

# weekend pulse

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## Back in motion

A brain tumour left Wangaratta mum Belinda Curro unable to walk or talk. Now she's preparing to cycle across Cambodia to help the disabled in underprivileged countries. **REPORT: P4-5**

## COVER STORY



Family support ... Belinda with her parents Susannah and Clifford Aldridge.  
Pictures: KYLIE ESLER

# WIND IN HER

A life-threatening brain tumour left this Wangaratta mother of three unable to hold or speak to her newborn son. She talks to **SUE WALLACE** about her journey through the ordeal and the refusal to accept defeat that left doctors astounded.

**B**ELINDA Curro believes in the saying you can't change the direction of the winds but you can always adjust your sails.

But her saying was well and truly tested the day the Wangaratta mother of three was told she had a brain tumour that was threatening her life and that of her unborn child.

Belinda can vividly recall the meeting with the specialist in Darwin who informed her there was only one choice — to operate or she and her baby would die.

"The brain tumour was so large and in such a bad spot I was transferred immediately to Adelaide where they could cope with the complicated brain surgery," she says.

A 10-hour operation followed, but even then the tumour was in such a difficult position: surgeons were unable to remove it all and Belinda was left unable to walk and speak.

She was 25 weeks' pregnant.

Back at home life turned upside down for Belinda's husband Leandro and their two children, Imogen, now 9, and Jeremiah, now 7.

Throughout the ordeal her parents, Clifford and Susannah Aldridge, were by the family's side.

Three months later Belinda delivered a healthy baby boy, Luke, in Adelaide and then returned to Wangaratta in December 2009, where Clifford and

Susannah moved in with the family to help.

"We were so pleased Luke was OK but I couldn't hold him, or speak to him and wasn't capable of caring for him as I couldn't even feed myself," she says. "What I found particularly heart-breaking was not being able to speak to Luke."

"Think about how often a mother talks to her newborn and how babies learn to recognise their mother's voice, well I just couldn't speak."

Raised at Mount Beauty, Belinda moved with her family to Wangaratta when she was 14, then to Melbourne and later Brisbane, where she met Leandro.

"We met in a karaoke bar in Brisbane where Leandro was stationed in the army," Belinda says.

After marrying, the couple had their first two children, and lived in Darwin where she worked as a clerk at the army base while her husband was stationed in Iraq.

When she was 25 weeks' pregnant with Luke she started to experience shocking headaches, dizzy spells and blurred vision.

"Several doctors said it was pregnancy-related but I finally got someone to listen to me," she says.

"After having a MRI scan I went home and then the phone rang and they said I had to return to hospital immediately.

"My world was turned upside down and I knew it



Wangaratta's Belinda Curro says she is lucky to be here and makes the most of life.

**In training ... Belinda Curro will cycle 350 kilometres across Cambodia to raise awareness of Cambodian women with disabilities.**

was never going to be the same from the moment I was diagnosed."

After the lengthy operation, Belinda was devastated to learn it was unlikely she would regain her speech and mobility.

"The operation affected my balance, speech and left me with uncontrollable shaking and no feeling in my face muscles," Belinda says.

All the while Belinda's parents were helping to care for the children and giving Belinda and Leandro the support they needed to face what seemed like an insurmountable battle.

"Without my parents, who moved in with us, we couldn't have coped, they have given up so much and made so many sacrifices," she says.

But the sacrifices have been more than worth it as Belinda, 32, astounded doctors with her tenacity and refusal to accept defeat.

Today, almost unbelievably, Belinda is a familiar sight around Wangaratta training on her bike for her second international charity bike ride.

"It was little steps at a time but I was determined that I had to get on with life and I started serious rehabilitation," she says.

"It was all very frustrating for someone like me and the worst thing was having to ask people to do things all the time.

"You don't realise how much you take for granted in life until it is taken away from you."

Swimming has played a big part in her rehabilitation and she's up early most mornings heading to the pool with her coach, Max Batey.

"We were just talking recently about when I first started I could hardly move in the water ... now I am doing laps," she says.

"Doctors are amazed at my progress, willpower and determination."

Cycling has also played a big part in her recovery and she spends up to four hours a day training.

"My husband has always loved cycling and I joined Disability Sport and Recreation where coach Greg Mayland introduced me to a hand cycle," she says.

A hand cycle is a type of arm-powered recumbent bike with three wheels.

Despite having limited mobility and balance, Belinda discovered she just loved it.

"It felt weird at first but I loved the fact I could feel the wind in my hair and was mobile," she says.



amazed at me, they had never seen anything like it and I was the only female cyclist.

"They kept coming up and saying 'strong woman'."

Next month Belinda will take on a new challenge and travel to Cambodia, where she will again hand-cycle 350 kilometres across Cambodia on an eight-day journey.

"I love being active and training hard and cycling is something Leandro, who is based at Puckapunyal, and I can do together," she says.

She has also been working tirelessly to raise money to fund the Cambodian trip, holding movie nights and sausage sizzles.

Belinda will join 16 other Victorian cyclists, both disabled and able-bodied, to hand-cycle and pushbike their way across Cambodia to promote awareness of Cambodian women with disabilities.

"These women live far less privileged lives than ours and are on the bottom rung of society with

“ I even surprised the hospital psychologists as I tried not to be sad and thought how lucky I was to be alive ... ”

their work and leisure opportunities severely limited," she says.

Cycle Power will also establish a wheelchair basketball program to empower Cambodian women through involvement in sport.

When she's not cycling, Belinda enjoys catching up with friends for coffee and helps run a Neuro Support Group which meets once a month for people with brain injuries.

"People don't understand brain injuries, I didn't understand until it happened to me and things changed," she says.

Belinda admits she never imagined anything like this would ever happen to her, but she's not bitter and accepts what life has dealt her.

"I am lucky to be here and I certainly make the most of it," she says.

And throughout her ordeal Belinda has remained extremely optimistic.

"After the operation I even surprised the hospital psychologists as I tried not to be sad and thought how lucky I was to be alive, now I just want to get on with my life," she says.

"I want to spread the word that being disabled isn't the end of the world and you can achieve things you want to do — you just have to adjust your sails and go with the wind."

• Donations to help fund the Cycle Power challenge can be made by phoning (03) 9473 0100.

For information on sport for people with disabilities contact Disability Sport and Recreation on 1800 234 648 or dsr.org.au

# WHEELS

"I really miss being able to walk properly and run."

Belinda is now quite mobile and has the back-up of a walker just in case she falls, a potentially life-threatening risk for someone recovering from brain surgery.

As she became more confident with her cycling, Belinda decided to give something back to others and signed up for the Cycle Power Challenge.

She spent two weeks hand-cycling 540 kilometres across Vietnam — and she's got a tattoo to prove it.

Despite the heat and humidity they endured, Belinda describes it as an opportunity of a lifetime.

"I felt I had really achieved something," she says.

"It was such an experience and so dear to my heart that's why I had the tattoo ... it reminds me every day what we did and how good we have it here in Australia compared with over there."

Belinda raised \$6000, which was part of a \$70,000 donation raised by the team to assist disabled Vietnamese.

"People complain when things go wrong here, but compared to countries like Vietnam and Cambodia, there's not much to complain about — I saw people who didn't have a thing, yet they were happy," she says.

"The Vietnamese people were



**Belinda Curro with her children, Imogen, 9, Luke, 3, and Jeremiah Curro, 7.**