

## Woman's Day

### After a lifetime of hiding, these Kiwi burns survivors bravely bare their scars in the hope of helping others

Not covering up any more, Tracey-Maree, Donna and Heather are all proud advocates for the Burn Support Group.



Three strong, inspiring Kiwi women stepped into a whimsical floral wonderland when they visited the *Woman's Day* photo studio recently. They were all there with a common purpose – to celebrate their scars.

The brave act of removing outer clothing to reveal bodies marred by childhood accidents isn't one that's come easy for Tracey-Maree Houia, Heather Stewart and Donna Gregory Marshall – all three have spent their lives covering up as they worked on their psychological scars.

But the courageous trio wanted to share their experiences of living with bodies that have been scarred by burns and to show support of the organisation that has helped them all on their journeys – New Zealand's [Burn Support Charitable Trust](#).

## Music heals my soul



When Tracey-Maree Houia heard a striking male voice belting out a song at a country music festival in 1998, she homed in on the handsome young man up on stage. "I'm going to marry him," the 25-year-old said.

Two decades later, Nic – the man with the striking voice – is much more than Tracey-Maree's husband and the other half of her country music duo En-Tranzet. He's also her greatest support.

Tracey-Maree says it was a combination of true love and music that helped her find happiness after years of struggling with her self-image, after being teased and bullied "from my first day of school until my last".

The 55-year-old Aucklander has scars covering her arms, chest and legs from third-degree burns sustained as a six-month-old. She was being babysat by a family friend when she manoeuvred her baby walker towards a jug on the edge of the bench and pulled at its cord.

Having undergone countless operations to smooth her skin tissue, the mother-of-two recalls the difficulties of growing up with extensive scarring. "I was conscious of lads seeing my body because I'm burnt on my breasts," she reveals. "I hated the thought of a man looking at them."

But through her hard times, music was always the one thing that helped Tracey-Maree escape from emotional pain. "Music is in my soul and has always been a way for me to get my feelings out," she says. "But I'd still always cover up my body on stage."

That was until she met Nic. "He raised my confidence to the level where I didn't need to cover up while performing," she tells. "He helped me go from a singer to an entertainer."

Nic was equally captivated by Tracey-Maree. They quickly formed a bond over music and he happily took on his girlfriend's special-needs son Bradley.

After becoming a music duo, the couple accomplished more big things, such as winning the 1992 New Zealand Country Music Entertainers of the Year title.

Then they adopted a baby, Brooke. Tracey-Maree proudly talks about her now 20-year-old daughter's runner-up placing in Miss Universe New Zealand last year.

Brooke is also an ambassador for the Burns Support Group, which plays a significant role in the Houia household, with Nic also an active advocate. Tracey-Maree says her husband has stood firmly by her side throughout their 30-year relationship. "Nic is very resilient and you'd have to be to put up with me because I'm a character!" she laughs.

The couple still have a lot of fun together, having just opened for the Topp Twins at the Norfolk Country Music Festival.

Smiling, Tracey-Maree says, "My goal is to spread the message that scarring is only skin deep. I believe that the more I show my scars, the more awareness there is and the more I might help others."

## It's my badge of courage



Heather Stewart stood in her neighbour's backyard watching rubbish burn in an incinerator drum.

The nine-year-old was playing next door for a few minutes after dinner when she was told by her friend's dad to step back as he poured petrol over rubbish.

The fire, which swelled quickly and violently, caused the drum to explode and hurl into the path of Heather, who was struck by the blaze and burnt beyond recognition.

"It's pretty much a miracle I survived," says the 60-year-old. She was immediately hosed down by neighbours, then rushed to Palmerston North Hospital, where she was given just a 50% chance of survival.

Heather took 10 days to stabilise before being transferred to Lower Hutt Hospital, where she stayed in intensive care for two-and-a-half-months.

During the following two years in hospital, the young girl endured dozens of surgeries, including an intricate nasal reconstruction.

"The doctors attached skin from my arm to my nose and that skin grew directly onto my face over the nasal bones," she explains. "My arm was strapped to my head until a blood supply had rerouted to my new nose."

For three weeks, Heather lay patiently on her back with her arm pressed against her face as her body healed.

