



WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

What would you do if you lost your sight or were in so much pain it made even the most simple tasks in life unmanageable? We talk to two inspirational women who have been dealt an unfair hand, but who've pushed on regardless to do more than they ever dreamed

BY KAREN BURGE AND ALEXIA SANTAMARIA

JULIE WOODS – COOKING WITHOUT LOOKING

Julie Woods needed only seven words to write her life story recently. "Sighted, partially sighted, blind. Happy, sad, happy."

It's hard to imagine being happier blind, but Woods says she may well be the happiest blind woman in the world. When she lost her sight at 31 – the mother of two boys aged three and one – she began a blind adventure which has taken her life in a whole new direction.

Since going blind the 47-year-old has hosted her own *Cooking Without Looking* show, travelled to the wonders of the world, written her book *How to Make a Silver Lining: 8 Keys for Adapting to Extraordinary Change*, walked eight half marathons with a sighted guide, won numerous community awards, and found love again with her second

husband Ron. She's even refereed naked rugby for the Nude Blacks – giving new meaning to the popular refrain 'ref, are you blind?' Woods now works as a motivational speaker and life coach under the name That Blind Woman. She admits the name can be a bit confronting for people but she wants to show the public she has no qualms about not being able to see and is happy to share her story.

"I'd been in a shop not long after I went blind, and when I went back the man working there turned to his wife and said 'this is that blind girl I was telling you about'. And I thought 'is that really how people see me?'"

Woods later realised being 'that blind woman' was a unique position and she adopted the throwaway line as her own.

"It's become a fun way for people to approach me. If I can educate people and make them more aware then that is doing something positive with my blindness and I've always wanted to do that."

DETERIORATION

Born with perfect sight, Woods first noticed her vision deteriorating at the end of high school when she started struggling to read equations on the blackboard. The following year she started university sitting at the back of the lecture theatre and by the end of the year she was in the front row and still couldn't see.

Woods was diagnosed with Stargardt Disease, a juvenile form of macular degeneration that causes progressive >>

vision loss that can't be helped by glasses. For Woods the loss of vision initially halted and she was left with partial sight - neither sighted nor blind.

"It was blurry whether I was reading a street sign or a book, and no optical aids made any difference. Everything became blurry - life became blurry. That took me into 13 years in an abyss with my vision loss; I didn't belong in the sighted world and I didn't belong in the blind world."

Despite the hardship and with no help - it was before the days of disability support services for students - Woods made the decision to carry on at university and graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce.

"I failed half my subjects in my first year, but decided to pick myself up and carry on - I was determined to finish what I had started. Sitting in the back row of the lecture theatre didn't work for me; sitting in the front row did. Having a book at arm's length didn't work for me; having it six inches from my nose did. I dropped recreational

There are still regular burns from the oven and mix-ups with ingredients, which have seen beetroot on the Weet-Bix and sugar in the gravy

reading and read only what I needed to pass my exams."

In the years that followed she enjoyed a fulfilling career at the Ministry of Education, travelled overseas, met and married first husband Mark, and had her sons Zac and Sebastian.

But then she noticed her vision was changing again.

"We put new lino in the bathroom and it looked very shimmery. The shimmering got worse and my doctor referred me to the hospital eye department. The shimmer in my left eye spread into a blob and then a haze, until it spread into my right eye. Within three months I was legally blind."

With two pre-schoolers to look after, Woods did not accept the change well.

"I felt powerless, overwhelmed and had no idea of how I was going to cope." Despite a rigorous needs assessment Woods was deemed ineligible for any household



assistance because her husband was earning \$38,000 at the time. "We were devastated and immediately put under pressure to cope."

KITCHEN CHALLENGE

"That was what I felt most angry about, not going blind, but not being worthy enough for funding to get the support I needed. Thank God for the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind [RNZFB] who were there for me.

