

September 2011

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Alex Mitchell

... SURVIVOR

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UPON MEETING ALEX MITCHELL, IT'S EASY TO BE FOOLED INTO THINKING SHE'S A PUSSY CAT – HER CHEEKY GRIN AND WICKED SENSE OF HUMOUR BELIE HER STEELY DETERMINATION AND RESOURCEFULNESS, SOMETHING THAT'S ESSENTIAL FOR SURVIVING A LIFE-CHANGING EVENT. ALEX TELLS ANGELA BUETI HOW SHE MIRACULOUSLY SURVIVED THE DEVASTATING BOXING DAY TSUNAMI WITH HER TWO YOUNG CHILDREN, AND SUBSEQUENTLY REBUILT HER LIFE HERE ON THE SUNSHINE COAST.

Alex Mitchell is not one to blow her own trumpet. If you have never heard of this Sunshine Coaster, it's little wonder. She doesn't seek the limelight and being our cover girl for this edition filled her with fear and trepidation. "Why would you want to write a story about me?" she asked, genuinely surprised.

I met Alex at a local event a few months before this interview, and within minutes of chatting, it became clear that her story was quite extraordinary. She has not lived a conventional life and has experienced some potentially catastrophic events that would have most down and out for good.

It's true that life throws all manner of challenges in our paths, but, inexplicably, it throws more at some than others. And while many of us complain about the insignificant and mundane, it's all put into perspective when you meet someone like Alex. Suddenly, complaining about a head cold or desperately needing the latest big-screen TV seems a little silly.

Alex has copped a lot, more than most, but she's not one to ask 'why me?' She had a cancer scare in her 20's and was told she would never have children. She suffered a difficult relationship from which she fled, and then came the moment that would change her life forever – she narrowly escaped the devastating Boxing Day tsunami with her two young children.

But the saying goes 'it's not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog' and Alex is testament to that.

The 44-year-old single mother of two has used every ounce of her steely determination and resourcefulness to build a better life for her young family. With a burgeoning business called Author Support Services, an entrepreneurial flair for buying and renovating houses, and as facilitator of the successful Sunshine Coast Women Entrepreneurs group, the future is looking bright.

As we settle in for a chat at The Chopping Block in Buderim, Alex is still curious as to why people would want to read about her story. I reassure her that it's not her head that's on the chopping block and that she can relax! The afternoon whizzes by and before we know it, Alex has generously shared the poignant moments of her life with me.

Alex is a hippy at heart. Having travelled to more than 26 countries, she's had more flights than most of us have had bus trips. Living most of her young adult years in a Kombi van exploring Australia, life on the road with a backpack was de rigueur.

When discussing her upbringing, it's clear that a family gene is responsible for the happy wandering. Alex's Austrian father and Australian mother frequently travelled overseas from their home on Sydney's North Shore.

"We were a regular middle-class family, but we were a bit left of centre," explains Alex. "All my family travels. I guess it's something we all love to do."

It was while living in Papua New Guinea's Bougainville as a seven-year-old that Alex's imagination was captured and she was shown what the world had

to offer. She was sent with her older sister and younger brother to live there with an aunt for three months while their parents travelled to Europe.

"We went to school with the local children and the school rules said we had to cover our bottoms and feet, so we wore knickers and thongs. We were walked to school as there were head-hunters around. We opened coconuts and played with the local kids. It was an amazing experience."

Back in Sydney, Alex attended an acceleration program in years five and six as she was gifted in English. "I liked the new school and didn't find it difficult, and we had lots of extra opportunities to do drama and music." But the rocky road of secondary school was around the corner.

"You could say high school and I were mutually disappointed in each other," Alex says with a laugh. "At the end of year 10 I was told that it would be better for the other students if I didn't come back!" The options were a private school or to leave school altogether and Alex took the latter option.

So, at 16 years of age, with a one-way ticket given to her by her parents as a birthday present, Alex took off to Byron Bay. The self-confessed 'wild child' was in her element.

For the next four years Alex travelled around Australia soaking up the sights while making a little money along the way by selling flowers, hot chickens and anything else she could get her hands on. She devoured books on feminism and politics and became something of a political activist.

In Airlie Beach she was questioned by police for refusing to wear clothes but was let off on a technicality. "I was sewing an outfit in the back of my friend's HT Holden which we lived in. I explained that because I was in my own home, I was free to be naked!" Oh for the freedom of the early '80s.

Alex criss-crossed the country for close to four years before she fell in love with the Sunshine Coast. She was 19 and living happily in a Kombi van at Sunshine Beach (before there were huge houses dotting the landscape) when a cancer scare threatened to derail her carefree life forever.

