



Tania Hayes, 33, has been caring tirelessly for her husband, Warren, 40, who was left partially paralysed after developing a brain tumour in 1997. Their son, Josh, is two.

Tania and Warren

WARREN AND I fell in love on our first date, in 1993. I was a 19-year-old legal secretary and aerobics instructor, while Warren was a strapping 25-year-old real estate agent just launching himself as an auctioneer and property developer in our home city of Wollongong, NSW.

With a shared passion for fitness and exercise, we were blissfully happy in each other's company. When Warren proposed on Valentine's Day 1996, the future seemed clear and infinitely promising.

Then, one morning in April 1997, during one of our regular early runs, Warren stumbled and fell. He had been suffering from severe insomnia and headaches for some time, which we had put down to work stress, and that morning, he was pale and drawn. Yet he insisted on continuing. He was never one to give up – a trait that would soon save his life.

Later that day, when his vision suddenly blurred, Warren was sent for an urgent brain scan, which revealed a tumour stretching from his left ear to the base of his brain. Although it was benign, the tumour that tangled around his brain stem was the size of a tennis ball.

Warren had emergency neurosurgery knowing he had only a 50-50 chance of survival and that, if he did survive, he would very possibly be paralysed and wheelchair-bound for the rest of his life.

The operation was supposed to take

four hours, followed by a hospital stay of three weeks. Instead, it took two lengthy operations to remove the tumour, the first lasting 12 hours. Following life-threatening complications, including both bacterial and fungal meningitis, golden staph, pneumonia and blood clots, as well as epileptic seizures, Warren was in hospital for 446 days. He underwent 20 operations, during which time his weight dropped to 60kg.

With my soulmate still in hospital and desperately ill on what was supposed to be our wedding day in November 1997, I cried uncontrollably. My only solace was knowing how deeply we were connected and that we would keep fighting on.

As the months dragged on, Warren's doctors began talking about moving him permanently to a nursing home. I was horrified that anyone would suggest doing that to a 30-year-old man who had fought so indomitably to live. It was time, I realised, to take him home and look after him myself.

My life as a full-time carer began in 1998, when I was just 23. With so many nursing skills required, I didn't know whether I could cope and many people assured me I couldn't. Together, though, Warren and I threw ourselves into the gruelling process of rehabilitating his wasted, semi-paralysed body. With the support of family and friends, we began to rebuild our lives, renovating a pretty cottage in a way that caters for Warren.

After four years at home, we finally got

to celebrate that long-delayed wedding. Then, two years ago, we became parents. Our son, Josh, is the most wonderful reward Warren and I could receive.

Caring for someone around the clock is no easy task. In the early days, I sometimes felt stripped of my freedom and too exhausted to cope. With neither of us able to work, we have to get by on just \$452 a week in pension payments, which is pretty tough.

Yet, deep inside, I always knew I had to trust the hand life dealt me and, today, I'm glad for the qualities my experiences have forced me to develop: courage, strength and a determination to overcome whatever is thrown at us. As for Warren, his ongoing ability to defy the odds – always with a smile – simply amazes me and inspires all who meet him.

I used to be slightly embarrassed when telling people I was "just" a carer, feeling as though society attached little value to the path I'd chosen. Now, I'm proud to say I'm a carer, having come to realise that it's not what you do in life that matters, but how much love you put into what you do.

Carers are the givers of this world and I'm proud to think that, by doing this job, I am giving the man I love so deeply the greatest gift of all – a life worth living. ■

– TANIA HAYES

Tania's inspiring book, Love Has No Limits, has just been published by Mira Books. For more information, visit www.taniahayes.com.au.