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# Doing it My Way

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Imagine not being able to talk or write coherently. Not being able to understand what others were saying. Struggling to get your thoughts in order.

For most people who take these abilities for granted, this scenario would be an absolute nightmare.

For Alana Henderson, whose livelihood depended on her ability to communicate, this nightmare became her reality when, at the age of 59, she suffered a stroke caused by a cerebral haemorrhage.

Feeling trapped but unwilling to give in, the Holmesville woman survived a traumatic stay in hospital and subsequent diagnosis of both diabetes and breast cancer, to fight her way forward into a whole new way of life.

Six years after her medical upheaval, she has detailed her journey in her first book, *Out of the Fog: Adventures through Lifestyle Change*, in the hope of providing inspiration to others managing their own recovery from illness.

Alana's downward spiral into ill health began 12 months prior to the stroke when her business, which provides editing services, interview training and career consultancy, underwent a rapid period of growth.

Rather than employing additional staff, Alana integrated the extra work into her own role, setting off on an unhealthy and unsustainable path that would eventually lead to her health breakdown.

In the year that followed, Alana's stress levels skyrocketed as she struggled to maintain the horrendous workload – a good night's sleep was replaced by short naps when absolutely necessary, with multiple cups of coffee and

constant snacking her answer to flagging energy levels.

Exercise was a distant memory, and in her increasingly sedentary lifestyle the weight began to creep on until, at the time of her stroke, Alana weighed 101kg.

Things came to a head on June 28, 2011 when, after another particularly frantic day of work, Alana rushed out the door at 7.20pm already late for the Sing Australia choir practice at Wallsend, where she was the piano accompanist.

"I had a hundred things running through my head as I was getting there, I knew I would have to work all night and then get to another interview panel the following day with an employer," Alana said.

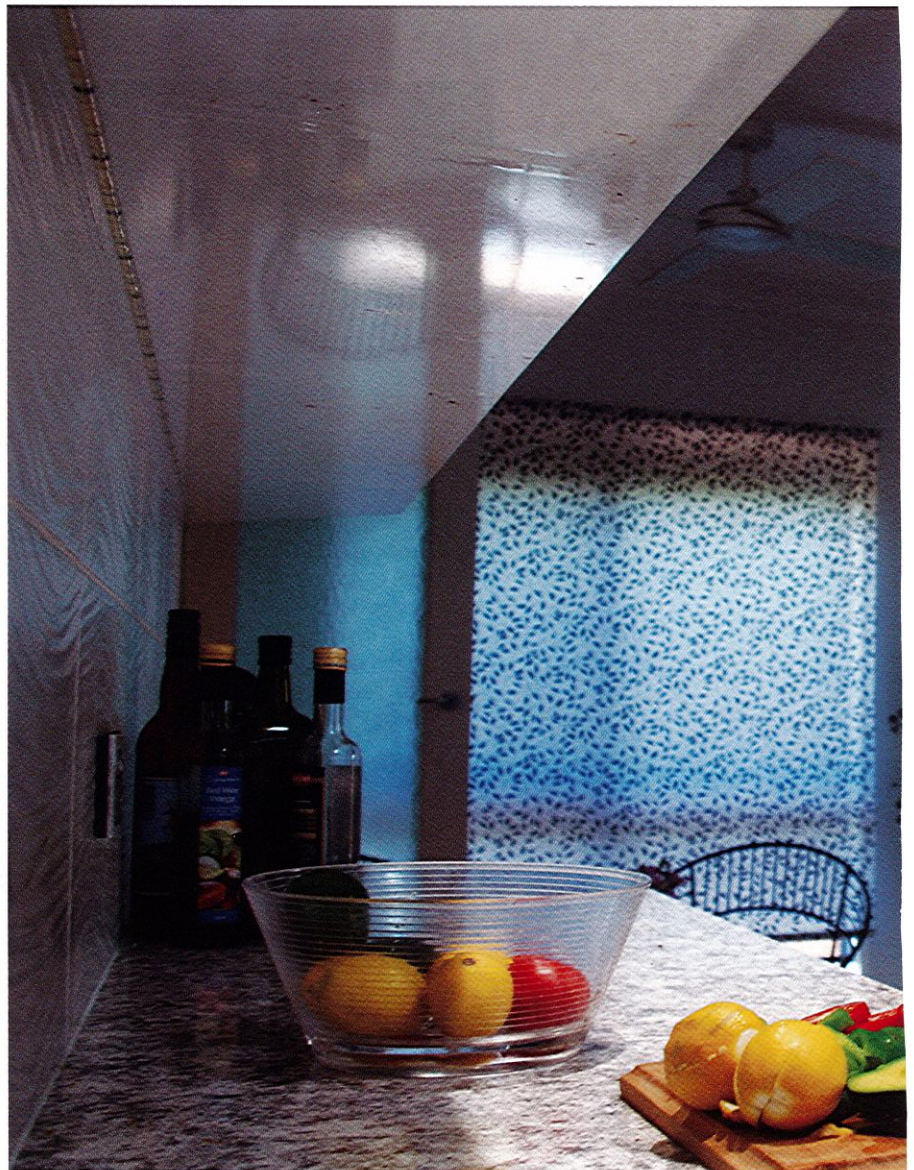
"I got there at twenty-five to eight, and I had at the time a big bag of music, about 2000 pages, which was really heavy and I had it in the boot of my car.

