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## Burn survivor's courage: 'My scars don't define me'

After she was badly burned as a baby, Tianna-Joy faced a tough road ahead - by Keeley Henderson



Tianna-Joy King was a baby when fire tore through her family home, leaving her with burns to 69 per cent of her body.

The doctors warned her mother, Antoinette Maree, that the beautiful 14-month-old tot wouldn't survive her injuries.

'Her clothes had melted to her body, her skin resembled wet tissue paper and her bones were exposed,' Antoinette Maree, from South Australia, says. 'She had holes in her lungs, her windpipe was destroyed, she lost all her toes and heels, her fingers were twisted.'

The mum watched helplessly as Tianna-Joy 'fought with every breath to live' in intensive care.

'My daughter was bandaged to the majority of her body and endured two hours a day of physio, screaming in pain. The strength she had to continue was amazing,' she says.

Tianna-Joy survived. But her fight was far from over.



*Tianna-Joy (pictured) suffered relentless bullying after she was badly burned as a baby  
Photo by Jeanette Farquhar*

'Surviving the injury was just the beginning. After that she faced many years of surgery, pain, stares, teasing and bullying,' says Antoinette Maree.

Now aged 24, Tianna-Joy has endured around 100 medical procedures over the years.

'I remember sitting at a cafe with mum when I was little, bandaged from head to toe, and these old people staring and saying I shouldn't be allowed out in public looking like that,' Tianna-Joy tells New Idea.

Growing up, Tianna-Joy was in and out of hospital, she had to wear uncomfortable pressure garments, and had splints on her hands and feet.

Even with endless hours of painful stretching and physio, she still often had to use a wheelchair because walking for more than five minutes would result in horrendous pain.



*The tattoo on her back carries a mantra she is determined to live by  
Photo by Jeanette Farquhar*

'There was a lot of things I couldn't do growing up.

'I couldn't play sports because I physically couldn't cope on my feet. I couldn't go to friends' houses because often I had open wounds and needed dressings to be done. And parents were scared I would break, or was contagious,' she says.

As a teenager, her injuries robbed Tianna-Joy of the independence and freedom her peers took for granted.

With hands that were often bandaged, she was heavily reliant on others to push her wheelchair, so even a simple walk through the park or a trip to the shops was bittersweet.

'I didn't want to be a burden and I didn't want to be seen in a wheelchair, because people would look,' she explains.

And the bullying was relentless.



*Tianna-Joy suffered devastating burns to 69 per cent of her body  
(she is pictured in hospital as a baby)*

*Photo supplied*

'Teasing, pointing and laughing happened every day. When I was about nine, one girl made me trip over and laughed at me. Another time I was in my wheelchair with my feet bandaged, and a group of kids tipped me out and I had to bum crawl across the room to get back to my wheelchair. It made me feel worthless.'

'I'm not sure if the bullying, and teasing, and staring is why I suffer from social agoraphobia, but I guess it would be a huge contribution.'

'I find it difficult to leave the house without a family member by my side. I struggle to talk to strangers and dread questions being asked about my burns. I spend the majority of my time in the social media world where I feel comfortable.'



*At times, the bullying she endured made Tianna-Joy  
(pictured with her mum) feel 'worthless'  
Photo supplied*

It would have been easy for Tianna-Joy to become a recluse. However, her great passion for music has given her the strength to get out into a world, which often feels overwhelming.

In particular, she credits her idols Justin Bieber, Demi Lovato and girl band Fifth Harmony for 'keeping her going'.

'I draw strength through their triumph over a diverse range of struggles,' she explains.

Though she has faced tremendous hardship in her life, Tianna-Joy turned a corner late last year when she attended The Phoenix World Burn Congress in America.

There she received a hug from another idol, plane crash survivor and America's Got Talent star Kechi Okwuchi.



*America's Got Talent star Kechi Okwuchi hugs  
Tianna-Joy at the World Burn Congress  
Photo supplied*

'It was incredible,' she says, adding that her experience at that event gave her the foundations to change her life.

'The workshops in self-confidence and relationships helped me accept my scars and gave me hope for the future.

'I was in a room with 1000 survivors and their families, and for the first time my world became so much larger than the comforts of my bedroom. I felt like I actually belonged.

'Everyone I spoke to had a different story, but we have all gone through the same emotional and physical pain. I made friends for life.'

Looking to the future, Tianna-Joy hopes to have a family one day. She also wishes to help others. 'Learning to love myself is a work in progress but as the tattoo on my back says: 'Never say never', she smiles.

'I hope to inspire people. My scars do not define me. I have learnt to accept the skin I'm in.'

Tianna-Joy is fundraising so she can return to the World Burn Congress this year. **Donate at <https://www.gofundme.com/helptiannajoy>.**