"I didn't want to be blind and I didn't know any blind people, so my views of blind people were quite stereotypical and all of that made me very resistant to asking for help. But asking for help was life changing. It enabled me to get in touch with support and to learn the new skills I needed to be a wife, a daughter, and a friend, but mainly to be a mother."

For Woods the first challenge of everyday parenting was getting back in the kitchen.

"I was their mother therefore I cook and

they eat; it's that survival thing and food is important to me - food is love."

An instructor from the RNZFB came to Woods' house and the first lesson was putting butter and jam on a piece of bread.

"We ate a lot of jam sandwiches for a while," she laughs.

Then there were her famous chocolate truffles. As a keen cook before blindness, she was suddenly left unable to read her recipe books, which she says was like losing a part of her. Her only option was to rely on the recipes she could remember, one of which was truffles. She started adding liquorice and dipping them in chocolate and they became her standby dish if she ever needed to take a plate.

"I know people must have thought, 'here comes Julie with those bloody truffles again,'" she laughs. But "those bloody truffles" became the basis of her *Cooking Without Looking* demonstrations, which she incorporates into public speaking engagements, or through Project Truffle, where she aims to visit every intermediate school in New Zealand to share her story and demonstrate making her famous truffles.

Woods' return to cooking hasn't been pain-free. There are still regular burns from the oven and mix-ups with ingredients, which have seen beetroot on the Weet-Bix and sugar in the gravy. Early on she recalls serving Chinese takeaways straight onto the bench - missing the plates all together.

Re-learning the life skills she needed was consuming and in the midst of it, her marriage ended.

FINDING THE WRITTEN WORD

"The biggest factor was communication; once you stop communicating it impacts on your relationship and, for whatever reason, we stopped communicating.

"Part of me knew it was coming, part of me didn't. But when it came I knew it was the right thing because neither of us was happy. Part of me admires Mark for making that call because it wasn't easy being painted as the baddy and walking out on your blind wife. But in doing so he set us both free."

Woods says parenting on her own was a big challenge but she and the boys put their energies into making it work, with lots of support from family, friends, and the RNZFB.

"Mum and Dad have been a huge support to me with practical, hands-on stuff and they've really walked beside me emotionally.

They've supported me to become the blind person I wanted to be."

And she says a blind parent learns new tricks to keep their kids safe and catch them in the act of doing things they shouldn't, like hearing rustling bags of potato chips and smelling chocolate on their breath when she had said no to treats.

'Watching' children's sport was a challenge - Woods needed others to tell her when her children did something good so she could cheer.

Her boys are now 18 and 20 and she says while there are some things she feels sad about, particularly not being able to read to them when they were small, she can see they have gained a lot from her blindness.

"They are much more aware of other people's needs and not just their own. They have always had to look out for someone else and not just themselves." She still has a picture in her head of what the boys looked like as toddlers and has added to that over the years with descriptions from others, and her sense of touch.

"They now have stubble," she laughs. "The sense of touch is huge. Being teenagers there are times where they don't want that, but they are still pretty good."

Not long after her marriage break-up Woods decided to learn braille as a way to bring something positive back into her life. She quickly fell in love with the language and the way it allowed her to organise her world and label everything from CDs to tins of food. And braille also gave her back her recipes - which her mum read out for her to transcribe into braille - and reading for pleasure, something that had been missing from her life for 17 years.

"It was liberation - I was reunited with the written word. I let go of what I could see,

which in terms of print was buggier all anyway, and I embraced what I could feel."

While working at the RNZFB as a braille awareness consultant, Woods met her husband Ron, an artist, when he presented at a workshop for people with disabilities.

She says she was attracted to him by his sense of fun.

"Life was so serious, I was doing all that learning and I was blind, and he connected with my sense of fun."

The pair married in 2011. Together they have taken trips to 'see' some of the wonders of the world, including the Lost City of Petra, the Colosseum, and this year, the Taj Mahal.

WHY NOT?