Returning to Sydney for an operation, Alex was told that her cervical cancer may prevent her from having children. Although she was a free spirit, the notion of a family and a house with a white picket fence was something she had secretly desired one day. Unknowingly, a holiday to the UK to recuperate after the surgery was the catalyst for making this dream come true. It's where she met her "soul mate" and fell in love.

"I met my future husband at Heathrow airport," Alex says with a sparkle in her eye. "He was a friend of my sister. It was love at first sight. After three days I moved into his place in Berkshire." Alex confesses that when she falls, she falls hard.

A few years later they were married and the couple embarked on a 10-year journey exploring as many corners of the globe as they could get to. "We had so much fun," Alex says. "We really lived life. I didn't want to miss a thing."

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It's a useless emotion being a victim. [Going back] really helped as I was able to talk with the Thai people and see how they have rebuilt their lives."

Alex Mitchell is a hippy at heart, having travelled to more than 26 countries. It was during a trip to Thailand with her children that she found herself involved in one of the world's most devastating natural disasters

It was a relationship that lasted 17 years and produced two treasured children, Flynn, now 13, and Ella, now 10, but it was settling in one spot that caused the ties that bound them together to unravel.

"I never found a better country than Australia to live in, and we settled on the Sunshine Coast in the mid '90s. Our marriage started to fall apart once we stood still, and things got steadily worse until the situation became pretty frightening. It took the last of my personal strength to walk away with my two and five-year-old."

With no money and no self-confidence, it took a year for Alex to pull herself together. She was 25 kilos overweight and receiving the single parent pension, with an uncertain future. Life was looking bleak. Then, her fighting, resourceful gene kicked in and Alex started to hatch a plan to make a new life for herself and her two young children.

"I wanted my kids to have an amazing life," she says. "I decided that we would go backpacking around Thailand for a couple of months. It was like a little team-building thing – to bring us back together."

Alex reasoned it would be no harder to live on the government allowance overseas than in Australia, and having travelled to Thailand numerous times and knowing a little of the language, she felt comfortable taking her children, who were six and three at the time.

Being an avid writer she also planned a series of stories about backpacking with children for a local newspaper.

The plan was perfect, except for one major thing. The timing of the trip would have dire consequences.

One of the most devastating natural disasters our planet has ever experienced was about to unleash its fury right at the moment Alex and her children were unwittingly sitting on an idyllic beach on the remote island of Koh Phayam near the Burmese border.

They were caught in the middle of the catastrophic 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, which is reported to have killed 275,000 people across 14 countries.

How Alex and her children escaped is a miracle. "The reason we survived is just pure luck," she says, shaking her head.

Alex recounts the chilling events.

The tide was out and Flynn was playing on the sand while Alex and Ella were metres away in a restaurant, which was just a few poles and a thatched roof sitting on the beach. At about 11am Alex looked out to the usually calm horseshoe-shaped bay and saw the water rising fast up the sand. Her immediate thought was that it was the wake of a ship.

"I ran out to get our things off the beach as I thought they were going to get wet, but the water didn't stop. It kept on coming. I turned around and ran up the back steps of the restaurant as the water started swirling around my feet. The noise was like a jet plane.

"Ella was standing on a table, screaming. The noise was so loud I couldn't even hear her screams until I was right next to her. I picked her up and started to run, and at the same time heard someone shout to Flynn to get out of the tree he had climbed. We were incredibly lucky to find each other in those crazy few seconds.

"I was carrying one and pulling the other behind me as we ran from the beach. We were slower than everyone else though, and started to fall behind. The water was

rising fast up my legs.

"Thankfully, a young English backpacker stopped. He picked up Flynn and threw him over his shoulder, and we all raced barefoot through the jungle.

"We climbed over rocks and onto a cliff, which had been partly dug out to build huts. About 20 of us were on the cliff. The screaming and noise was horrific. It was manic. The cliff was pretty unstable with the waves hitting it. I made a decision to wait for the next wave to recede then make another run for it. Some people thought I was crazy to leave the cliff, but I didn't care what anyone else was doing. I would do whatever it took to get my children to safety.

"When the time was right, we scrambled down the cliff, along the path and started to run up the mountain. I turned to look and just about everyone who had been on the cliff was following us. It's funny how people react under pressure. I guess they were just waiting for someone else to decide what to do.

"We made it to the little school that sat on the highest part of the tiny island, and soon people began to gather there, a couple of hundred in all. People soon turned up on bikes with pots to cook food. Late that afternoon I convinced a local guy to drive me down to where we were staying so I could get some things for the children. He was petrified. He didn't want to take me. I salvaged a few things which were covered in mud. The watermark in the hut, which was on stilts, was head high.