"I pulled it out with one hand - as I did, as I got that weight and went to put it on the ground I heard this incredible wind, like a cyclone almost. I didn't look at the trees, I just assumed it was a storm coming but that was actually the blood running around in my brain. In the moment of picking up that big weight, it was just enough to pop that artery.

"When I rushed into the rehearsal they'd already started and I couldn't understand what they were singing. I couldn't hear them properly, it sounded like they were in another room somewhere.

"I started playing the piano, I started losing my ability to >





read the music, so I thought there was something happening but it didn't occur to me that it was a stroke."

Fifteen minutes later Alana was in hospital, unable to understand the people around her or what was going on.

Her blood pressure was sky high - 240 over 180 - and she was drifting in and out of sleep.

The last thought Alana can remember from that night was her belief she must have a brain tumour - so waking up the next morning to find out she'd had a stroke seemed almost a relief.

The feeling was short-lived however, and what followed was nine traumatic days in acute stroke services that made Alana feel ignored, isolated, terrified and humiliated, with little control over her own situation.

Eventually Alana made the decision to discharge herself and take on the challenge of her rehabilitation at home.

To make matters worse, she discovered she was also suffering from an auditory processing disorder, while three weeks after her discharge she was diagnosed with both Type 2 diabetes and breast cancer.

"I was in a real daze ... and then I thought 'I can die from any one of these three things and possibly even quickly or I can do something about it,'" Alana said.

"So I decided to deal with it myself. I couldn't do my own cancer surgery, I had a wonderful doctor who did that, but I

used the health system absolutely minimally to deal with the stroke and with the diabetes. I decided to deal with this like a project, as if I was managing a project."

The "project" involved integrating every single aspect of her recovery - from researching clinical best practice and intensively working on her ability to talk, write and differentiate sounds, to overhauling her diet, sleep and exercise patterns - to bring about a complete lifestyle change. And the results have been nothing short of amazing.

Defying her initial diagnosis that it would take one to two years - if ever - to recover her ability to communicate properly, it took Alana just four-and-a-half months before she was able to speak almost fluently again, with few, if any, stumbles.

She completely changed her diet overnight, opting for unprocessed foods as close to their natural state as possible.

Alana also began walking, gradually increasing the distance every day. Within seven weeks she had reversed her diabetes from "a very high level down to a normal level" and by the end of 45 weeks, she had lost an incredible 45 kilograms - almost half of her entire body weight.

By 2015, her fitness levels had improved so much that Alana was also taken off her blood pressure medication.

Six years down the track, the now 65-year-old has not only stuck to her new lifestyle but has taken it even further,





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constantly exploring new ways to keep her mind active and her body fit and healthy – all the while rejecting the stereotypes of what a “senior” can and can’t do.

Embracing her newfound love of exercise, Alana moved from walking to jogging, and then eventually running, discovering the joy of the weekly park-run movement. She has completed 101 of the 5km runs to date.

She took up cycling and added dancing - modern jive and then tap - to her routine to work on her balance.

Getting out of her comfort zone even further, Alana took on the challenge of pole fitness, which was also being taught by her dance instructor.

“I’m probably one of the oldest people in Australia who does pole fitness but I love it, it’s fantastic. A lot of old people, or seniors as I call them, say, ‘Why would you do that?’ but it had a lot of really important value because after I had the cancer surgery and had radiation therapy, I went onto hormone therapy.

“When I read the material about the drug that I was on for the hormone therapy, the side-effect for that is osteoporosis, so I thought I need to deal with that because I don’t want to have an increased risk of falling.

“That’s why pole fitness was really good; it meant I had to really develop good muscle strength and good core strength, so that’s what I’ve done.

“The clinical research said I could expect to lose eight to 10 per cent of my bone density in five years on that drug – I lost 1.9 per cent.

“I’m really strong, really fit and really healthy. I do all of that and I do it every week, because I’m not complacent at all. I don’t think that now I’ve fixed the stroke I’m ok, I continue to work on things that are going to keep me stimulated.”

Aside from the physical changes, Alana also worked hard on mentally stimulating herself, which included the challenge of turning her journey to recovery into a book.

Published last year, *Out of the Fog: Adventures through Lifestyle Change* was as much about testing the communication skills she had regained as it was about helping other people understand not only what it felt like to have a stroke, but also what it takes to change your lifestyle.

“It’s really a lot about how to change your life and how to have a good outcome at the end that you never could have imagined you would have,” Alana said.

“I’ve far exceeded the expectations of my GP. He just didn’t imagine that I would do all that and keep everything going after five years.

“Now, because I have made that total life change, it’s easy. It’s just like living your normal life, but it’s just making that commitment to stick with it and get over the hurdles that occur from time to time.” 