Woods says as a blind traveller, meeting local people and learning the story behind places becomes more important. Ron also helps to bring the sights to life with his artist's eye and rich descriptions.

"He sees things others don't and then describes them beautifully for me as well, so the picture builds. And with the pyramids, climbing up the side of them did way more for me than standing at a lookout."

But Woods says none of these adventures would have happened if she hadn't made two little words her motto.

"Just after I went blind I said 'no' to the opportunity to go cross-country skiing and I came home, sat on the couch and thought 'you stupid woman; what sort of blind person are you going to make?' So from then on instead of saying 'no', I say 'why not?'"

Saying those two little words has seen her climb to the top of the Eiffel Tower and walk on the Great Wall of China, it's made her new friends, and inspired others.

"I always say 'the biggest thing you can bring to change is an open mind.'" >>

Each year nearly 1200 New Zealanders who have become blind or experienced serious sight loss register with the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind. While their guide dogs are most well known, the organisation has services to assist members with everyday life. For information go to www.rnzfb.org.nz.

PHOTOGRAPHS ALAN DOVE
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CATE GRACE – NOT YOUR TYPICAL TRAINER

When Cate Grace stands on stage in London, among nine other international finalists in the Life Fitness Global Personal Trainers To Watch for 2013, it won't be hard to spot her. A curvy size 16 Canterbury girl, possibly on crutches, she doesn't really fit the personal trainer stereotype. She doesn't fit any stereotype really. Not of a PT, and not of someone who has endured what she has: chronic asthma, endometriosis and finally a diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis (an auto immune disease that regularly attacks her immune system and periodically lands her in a wheelchair or hospital). You might expect someone like that to be a bit down, but not Grace. She is positivity personified and this has been officially recognised in her selection for this competition from 1500 entries across 43 countries. No small deal.

It hasn't always been this way though.

"I'm loving life now," Grace says, "but there were some black times. Pain and emotional eating ruled my life for some time after the rheumatoid arthritis diagnosis and my motivation got very low." It wasn't just the weight gain – at her heaviest she was a size 24, and refused to weigh herself – but things like periodically getting stuck on the toilet because her joints had frozen and trying to find devices to go round coffee cups to stop her dropping them. It was frustrating and depressing. This is probably why she's been so successful as a personal trainer.

"I've been there, and I know what it's like to feel too tired and unmotivated to do anything about your weight. It's got to be the right time for you, and mine came when I took part in a heart health study and got told I was clinically obese. I didn't do anything immediately but when I got married and saw my wedding photos, I thought 'god, when did that happen?' and knew something had to change."

Grace uses all her physical and emotional history to help others in the same headspace. She offers a holistic, positive approach to personal training through her LEAP (Lifestyle, Exercise, Appreciation and Positivity) philosophy. She works with people who have experienced trauma – physical or mental – and are ready to 'leap off their couch' towards

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a healthier life. She especially caters to the market who have found the regular gym environment is not for them. She fell into the 'non-gym' category herself and her turning point, surprisingly, came from a conversation with her mother – who also has arthritis.

"Mum was seeing a personal trainer. I couldn't believe it. I said 'You've got arthritis, what are you doing seeing a PT? They're all lycra-clad gym bunnies. I don't like them, they wouldn't like me!'" (the irony is not lost on her now). Despite her resistance, she signed up for a 20-week challenge with her mum.

"It was fun. It wasn't in a gym, we were swimming in the sea and doing all sorts of things. I loved it! I donated 12kg [she refuses to say 'lost' as she says she never wants it back], found myself off the couch and even walking without my frame! It gave me back my life."

MAKING IT FUN

In her own training she expands this philosophy further, teaching people how to enjoy exercise and taking her 'Leapstars' back to childhood to rediscover the fun of tunnel ball and hula hooping and A-Z clapping games.

"When I was really overweight, I always knew I needed to exercise, I just never knew how. Gyms were scary places for me but if someone had just told me to find movement I enjoy I might have started this earlier."