"That evening a group was dispatched to the other side of the island, where there was electricity and a television. They came back with the shocking news of what was happening around the world. We had thought it was just us. We made camp at the school and took turns to keep watch overnight for more waves or rescue helicopters, both of which we were expecting. Neither came.

"The next day the Thai Navy sent a warship, and local fishermen ferried all the women and children out to the ship. We huddled under the shadow of the machine guns and set up shade for the children. The kids felt the panic and the chaos, so we tried to make nap time as normal as possible. We arrived in the port and people came with rice to feed us and with bags of lollies for the children. The Thai people were so apologetic. It was like they felt they were responsible for ruining our holiday.

"We had to write our names and country on a piece of paper, were given a toothbrush, and we were free to go. It was surreal. We made our way to a little place on the other side of Thailand. It was New Year's Eve and I was reading a Thai newspaper written in English. There were graphic pictures of the tsunami and distraught messages from survivors looking for loved ones.

"I remember reading a message from a Swedish mother looking for her two blond-haired boys in green swimmers. They were the same age as my children, just playing innocently on the beach."

As Alex recalls this, she struggles to fight back tears, and so do I. It's an unimaginable thought for a mother.

At that point Alex started coming undone. The trauma of living through this nightmare had hit home and she was consumed by survivor guilt. She made her way back to Australia and struggled to pick up the pieces of her life.

"I had counselling, but it was a lonely experience," she says. "I had never met anyone who had survived a natural

disaster. After six months I started to pull myself together and realised how lucky we had been. The experience restored my faith in humanity.”

It was also a turning point in her life.

“I decided then there was no way I could survive all this and then go through life on the single mother’s pension. I had to make the most of it, create an extraordinary life, one where I could be proud of myself, where my children could grow up knowing that anything was possible. There was no point wishing for more money, a kinder husband, fewer natural disasters or bigger boobs. Having an amazing life was my own responsibility.”

In 2006, with renewed vigour, Alex started educating herself. She sold her furniture to raise \$5,000 to attend a course about wealth creation, which was paid back to her through a scholarship.

“I learnt about real estate investing and business building. I also built my self-confidence.”

By the end of that year Alex had bought her first investment property in Buderim with capital raised from the equity in her home. After renovating it herself, she added \$100,000 to its value. She had also lost the 25 kilos of extra baggage she’d been carrying, and people started to seek her out to ask how she did what she did.

“My story seemed to help others believe that they didn’t have to be victims, and I became more and more passionate about helping others to believe they could create their own destinies.

“I was so determined. I was not designed to be poor,” she says with a laugh.

And so continued Alex’s trajectory into property investment and the beginning of her business, Author Support Services, where she helps people realise their dreams of writing and publishing their own books.

“It was started primarily as an editing service, but took off like a steam train. My clients wanted help while they were still writing, so I began spending more and more time teaching people how to self edit, and how to manage the whole writing and publishing process. I gained so much from watching an author blossom and grow, becoming confident in their writing and believing they can share their message.

“I also started facilitating the Sunshine Coast Women Entrepreneurs, which has now grown into an amazing group of almost 300 Coast businesswomen. The philosophy of the group is that we all are learning and we all have wisdom to share. Every woman in business, big or small, should have the opportunity to learn and grow, to inspire and be inspired. This desire has nothing to do with money, and everything to do with attitude.”

Only last month, more than six years on, Alex returned to Thailand to finally face her demons. It was a brave act. Her children didn’t want her to go, but it was something she felt she had to do. “I needed to put it to rest,” she says.

“You can’t just wallow in it. It’s a useless emotion being a victim. It really helped as I was able to talk with the Thai people and see how they have rebuilt their lives.”

Life for Alex is now ‘normal’, at least as normal as it can get on her terms. Living in Landsborough, she is renovating her house and Flynn and Ella are in their element surrounded by a menagerie of animals, and the occasional backpacker.

“I have backpackers staying with me a lot of the time who

work on the property through the WWOOF [Willing Workers on Organic Farms] program. They provide my kids with the cultural diversity that they rarely get to experience where we live.

“I have found satisfaction in the simple muddy pleasure of plumbing, can feed my family for four days with one chicken, and am fairly adept at catching snakes. I am terrified of snakes but relocating them is a necessary evil, otherwise they eat all my poultry.”

She has also found love and contentment with a local farmer – a single dad with five children who also shares her passion for combining business with family.

And when she looks to the future, her eyes brighten.

“I want to take the children to Africa. I want them to see the safari animals. I want my children to see that anything is possible.”

To chat with this confident, articulate woman, you would never guess the trauma she has experienced. It’s testament to how far she has come.

And hers is a story worth telling. ■



ALEX MITCHELL