

Burns survivor made of stern stuff

Surviving third degree burns will almost certainly mean disfigurement, multiple surgeries and years of painful rehabilitation – something most people refuse to contemplate. But one Flat Bush woman not only came through such an ordeal but with the Support of the Burns Support Group Charitable Trust emerged a strong, compassionate and motivated person with a fulfilling life as HELEN PERRY discovered.

Mata La'Akulu is one of the most courageous and incredibly grounded people I have ever met. Her life took an unprecedented turn when as small baby, asleep in bed, a light bulb shattered, fell on the bed and within minutes the bedding was ablaze.

From that moment the probably ordinary childhood envisaged for her by her parents disappeared and baby Mata became another burns statistic in New Zealand. But she wouldn't remain anonymous.

Mata's story started only weeks before the house fire that changed the course of her life. "I was born in the Cook Islands – a secret baby," she says. "It was intended that my grandmother raise me but she died suddenly before I came home from the hospital. As is the way on the Cooks, my aunt took me and I became part of her family. She will always be 'mum' to me."

With Mata's family booked to come to New Zealand shortly after her grandmother's funeral, she too was part of their new life. "We lived in a state house in Otara, my parents both worked and the children shared beds. It wasn't flash but I had a good childhood despite the challenges."

Those challenges began soon after the family settled into their new home. Mata and an older sister were fast asleep when the light bulb burst setting light to the bed.

"My mother rushed in and managed to grab my sister. The fire station was close and I'm told an engine arrived really quickly but by time I was rescued the burns to my face and hands were severe. I had been lying with one arm up to my face, my hand touching my nose. These virtually 'fused' and I lost fingers and my nose which was later reconstructed. In fact, my chances of survival were slim."

But survive she did and though reluctant to go too deeply into the many painful aspects of her recovery, Mata admits the long journey,

begun with that emergency run to Middlemore Hospital, has impacted in many different ways.

"While there were enormously painful times and countless trips to hospital for grafts and surgeries, I was very protected in my pre-school years. My parents did everything to give me a happy life at home and as a result seldom took me out in public.

"But when it came time for school the impact of my injuries really came home and there began a journey which had to do with accepting what had happened and how it had left me. Fortunately, plastic surgeons had rebuilt my nose and although one hand was badly damaged, I had the other so I did okay."

While many people might have shunned public places, Mata remarkably began to embrace life. "Initially, I had no hair and had to undergo three tissues expansions. With each, one my hair began growing a little higher on me head. I had the second treatment while I was at college and would get terrible headaches. It was very hard; I didn't want to go to school but I didn't want to miss out either.

"After my final expansion my hair was growing normally, all over my head. I was so happy there would be no more tissue expansions!"

Mata she was still in primary school when the Burns Support Group Charitable Trust (BSG) was set up and she became involved in its activities. "Staff and volunteers helped build my self-confidence and helped me to understand myself. I progressed such a lot under their direction.

"I especially remember them asking my parents if I could go to a camp with other young burns victims. Mum and dad were very hesitant especially mum who always wanted to protect me. She had to be assured and reassured. All I wanted was to be with other kids so when they finally said, 'yes', I was so excited, but they

still insisted on taking me there, just in case!"

Because she rarely looked at herself in the mirror, Mata says playing a game of 'touch and feel' with other campers was a 'new learning curve'. "We learned to look at each other and at ourselves; to touch and feel our own scars and each other's. That was the start of a new process of self-discovery and self-acceptance."

Looking back Mata admits the camp was the catalyst for her growing into a confident and emotionally strong young woman who today serves of the BSG's Board of Trustees. "I did other camps and at 10, even went to Disneyland with BSG. By time I left school I was in a pretty good place."

But, then came a new encounter – the working world. Burns victims can suffer innumerable loss due to their circumstance. Not only loss of physical appearance but loss of income, relationships and more.

Remarkably, (or, knowing Mata, perhaps not) the teenager showed she had what it took to make her way and find employment. "I started out doing bar work and waitressing both here and in Australia. And why not? I've always found it satisfying to be around people and I've used that to my advantage. Some people see me as disadvantaged. I never have."

Since those early days of hospitality, Mata has explored various employment prospects and for the past two and a half years has worked for Skids, which operates after school care and holiday programmes.

Between her day job, as well as being a BSG board member and a mother of four children, aged 7 to 12 years, she says, matter of factly, "I'm kept pretty much on the go."

"My daughter is very protective of me and wants to fight my battles but I do fine all by myself," she says. "I've always been honest with them; I've told them about my scars and I



answer their questions. I want them to feel comfortable knowing who I am and where I have come from."

Although busy, Mata says she is never too busy when it comes to BSG work. "Understandably, I am ardent about safety. I believe smoke alarms should be mandatory in every home and all burn risks outlined to young people, not just fire risk. Did you know one of the highest number of burns come from children heating noodles in the microwave then tipping the bowl over themselves?

"Education is imperative and thankfully the BSG is always happy to make speakers available to schools and other groups. Education is the first step in prevention, and if I can help in some way, accidents like mine may be avoided and outcomes like mine prevented. Burn accidents are still way too many in New Zealand; the numbers have to come down."