Her story is truly inspiring. Despite being in pain from a young age she has still managed to pack an awful lot into 40 years.

"I've always had health issues, even when I was younger. I played competitive sport at a high level as a kid but couldn't run very fast and my legs always hurt. I just thought it was because I had big thighs!"

And it wasn't just leg pain. She's had chronic asthma since her early teens and had surgery for endometriosis when she was only 19. She has also had to deal with the heartbreaking consequence of such severe conditions – not being able to have children.

At 22 she was officially diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis, but despite being told by doctors she should stay put, she still went on her OE; holding account manager and project manager roles in big corporations, running a backpackers in Turkey, studying project management at Sydney University and touring Africa.

"It was a blast. I lived life hard, worked loads, had great fun and just dealt with the pain. I had some wonderful, busy jobs but after six years away my body really started to tire. I came home from Sydney for two weddings and ended up moving home to Mum and Dad. I was just having way too many injuries and niggles and it felt like a flu I was never getting over."

Grace went on a Kiwi road trip to try to recover. "I thought it was just burnout and a holiday would sort it, but even when I got back and started work, it wasn't getting any better." More and more injuries followed – a dislocated shoulder; neck, wrist and back strains that just wouldn't heal. Then she collapsed at work. >>



"I was doing a youth training programme and was talking to a group of young adults about following their dreams. After the seminar, one of the big September aftershocks hit. So here I am under a table at the Linwood Welfare Centre with this young man from the course and he asks me 'Are you following your dreams?' Well he really called my bluff and I realised I wasn't. I went home and announced I was quitting my day job, much to my husband's distress!"

'I needed to help others realise that despite what had happened in Christchurch they'd eventually rebuild their lives too'

GETTING GOING

But the need for Grace's unique type of training was there and word-of-mouth meant clients came easily - even when she signed a lease for premises in central Christchurch on February 17, days before the big one hit.

"It was in the red zone so not really somewhere I could use after the quake," she says. "Like so many people I took time out to make a plan but clients kept calling and telling me they needed some positivity."

"I started holding gold coin donation classes in Hagley Park and giving the money to the city but people were asking for one-on-one sessions. I realised I had a role. I've been up and down emotionally and had to rebuild my life several times because of illness and I needed to help others realise despite what had happened in Christchurch, they'd eventually rebuild their lives too."

And she's been constantly busy ever since, doing what she loves: training clients, inspiring audiences, winning awards nationally and now being selected for the finals of this large international one.

"People don't believe me, but I think being diagnosed with arthritis is the best thing that ever happened to me. I've learned all about my body, I've learned to set limits to how much I push it, I'm stronger and happier than ever and I get to inspire and empower people every day to find their own good news. It really doesn't get much better than this." □

"The first time it happened everyone just thought I was tired and stressed, but the second time I ended up in hospital for six days. That's when I got told I also had rheumatoid arthritis, an even more serious problem."

Living at home, 30 years old and having to use a Zimmer frame, things weren't looking bright.

"I couldn't quite believe this was my lot - this was an old person's disease! I had just met my partner, Riwai, six months before and I felt like telling him to run for the hills. I was going to be a lot of hard work!" But he didn't; in fact he asked her to move in, and is as much a part of Grace's incredible story as she is. He became Grace's carer.

"I felt so sorry for him, but there were

some laughs. I had to change my whole wardrobe as I was with this six foot plus Māori boy with huge hands who couldn't do up fiddly buttons! It was such a rip-off him having to learn to do bras up instead of undoing them! He even learned to straighten hair. Bless him - of course I said yes when he proposed!"

After doing the 20-week challenge with her mum, things turned around rapidly. She did another 20 weeks and loved it so much she started to think about a career as a personal trainer. She started studying part-time then took on some clients at the weekend while still working weekdays as a specialised youth case manager at Work and Income. She clearly remembers when she decided to take the leap into full-time.