But she says recovering from surgery wasn't the hardest part of her hospital stay. "My parents lived 160km away, so they could only come on a Sunday. As a nine-year-old, when you're in a room with four others and they've all got family around and you don't, that's hard."

The hospital librarian took on a motherly role, visiting Heather every day. And Heather's own mum eventually gave up her job and rented a place near the hospital, thanks to financial help from a family friend.

Heather went on to marry and divorce young. She fell pregnant with her daughter Purdy, who was born with a chromosomal abnormality and lived for just 10 weeks.

It was the never-ending support of family and friends that helped her to get over life's hurdles. Then when she connected with the Burns Support Group, she found her calling.

"I started going to schools to educate children about young people who've been burnt and how they just want to be treated the same as everyone else," says Heather, who now lives in Auckland.

"I found my story helped build a rapport with children straightaway and I quickly realised I could really enjoy teaching them."

Now a teacher of 18 years, Heather is a shining example of resilience and overcoming adversity to her students.

"When I first start a class, I always talk to the kids about my accident and why I look this way. But with the really young ones, it's all about them again after about five minutes," she laughs. "They're like, 'OK, we're over that – can we do maths now?'"

Heather, who can hold a pen and tie laces despite no longer having the tips of her fingers, says she feels strangely lucky that the ravages of the fire are visible to other people as she believes this helped her come to terms with them a lot faster.

"In a way, I feel quite proud of my scars – they're like my badge of courage," she says.

## I'm the old me, but happier



Stretched out on the beach in Mount Maunganui under the searing summer sun seven years ago, a newly single Donna Gregory Marshall hesitantly took off her cardigan, exposing her arms in public for the first time in her adult life.

Donna, now 55, was very conscious of the deep scars covering her arms, shoulders and back – lasting reminders of the boiling water that burnt 60% of her body when she was a baby.

"It was a really hot day and a friend told me to take my cardigan off because I looked uncomfortable," explains the Hamilton local, who'd just separated from her husband of 16 years. "At first, I said no way because I hated showing my scars in public, but I did it and never looked back."

Whangarei-born Donna was just 11 months old when she was drenched in scorching water, after pulling a jug cord that was hanging from the bench, while her mother ran a bath for her brother.

Donna was rushed to hospital after her frantic mum soaked her in a cold bath. She then spent three months in the burns ward with bandages bounding her third-degree burns.

She recalls, "My poor mum said the first night I was home turned out like World War III because I was wearing little mittens and scratched my itching burns. My parents had to strap me into the cot with my arms up so I couldn't itch."

It wasn't until Donna was an adult and undergoing counselling through NZ's Burn Support Charitable Trust that she discovered that the cot episode – which she's thankful she doesn't remember – is the reason she has nightmares if she sleeps on her back. "It's OK, though. I just sleep on my side," says the water burns safety advocate, who has undergone 30 operations, including skin grafts from her thighs.

Six years ago, Donna started counselling to re-evaluate her priorities and find happiness again after the sudden end of her marriage. She recalls collapsing in a heap of grief on her kitchen floor, utterly heartbroken and at rock bottom. But six months later, the full-time nurse had found her feet again.

"Before my marriage break-up, I never would have joined the Burns Support Group like I did," reveals Donna.

"I wasn't flourishing in my marriage. Although my husband supported me, deep down, I always felt like he was embarrassed about my scars.

"Now I'm the old me again, but happier. I've realised that my scars aren't anything to worry about. I'm a survivor and because of that, I'm an empathetic and caring person – that's the real me."

Today, Donna is much more comfortable in her own skin – scars and all. She is also a wife for the second time, to her loving husband Kevin Marshall, who she married in 2014, wearing a beautiful, short-sleeved gown.

Smiling, she recalls, "Not long after we met, Kevin said we needed to go shopping. I said, 'OK, but I'm going without a cardigan.' He replied, 'Well, I hope so!'"

Draped in coral chiffon for the *Woman's Day* photo shoot and beaming with confidence, Donna dabs away tears as she reflects on how far she's come.

"To do this story means so much because I've always had a thing about photographers. I've had three lots of professional photos done in the past and each time, the photographer told me to cover up my scars."

Relaxed after recently returning from a romantic holiday to Hawaii with Kevin, Donna says she has bought herself togs for the first time.

"I got three pairs and they're all gorgeous – I'll be there strutting my stuff!"