

LOVE MY WAY

Mum of two Meg Welchman will likely be having cancer treatment for life but nothing is getting in the way of her living her life to its fullest.

WORDS BY ELLI JACOBS



I was born in Melbourne but raised in Ballina, a coastal town on the far north coast of New South Wales, together with my two older siblings. From a very young age my parents nurtured and encouraged me to be what I wanted, with a good dose of independence and freedom that comes from living in a small town.

I went on to study psychology at the Brisbane campus of Griffith University, where I played bass guitar in a band called The Crimson Cardigans and wrote music reviews for the university newspaper.

After graduating, I began my career as a counsellor in the space of mental health and couples counselling. I met my husband Simon when we were both 18, through mutual friends. Ten years later, we began dating and married in 2002. Our son, Reuben was born in 2007 and then, shortly after my daughter, Ivy was born in 2009, our lives drastically changed.

I felt lumps in my breast which I thought were mastitis from breastfeeding. They weren't.

The hard lumps were, in fact, aggressive breast cancer that had spread very quickly from my breast through my lymph glands and into my liver. In March 2010, age 37, I was diagnosed with Stage IV breast cancer.

Receiving the diagnosis was like jumping off the end of the earth. Everything I thought as my reality and my future just disintegrated and was replaced with intense shock and fear.

It was very hard to make sense of it because there's no history of breast cancer in my family, and I had already struggled for so long to have

children. Both my newborn daughter and my son, Reuben – who was just two years old at the time – were conceived through IVF, so there was this sense of unfairness, that we'd already been through such a massive hurdle and now we were faced with this new challenge. But I guess life's filled with unexpected circumstances.

Prior to the diagnosis, I was looking after a toddler and a newborn baby, taking two dance classes a week, and at no stage did I feel unwell or that my body was almost ready to shut down, and that contributed to the shock.

I had to give up breastfeeding immediately and begin six months of hard-hitting chemo, followed by a mastectomy, all the while surrounded by the love and support of family and friends. My mum and in-laws came to live with us for a period of time to help with the children but to also allow me and Simon time to be together and connect.

Being in the moment and spending as much time as possible with each other became our priority as we weren't sure how long we would have. At the same time, as a psychologist, I knew what would help, and I began to practise that with myself. It all seemed to work as after treatment, the results were positive. I was in remission.

Unfortunately, since that initial diagnosis, I've had three further reoccurrences of metastatic breast cancer, twice to my liver and lymph nodes and once to my lungs.

The second time, in 2013, was when my little boy was just beginning prep school at age five. I was very lucky to have a wonderful

Above: Meg Welchman has been living with Stage IV breast cancer for 10 years.

group of school mums who formed a roster and cooked home-made meals for us and I sometimes also found gifts on my doorstep.

Every Thursday when I was having another six-month round of chemo, they would take turns looking after my children, providing them with play dates and things to look forward to.

In a time of crisis, that gave me a lot of hope and it allowed my children to develop resilience as a result of being around other caring parents and children.

In 2015 when my breast cancer returned for the third time, I went through another six-month round of chemo and was put on a new drug called Kadcyła.

Since then, even though my scans show no sign of cancer, I've been put on chemo for life which means every three weeks I have targeted therapy for my particular type of breast cancer known as HER2+. The therapy is keeping me alive.

Then in March last year, I noticed how breathless I felt just walking up the stairs to my front door and I was also coughing a lot. At first, my doctor thought it was a form of pneumonia, but we found out it was the breast cancer and it had formed in the lungs. Being my fourth time, I was completely devastated.

It was very difficult emotionally and physically as I wasn't able to breathe freely. But, I kept attending choir classes which proved to help me mentally but also with my voice, to keep it strong.

What helped the most though was a new clinical trial I was on at The Wesley Hospital in Brisbane. It offered

One in eight Aussie women will be diagnosed with breast cancer.

BREAST CANCER IN AUSTRALIA

According to the Breast Cancer Network, breast cancer is the most common cancer affecting women in Australia. It is estimated that approximately one in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer by the age of 85 – and, on average, 50 people will be diagnosed with breast cancer each day. However, while the number of women and men being diagnosed with breast cancer in Australia is increasing, the number of deaths from breast cancer is decreasing. Statistics from the Cancer Council show that the five-year survival rate is about 90 per cent, and the chance of surviving at least 10 years is now 83 per cent. Improvements in survival are attributed to earlier detection of breast cancer through regular mammograms, self-examinations, and improved treatment outcomes.

a new, tablet-based drug for women who'd had secondary breast cancer. I could take it at home without the severe side effects like falling out hair.

Since November 2018, all my scans have been clean, showing no trace of cancer and I can breathe freely again.

I continue on three-weekly targeted treatment of my breast cancer and will do for life.

Rather than running down dark alleys of 'what if' and 'if only' I decided I would like to channel my mind towards creativity.

