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Fun retreat for Burn survivors



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Last week the Castaway Resort was host to a very special retreat that was both empowering and healing for women that have sustained severe burns. The Women's Burn Retreat held annually by the Burn Support Charitable Trust, was packed with activities, workshops and pampering sessions that provided a perfect respite for burn survivors.

Survivors not victims

When Howick resident Michele Henry first spotted TV personality and former model Colin Mathura-Jeffree at Maccas, the events coordinator and administrator for the Burns Support Group promptly approached him to be a speaker at the upcoming Annual Women's Burn Retreat to be held at the Castaway Resort.

Colin was apprehensive. Coming from a fashion and beauty background he wondered if the burn victims who have gone through the trauma and pain of sustaining burns would think him to be shallow and vain.

"Michele reminded me that these women are survivors and not victims and that I have a life story to share," says the former TV judge on NZ Top Model.

"When I arrived at the Castaway Resort, I had no time for trepidation as I was greeted with the most open smiles and energy. I spun out stories of my terribly wild career and the most embarrassing bits got the biggest laughs.

"I even remembered in 1993 a show in Wellington that had a guy who had survived burns and how the organisers nearly dropped him out. I struggled to speak up for him because he was the most handsome male model in the show. He remained in the show.

"Initially, I was a bit unsettled because I saw these women were equally as brilliant, vivacious, sexy and real," he says of the upbeat women who have been through a trial by fire, literally.

Instead of stories of depression, disfigurement, and surgeries, the women who have gone through multiple grief situations were out to have fun as Colin shared styling tips on posing like a pro for photography.

“The shoot was just like TV’s Top Model,” is his verdict on the prowess with which the women preened and posed.

“These women suddenly smouldered under direction. They leaned into the fantasy. They took the smallest of cues and were vogueing all over the chairs, the deck and the floor. I was so impressed. True beauty shone because these women aren’t just limited to the title ‘survivor’, they’re more than inspirational, I realised they are a force of nature,” says the former judge for New Zealand’s Hottest Home Baker.

Healing and self-care

Michele who looks after the day-to-day administration for the trust, adds saying, “The Burn Support Charitable Trust, now in its eighth year is the provider of this event. It’s a privilege to see the invaluable benefits gained by all. With the amazing support from various organisations and individuals, the retreat offers a safe haven to openly discuss the burn survivor journey, creating extremely close bonds that very quickly are established from day one.

“This week, Colin made a memorable impact with his wealth of knowledge, charismatic delivery and sincere compassion,” she says. “Colin shared his ambitions and achievements connecting effectively and leaving a lasting impression. It was wonderful to watch the ladies express their inner beauty through a fabulous photo session. Their confidence at an all-time high.

“Over the 4-day retreat women participated in workshops gaining tools and strategies to enhance and better everyday life.”

The retreat offered a diverse range of activities tailored to cater to the physical, emotional, and psychological needs of participants. Therapeutic workshops focused on healing and self-care techniques, including meditation to promote holistic well-being.

The Q & A forum was an interactive platform for attendees to engage with fellow survivors, share stories gaining an insight towards healing and acceptance.

“The heroes of the event are the beautiful, courageous and greatly inspiring ladies that attend,” says Michele.

“Their contribution is immeasurable, they are a sisterhood and an encouragement for each other, affirming the resilience and strength of women overcoming physical and emotional burn trauma.”



An enriching legacy

The Burns Support Group was founded by Howick residents, Delwyn Breslau and her husband, Alan whose tireless work for burn survivors and their families helped them rise like the proverbial Phoenix from the ashes.

At 37, Alan's life had changed dramatically after a commercial plane he was a passenger on flew into a tornado. The Mohawk Airlines plane with 40 passengers tragically crashed and burnt as it broke into two in Rochester, New York. Trapped, unconscious in burning wreckage, Alan, who was on a business trip, was held upside-down by a seat belt, surrounded by seven dead people, including the pilot and co-pilot.

Alan sustained third and fourth degree burns over 40 per cent of his body, losing the top of his head, an eye, ear, nose, thumb, and some fingers. The chemical engineer who helped design Neil Armstrong's seat to fly to the moon went through the ordeal of over 80 surgeries.

Refusing to be overcome by depression, Alan rebuilt his life and helped thousands of other lives by establishing the Phoenix Society. He also initiated the first World Burn Congress – a global movement for burn survivors that brings hope and healing to help those who have been through horrific experiences.

He helped establish the first camp for children with burns in Pennsylvania and started the Magic Carpet programme to fly burn-injured children and adults from third world countries to the US for pro-bono surgeries. His message for burn survivors was: They are victors of circumstances and not victims.

The next retreat will be held from March 12-15, 2025. If you are or know of anyone that has sustained burns and would like to take part in this transformative event, please contact michele@burns.org.nz