



# RACING towards a cure

Spurred on by her social conscience and the loss of her father to cancer, Annie Crawford developed Can Too, a professional training program enabling people to complete endurance events while they raising funds for research.

MY FATHER TOOK us out of school for a year to travel in a Kombi around Europe. Seven kids and Mum and Dad. It was an amazing thing to do. Everyone said to him, "You're crazy, how could you take that risk?" I was 15, the second oldest, and I absolutely loved it, but I think my 17-year-old sister might have sometimes wondered what she was doing there with all of us in a Kombi for a whole year.

He hadn't done the year in Europe that so many people did after school when he was younger, so he took the risk. And he wrote a book about it. It's called *The Trip*. My sister-in-law published it for us as a gift about 10 years ago.

That experience set off an absolute travel bug in me and at uni I saved all my money to go backpacking around India. I went there again last year, this time with Opportunity International, a fantastic organisation that funds micro-finance projects, giving small loans to women to help them start a business and find a way out of poverty.

I'm a social worker by training. I've always been interested in issues of social

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justice, so when my husband Simon [Buckingham] and I did well out of a bio-tech company we helped to set up in the United States, I decided I would use that lucky position to give something back. I started toying with the idea of starting Can Too when I ran in a marathon in the US through a similar program. I knew there was nothing like that here, so when we came back to Australia it was the perfect opportunity. I'd also grown up enough by then to realise I could do something myself. We had been out of Australia with our three sons for eight and a half years, the first three in Switzerland, then California.

Naturally, Dad dying at 51 had a big impact on my whole family. We were a very close family with happily married parents. Dad had bowel cancer but it had already gone to his pancreas and liver by the time it was diagnosed, two days before my twenty-fourth birthday. You think 24 is old, but you still feel like a kid then. He was given a death sentence of one to six months; he lived for two. He cleared out his office and never went back. My youngest brother was still at school. He was 16.



The Crawford family during their 12-month European adventure. **Right:** Annie with husband Simon and their three sons.



I'd just finished uni. I'd gone through a period of being a bit slothful like lots of people at that age and I was just starting to get back into exercise again at the time my father died.

Dad ran every morning of his life. He used to take me with him in the freezing cold. For a few years he had a stationary bicycle that he rode on the veranda and woke us all up every morning. He also loved sailing. He was always fit. It was ironic he died so young. He drank, just like normal people do, but he never smoked. His name was Graham but nobody called him that. He was always just Gruff or Gruffy.

I've been running long distance – marathons or half marathons (42km or 21km) – for about 10 years. I've always been a health-conscious person, apart from those uni days. I've found running is very good for my mental health. I love it as much for that as for the physical health really.

In 2005 I started the first Can Too program. We had 54 people in the first event, the Blackmore's Sydney Running Festival, and we raised \$105,000 for Cure Cancer Australia ([www.cure.org.au](http://www.cure.org.au)). I chose that charity because they directly fund Australian researchers. I strongly believe we need to do more to stop the brain drain out of Australia, especially scientists. I also like the fact they might find a cure.

We have now trained more than 3,000 people and raised \$4 million. Most would call themselves non-runners or non-swimmers when they begin. I think people sign up thinking it'll be a bit of fun, fitness and fundraising, but it becomes a lot more than that. It might be someone who has

never run 400 metres around a track who takes on the goal of running 21 ks. It's a personal journey for them, a journey of transformation. So while they don't know that at the beginning, they learn a lot about themselves and that transfers into other areas of their lives. They think, 'Okay, I did that, so now I can go and do a masters, or whatever, as well.' I get a real kick out of watching that transformation.

One woman joined the program because one of her friends, who happened to be my mother, had a very bad cerebral haemorrhage at 69. We thought she was going to die. Anyway, Mum's good friend, Margaret-Anne Hayes, said to God, or whoever it was she talks to, "If you let her live, I will go and run the 10-k."

Margaret-Anne turned up the first day and couldn't run at all. She walked the whole track. She went on and did the 9-k program. We teach people to run slowly. It's all about pacing yourself. So she runs slowly and she does it. Then she came back and said, "I'm doing the half marathon." So she did a 21-week program at 67 years of age, having never exercised in her life before. You can imagine the change in her personality and confidence. She has also raised \$20,000 – and her goal is \$70,000.

I run with two friends on Mondays and Thursdays. We meet at about 5.45am and I love that because before the day has started you feel really good and healthy. It's great having friends to run with. That's also why everyone loves Can Too; they've got the motivation and the camaraderie. It can be lonely otherwise. ■

As told to Carolyn Parfitt

## Annie's projects

- Can Too offers professional group coaching to train people to complete swimming and running events in exchange for raising money for cancer research. Participants pay a \$100 membership fee and commit to a level of fundraising depending on which program they join. For example, \$1,250 is required for a 14-week program, \$2,000 for 20 weeks and so on. Can Too provides ideas about fundraising, plus a training schedule, information about nutrition, safety, and social events. The non-profit program expanded to Melbourne in 2009 and Brisbane this past March. Visit [www.cantoo.org.au](http://www.cantoo.org.au). Annie is also on the board of MaAfrika Tikkun ([www.maafrikatikkun.com.au](http://www.maafrikatikkun.com.au)), which assists orphans in South Africa, as is her husband Simon.

