

Interviews by Amanda Hooton



Nurse **Nikki Mercer** (at left), 45, and advertising copywriter **Tracy Richardson**, 43, are friends who met on a camping trip 13 years ago. Both are English, married to men called Nick, live in Sydney's Clovelly, own labradoodles and drive Volvos. Last year, both were diagnosed with breast cancer.

Tracy: I guess the friendship was really cemented when we moved to Clovelly. My oldest daughter's a bit younger than Nikki's, and they go to the same school. We just found ourselves spending lots of time together. And because neither of us has family here, we'd have Christmas and holidays and stuff together.

Nikki is the fittest person I know. She holds our gym record for rowing. She's slim, she's gorgeous, she looks after herself, she's really into nutrition. Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong for cancer. She was diagnosed in February last year.

A few weeks earlier we'd been coming out of the gym and I was moaning about my varicose veins, and she said, 'Oh, I've got this lump I've got to get checked out.' I said, 'Are you right?' And she said, 'Oh yes, it's just hormonal.' And because she's a nurse, I didn't even think about it. Then a couple of weeks later we got the news.

A couple of close friends decided we'd go and see a counsellor to find out how we could help her. So we all fronted up – all bawling, especially me – and decided to

have a mammogram. And then I got this letter saying, 'We need you to come back, the picture didn't work.' I didn't think much of it. When I told Nikki, she said, 'Oh, right. Do you want me to come with you?' And I said, 'Oh no, they've just got the picture wrong.' And she said, 'No, I'll come. I'll have had chemo a few days earlier, I'm not doing anything, I'll just sit there with you.'

When we went in – Nikki in her wig – my doctor was sitting there with a nurse. Nikki said afterwards she knew from that moment. We sat down, and he said, 'I've seen something on your chart, and I'm

99 per cent sure it's breast cancer.'

I was lucky. It was two centimetres big – one of the smallest ones they ever find. And that's the thing. Without Nikki's diagnosis to prompt me into action, it would have grown, it could have spread – who knew when I would have picked it up? She saved my life, really.

Chemo was a really intense period – we saw each other every day. We'd take the dogs for a walk to the beach, tottering along in our scarves, talking about how constipated we were.

We both bought wigs. God, it's terrible losing your hair. I remember thinking, when Nikki got her crew cut, 'Am I going to break down?' Sitting there watching a woman I love dearly, a woman like my sister, have all her hair shaved off. And part of me was thinking, 'Shit, in eight weeks' time this will be me.'

She was incredibly brave. During one chemo session her husband had gone overseas – she really wanted him to go, and she's very determined – and she had a horrible time. She vomited continuously all night. The next morning she looked like death. She was in bed shaking, grey, trying to get hold of the nurses, throwing up and up. And there was nothing I could do. At one stage she lay down and I said, 'Do you want me to talk to you?' And she said, 'Yeah.' So I just started saying, 'Yesterday I did this, today I'm going to do this...' and she actually drifted off to sleep a bit. Then I said something really stupid like, 'And later we can talk to the nurses,' and her eyes flew open and she said, 'Yes! We've got to ask this and this and this.' I was so cross with myself.

There was never a moment when I thought I would lose her. Never. Whereas I know she's contemplated death. That's quite hard at times – this person you love, talking about not being around any more. On chemo days I used to buy her a little present, and quite often the cards were deliberately of two old women. I keep harping on about longevity: 'We're going to be around forever, so don't even think about it.'

Nikki: When we met I just thought – I've always thought – she was the funniest woman I'd ever met. She's also the most unselfish person I know. She always puts other people first. But that's her great vulnerability as well. She's so trusting. Sometimes I worry that people take her for granted.

When she had to go back after her mammogram, I absolutely knew there was something wrong. I was in the middle of chemo, so I was just encompassed by this big dark cloud, and cancer, and horror. But when I was diagnosed, I'd gone along on my own, thinking this would be fine, and I'd come home and my whole world had collapsed. So when it was her I wanted to be there.

She handled the news amazingly well, actually. She might have been a bit deadened to it, because of me. I remember holding her hand, then driving her home afterwards. When we got home – this is so Tracy – she said, 'Oh well, at least I won't have to cook dinner. I've got cancer.'

Everyone said, 'Thank God you've got each other,' but I didn't feel like that at all. I'd far rather Tracy not have had it! It's a horrible thing to watch someone go through. Having said that, she was absolutely a comfort to me.

During chemo we used to cook a bit for each other, because we were having treatment in different weeks. I'd talk her through her pills – take this one for that, then this one over here – I could see she was completely befuddled. But she was the one with the sense of humour. We'd be talking about being bald, and having no breast, and she'd be making me laugh.

She did have dark moments. During chemo, she had this sort of blankness on her face, no sparkle. At one point she got a terrible skin condition, like cold sores on her face, and she had to go and have a biopsy, and she was very distressed. I would have hidden myself away, but she's so brave, she was out there picking the kids up from school, everything.

I never thought she would die. With that sort of cancer, people respond really well. I did worry about how she'd go in treatment. Tracy's quite a sickly person: she gets car sick, things like that. I was like, 'She's so little – how will she be?' But of course she just got on with it.

I love her upness. But I did feel that I wanted her to understand what *could* happen – how serious it all was. She's like my husband: a real glass-half-full person. I'd be saying, 'You don't understand! Why do you think people get so worried about cancer? Because people die!' But we never had a fight. It's more a difference in outlook. She's much more positive than I am about the future. I've got a few depressive tendencies, and she hasn't. I just had to recognise that we had those differences. If I talk about dark things she doesn't really handle it, so I try not to. ■

Screening mammograms are free of charge at BreastScreen Australia for all women over 40, though the program specifically targets women aged 50 to 69. Call 13 2050.

GOOD WEEKEND'S Two of Us is now also a TV series, screening on SBS on Wednesday nights at 8pm.

Tackling the highs and lows together: post-chemo cross-country skiing in the Snowy Mountains, July 2005.

