

Burns survivors gather for special retreat as support group celebrates 35 years of operating

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A support group for burns survivors that started 35 years ago in one woman's lounge is now a thriving charitable trust with more than 1500 survivors and supporters.

Over the past few days, some of those female survivors gathered for a special retreat just outside of Auckland to help them mentally heal from their trauma.

Burns survivors Serena Rudd, Belinda McKenzie, Areena Lata, and Rachel Ford all have a different story to tell and they're happy to share it. They don't want people to look away and they don't need judgement or pity either. They're public and proud.

Rudd survived a fiery car crash that killed her partner and baby. The other driver was drunk.

"All I can remember is the flames coming up my legs," she says.

McKenzie barely escaped a house fire when she was 12 years old after her bedtime reading candle engulfed her room in flames.

"I sat there and watched my bedroom and house explode," she says.

Lata became a burns survivor at age two after her sister played with matches in their car.

"I received third-degree burns to 80 percent of my body, including my entire face," she says.

And Ford set herself on fire when she was three years old.

"Sat down by the tree and lit a match and boof, up in flames," she says.

They're now proud to talk about their burns stories.

"I just see myself as perfect the way I am," Lata says.

"I'm happy, I've accepted who I am. I'm a survivor and nothing is stopping me from going on," Rudd adds.

"I've explained it to someone before as if I was Angelina Jolie walking into a room and everybody turns their heads saying, 'oh my goodness', and that's when you go, 'hello, yes', walking into a room. You just have to deal with it," McKenzie says.

The ladies have gathered at a beach just out of Auckland for a four-day burn survivor retreat.

It's their chance to share their stories, be inspired, be pampered, and, in their words, accept all parts of themselves - even the bits that aren't always accepted by society.

It's raw, it's honest, and it's vulnerable. There's plenty of laughter and smiles - and a few tears - that's all part of the mental healing from severe trauma.



*Clockwise from top left: Areena Lata, Belinda McKenzie, Serena Rudd, and Rachel Ford.
Photo credit: Newshub.*

"It is absolutely phenomenal, the benefits of being around women who are alike," Lata says.

"I'll tell anyone about getting burnt, but doing it here around other people getting burnt, I broke down like a little baby. It was so emotional," Ford adds.

The retreat has been organised by the Burn Support Group Charitable Trust. This trust was established back in 1987 by Kiwi mum Delwyn Breslau whose eight-year-old son was badly burned in an explosion in Papakura. Nowadays, there are more than 1500 members. The goal is simple - improve the lives of those with burns.

For many, their treatment can be slow, painful, and fraught with risk - and the side effects are long-term and often permanent.B

Burns come in different degrees - first, second, and third. But even a small burn not treated well can result in life-long scarring or disability.

Some of the women spent more than a year in hospital and have lost count of the number of surgeries they've had to rebuild their bodies and faces.

"They said so many times to my mum that I wasn't going to make it when I was in intensive care because of how horrific the burns were, but I'm here today and I made it," Rudd says.

"I did it for my three kids who had lost their dad and baby sister. Losing their mum as well, I don't know what they would have done."

They say the mental toll can be tougher than the physical.

"It's had a huge, huge impact," Lata says.B

"Simply being able to look in the mirror one day and say, 'This is me, I am beautiful', has taken so many years."

It was also an emotional experience for Rudd.

"I cried my eyes out when I first looked in the mirror but now I'm alright, I carry on with life, you have to."

Education, they say, is key to preventing others from going through what they have. But don't ever call these women victims; they say they are survivors and are now very much comfortable in their own skin.