

Holding on to hope

Watching Tania Hayes feed her husband breakfast while her plate remains untouched, it's clear that caring for her wheelchair-bound husband is second nature. Later when she speaks to a room full of women at an Early Risers event, it's quickly apparent that sharing her family's story of battling against the odds also flows naturally, writes Seanna Cronin

TANIA Hayes was only 19 when she met her future husband Warren, a confident, young real estate agent.

As a legal secretary, Tania had worked with Warren's agency several times and admits his 'smart-arse' nature initially rubbed her the wrong way.

A few years later she bumped into him on a girls' night out and was pleasantly surprised.

There was an instant attraction and, even though her friends tore her away, Tania rang Warren a few days later and asked him out.

On the morning of their first date, Tania went to the gym for a workout and rolled her ankle, tearing several ligaments.

After spending all afternoon at hospital, Tania went home on crutches and called Warren to reschedule their romantic night out.

Although Warren misinterpreted her explanation as an excuse to cancel, and after several frustrating minutes of trying to convince him of the truth, Tania insisted he pick her up for their date to see her bandaged ankle for himself.

Tania painfully got ready for the date and when he saw the crutches, Warren couldn't apologise enough.

When they arrived at the restaurant it was raining and Warren gallantly carried Tania from the car all the way to their table.

Two years later, Warren proposed on Valentine's Day and the couple moved in together.

They planned to marry 18 months later.

"Life just seemed too good to be true," says Tania.



Tania and Warren Hayes defied the odds to go on and have a child, Josh

Disaster strikes

A FEW months after the romantic proposal, Warren was having trouble sleeping.

Soon after, during one of the couple's regular morning runs, he stumbled and fell.

The couple soon learnt they were signs of a brain tumour that had wrapped around Warren's brain stem.

Warren was immediately scheduled to have his first operation to remove the tumour in April, 1997 at Wollongong Hospital and Tania remained positive.

However, little did she know it was only the beginning of what would be a four-year ordeal involving 20 operations and endless complications.

Tania was faced with the possibility she could lose the love of her life or that Warren could experience ongoing problems after the operation.

Warren survived the operation, but doctors were only able to remove half the tumour and the operation left him paralysed down the right side of his body.

"We had barely started our life together and it felt as if it was coming to an end," says Tania.

Warren suffered a series of seizures and was having trouble breathing, so he was put on life support for eight days.

Ahead of the second procedure to remove the other half of the tumour still nestled dangerously on his brain, it dawned on Tania the doctors had already given up hope her fiancé would survive.

"They (doctors) didn't even book him a bed in the Intensive Care Unit after surgery," she says.

that had become a ghost before my eyes."

Warren was once again placed in the ICU and one day a doctor sat Tania down to discuss the possibility of turning off his life support machine.

"He was asking me to let go of the love of my life," says Tania.

Tania was shocked the doctors wanted her to give up, especially after Warren had survived so many adversities.

Her shock soon turned to anger.

"If God wanted to let Warren go, I would have let him go," says Tania.

"But I was sick of living in an institution that made all of the decisions and I wasn't going to let them do this to us."

Hoping and praying

MIRACULOUSLY Warren survived, but his weak body was dealt yet another blow.

He developed fungal meningitis in his brain, a disease he fought for four months.

"It was like waking up from another nightmare, only to realise you'd never woken from the first one," says Tania.

The vicious cycle of operation and infection continued, and Tania watched helplessly as the love of her life battled on through seven more brain operations, a golden staph infection and a blood clot.

"I gave up my job to be by Warren's side, day in and day out," says Tania.

"I was clinging to the love of a man

A new life

THE couple returned to their home and Tania began caring for Warren full-time.

Although scared of the responsibility, she put on a brave face.

"There's a saying - just fake it until you can make it," she says, describing what would become her mantra over the coming months.

Rehabilitation became a way of life for the couple and, against all odds, Warren's condition improved.

Today, he can speak and his tumour has shown no signs of returning.

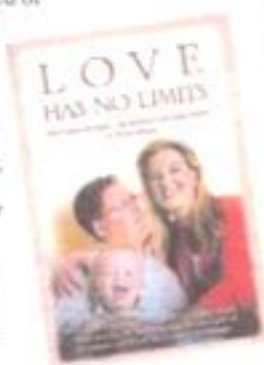
"Although Warren is still totally dependent on me, he has a better quality of life than the doctors ever expected," says Tania.

Three-and-a-half years after coming home from the hospital, Tania and Warren finally set a date for their wedding.

They were married in March 2002 in front of close family and friends in North Wollongong and Tania even managed to fit into her original wedding dress.

"I was the happiest girl in the world," says Tania.

"I finally got to marry the man I love."



A bright future

THE couple set their sights on having a child, but were disheartened when doctors warned that Warren may be sterile because of the 150 Xrays he'd had during his time in hospital.

Not one to take a doctor's opinion as the final word, Tania was still hopeful, and less than a year after their marriage, she fell pregnant.

Once again, Tania and Warren's determination shocked family and doctors.

They had beaten the odds once again and now have a boisterous young son, Josh.

"He is a precious reward at the end of an 11-year journey," says Tania.

"Nothing in life is ever impossible."

Tania has written a book about Warren's ordeal and, as an ambassador for Carers Australia, she is raising awareness about the daily hardships of Australia's 2.6 million carers.

"They (carers) don't get the recognition they deserve," says Tania.

"I'm proud to say I'm a carer because I'm giving someone I love the simple gift of life."

The hard facts

IF you think life is tough, take a moment to think about the challenges carers face each day.

■ Carers provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends who have a disability, mental illness, chronic condition, terminal illness or who are frail.

■ More than one in eight Australians provides unpaid support to a family member or friend.

■ Full-time carers only get a basic Centrelink payment plus an allowance of about \$400 a week.

■ A recent survey found that Australia's 2.6 million carers have the lowest wellbeing index score of any group in the country.

■ Anxiety because of financial strain, poor health from putting others' needs first and depression from feeling isolated and overwhelmed are some of the main stresses for carers.