During my third cancer diagnosis, going through weekly chemo and just lying in bed unable to do much, I began to think of what I could write about and how that might help me heal, including giving hope to others. As a way to give back, I combined my

"I thought the lumps in my breast were mastitis from breastfeeding. They weren't."

love for psychology and art therapy and self-published a book with the help of my cousin, Grace Cuell, who illustrated the book. It's part memoir, part mindfulness journal, and part mandala colouring book.

I felt that this way I could help others and I also want my kids, now aged nine and 11, to have something tangible they can pick up, look through, colour in and see my words as a way to know me. It's my legacy for them, so when I do eventually die one day, they'll know that I also truly lived and loved.

When it comes to sharing my illness with my children I never shielded them from it but I also didn't tell them too much too soon. When they were six and eight, they began to use the word 'cancer' as they were more aware of my health situation and old enough to understand that people do sometimes get sick and die.

Now they also know that people can have cancer and still live.

In addition to publishing the book, I've also given free talks in libraries on mindfulness and colouring all across Australia including at the Olivia Newton-John Cancer Wellness & Research Centre in Victoria. I am also an ambassador for the Icon Cancer Foundation.

Because music had always been a massive part of my life, in 2015, my husband and I, along with two of our closest friends, formed a band called The Double Happiness. He drums and I play bass guitar and sing backing vocals.


The beauty of being in a band when you're older is that you have nothing to prove and it's so thrilling when other people like what we do.

In March this year, we released a new single called 'No Place Like Nundah' (a suburb of Brisbane) and later in the year we're releasing our first album.

The meaning I've taken out of such an awful illness and walking around with the dread that my life will most likely be shorter than many people's, is that every moment counts and the connections we make with others represent the most important thing in life.

I'm now much more courageous and don't rely on the notion of doing things 'one day in the future'. I've learned to say 'no' to things I would've previously said 'yes' to, and I make sure to maintain tight bonds of love with family and friends, and in particular, a romantic relationship with my husband.

I've come a long way since my diagnosis in 2010. I'm working in the learning and development field at Relationships Australia, training other clinical practitioners.

The terror has gone and although I do get these niggling thoughts at times when I start wondering if there will be enough time for me, the reality is you don't have to have cancer to have those thoughts. We're all going to die at some point and we need to make the most of those precious moments every single day. 

• **Meg Welchman's book, *This Present Moment* is available at purplecordspress.com**



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Read the heartwarming story of two nurses – Vicky and her great-great-aunt, Eliza – who both served on hospital ships a century apart. mindfood.com/my-story-offshore-saviours

5 WELLBEING PRACTICES SUGGESTED BY MEG

JOIN A CHOIR

"It's about finding your voice which is the most powerful thing. Research shows that singing in a choir exercises the brain, improves breathing, boosts immune function by reducing the stress hormone cortisol, acts as a painkiller, and boosts our sense of happiness and wellbeing by making us feel more positive."

CREATE

"I love music so being in a band expresses my creativity. The process of writing my book meant I could shine a light on what was happening inside and break that repetitive habit of worrying. Creativity can be as simple as sewing, cooking or gardening, as long as it comes from your heart. A qualitative study on visual art-making for women living with cancer found it helped participants focus on positive life experiences, relieving debilitating preoccupation with illness; enhanced self-worth through demonstrating achievement; and allowed symbolic expression of feelings, especially during chemotherapy."

MOVEMENT

"For me, it's adult ballet but it doesn't have to be formal, you can just put music on at home and dance. I also began to jog at age 40 which helped with the mental anguish I was going through. Knowing your body is strong helps with whatever the future holds. A 2018 study published in *Molecular and Clinical Oncology* found ballroom dancing has a positive effect on cancer patients' wellbeing."

NUTRITION

"Keep your body fuelled with protein as this helps you build muscle mass which gives you the extra energy to 'fight' cancer. Some research suggests that a vegan diet lowers risk of cancers associated with female organs and prostate cancer."

MINDFULNESS & MEDITATION

"Rather than letting negative thoughts bring you down, observe them without judgement and say, 'Ok, I'm feeling this or thinking this right now but like clouds on the sky they come and go and that's okay.' A 2017 review published in *Annals of Oncology* demonstrated a significant improvement in quality of life and/or a reduction in stress with mindfulness and meditation on patients with cancer."

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CHOOSE LOVE

Our Readers Share Their Heartbreaking Christchurch Stories

Making Meaning From Trauma

HEALTH UPDATE
Is Meso Dosing The Next Big Thing?

Page 40

THE LUXURY ISSUE

WINTER COATS IN VIENNA • THE GALA OF ALL BALLS
WILD INDULGENCE IN CAMBODIA • DINING ON THE SEINE
PERFUMES IN PARIS • MEET OUR TRAVEL EXPERTS IN THE KNOW

KEIRA KNIGHTLEY

"Hope & Redemption Is What We Need Right Now"

Page 20

NEW RESEARCH
Why We Should Be Kind To Our Kidneys

PLUS
How To Stay Healthy For Longer

FABULOUS MID-WEEK MENU

5 FRESH GINGER RECIPES

"Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

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