. I go to the same supermarket which allows me to memorise what is in each aisle. At home, I put the groceries away myself. I am responsible for most of the cooking, so need to know where everything is.



Cinnamon rolls

For the dough

- 1½ cups warm water
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 3 cups flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon skim milk powder
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon yeast

1. Place all the dough ingredients into a breadmaker, selecting a 'dough' setting to mix.
2. Roll out the dough on a floured bench, rolling it into what I call "a rectangular oval!" This doesn't need to be neat and tidy – just a rough oblong shape.

Cinnamon filling

- 4 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 tablespoon melted butter

1. Mix the ingredients together in a cup. Spread the cinnamon mixture along the width of the dough. Roll the rectangle into a sausage and cut into 2cm strips. Place the rounds onto a baking tray lined with baking paper. Bake in a preheated oven at 200°C for 20 minutes.

The Canteen connection

In June this year Julie hosted one of her Cooking Without Looking workshops for CanTeen members. It was a fantastic success and when she got home, she received a text message saying: "It's Caleb from CanTeen. Thank you so much for this experience. You are an amazing woman. I will be telling everyone I know about the workshop and will remember how to greet a blind person." (Always address them by name so they know you are talking to them and identify yourself so they get to match your voice to you.)

The annual CanTeen Bandanna Challenge takes place from October 16-31. The Challenge is for every New Zealander to buy a bandanna to support young Kiwis aged 13-24 living with cancer as a patient, sibling or bereaved sibling.

Bandannas have been designed by CanTeen ambassadors Dan Carter, Maria Tutaia, Scott Dixon, Paige Hareb and Lisa Tamati, Federation and CanTeen patient members Samuel Gwynn from Wellington, Aeronwy Cording from Christchurch and bereaved sibling member Rachel Allan, also from Christchurch.

Bandannas cost \$4 and are available in New World stores nationwide.



4 Square



Lisa Tamati



Rachel Allan



Maria Tutaia