



a survivor's story



From the Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre



Mikah Montgomery's story, as told by Meg Rynderman, a consumer representative for the Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre

February 2018

'There's no happy pills or magic wands'

Mikah Montgomery

It begins like a horror story – a history of mental health challenges and substance dependence issues, then a sudden cancer diagnosis. But instead, as my conversation with 52-year-old Mikah Montgomery unfolded, I found myself listening to a story of resilience and hope.

Forced out of home at the age of 17, Mikah lived in and out of mental health facilities and drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres – she had a diagnosis of bipolar disorder with schizoaffective traits and simultaneously struggled with drug and alcohol dependence.

Fate and chance led her to meet Ken, the man who has become her friend and carer.

"I live with a friend, who is my carer for a mental illness. He's my carer for that and I'm his carer because he's 92. I've been living with him for 23 years so it's been a very rock solid base.

"I threw myself in front of his car one day because I was upset and he slammed on the brakes and we didn't look back after that," she recalled.

With Ken's help, Mikah found support for her drug and alcohol issues and regular work within the mental health services system.

"[At first he financially] supported my drug habit because it was expensive, until he didn't like it any more and could see what it was doing to me, and I started to see what it was doing to him. I quit drugs on the 8th of November 2005.

"I was personally involved in creating change through work and professionally, so this crossed over bridges. I realised I had to quit for myself, because there was no future and no choice other than to do that."

Just over four years ago, after a series of investigations into persistent back pain, Mikah was recalled for an appointment with her GP to review the results of a CT scan. She vividly remembers that Friday afternoon.

"He told me I had lung cancer and I didn't believe him, because my first response was to be shocked.

"And they said I had to come to the hospital straight away, and I said no I was going home to pack a bag – that was important to me. And so I went home and packed a bag and knew that it was on for young and old, that it was real."



“Your mind and heart and soul are going to be tested to stay positive and if you’ve already got a disposition for psychosis or hearing voices you’ll need extra support straight away from someone. If you’ve been traumatised, a lot of the medicines make you sleep and have nightmares – be mindful of that.”

A diagnosis of non-small-cell lung cancer required neo-adjuvant chemoradiotherapy, then Mikah required further chemotherapy, followed by surgery.

Mikah spent four months in Royal Melbourne Hospital. She commented that the days and weeks passed in a blur.

“I don’t recall as well as I’d like to say I did, because of a lot of medications and I had radiotherapy and chemotherapy ... and I had an operation whereby they took the tumour out, two [ribs] and half a lung.

I still have difficulty catching my breath and stuff, but really happy that I came through at the other end and I’m here telling you.”

Mikah focused less on her reaction to her cancer diagnosis and treatment, and more on the impact that her other issues placed on her as a cancer patient. Routinely, patients are asked to assess their level of stress and anxiety at various stages of their cancer journey. Mental health challenges and/or substance dependence issues may impact on the level of supportive care intervention required.

Mikah reflected on her own needs: “It was difficult expressing myself along the way in the four months, being in the confines of the hospital. There was a drug and alcohol counsellor person that came by once a week, and it was like he was ticking the boxes. He couldn’t find the time to actually sit, since he had so many patients to see.”

Mikah felt the right attention was not given to her history of drug and alcohol use and mental health issues.

“When you have people in hospitals, you still [need to] be mindful that there’s danger. There’s teachings to make the situation safe and there’s preventative understandings so that you’re helpful for that person’s life experiences.”

She spoke of the triggers she encountered whilst in hospital, adding helpful advice for others who have also experienced drug use and mental illness.

“In the hospital, as an ex-drug-addict, there’s those swabs everywhere and needles and you think, ‘Oh, I’ve got to be away from this shit’.

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Pain relief presented a major issue for Mikah during her time in hospital. Seven years clean from her addiction, she was terrified of relapsing.

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"You've done all this work to get off drugs and alcohol, which you're really proud of, and you're clean and you've got this power. And now they're putting me on all this pain medicines called morphine and OxyContin and OxyNorm and you're like, 'Hang on, I just did all this work and you're not going there'.

"And I was really brave and had the [epi]dural for the operation instead of morphine to prove to myself that I could do it."

Mikah wondered whether a few of the staff she encountered were predisposed to a particular view of her because of her history.

"They kept thinking I wanted my pain relief because of lived experience of being an ex-drug-addict rather than the actual pain of the new experience. And sometimes it was hard to be heard because of their predisposition."

But she remembered with fondness the kindness of so many others.

"Some of them I re-educated and some of them re-educated me to understand each other's sides. So there was a happy medium.

"I got some great nurses as well. I remember one who wore her watch upside down on her lapel and she came and wiped my head with a face cloth and icicles. No-one pressed the buzzer, they just optional extra'd and they're the ones that were amazing."

"At the end of the day we may not remember what you have done for us, the nurses and co, doctors etc., but we will remember how you've made us feel"

Mikah's mental health issues presented some challenges.

"I didn't like moving rooms and I didn't like changing beds and I couldn't sit up and it was another thing I had to think about. So it was easier to get mad at [my nurse] and then realise [it wasn't her fault]. But she was great; she got my bipolar, because at the beginning of the week I was grumpy and it was all her fault and I had my head under the pillow, and at the end of the week she was an angel.

"At the end of the day we may not remember what you have done for us, the nurses and co, doctors etc., but we will remember how you've made us feel."

Mikah emphasised that sourcing a reliable GP and local chemist as part of a support network is helpful for all cancer patients, including those with a history of mental

illness or drug use.

"I had a good chemist who I've gone to for years and a [GP] who I've been to for years – luckily I didn't fall completely on my bum! I had enough stuff set in place. I think if you didn't you'd need to put some in place, like going to an NA meeting or an AA meeting, seeing about steps where you make phone calls or receive them from Re-gen [Uniting Care Re-gen] or places like that where you have a counsellor, because they do exist and you can have phone counselling while you're in hospital."

Prompted by her role as a peer support worker and consumer consultant for both North Western Mental Health and Broadmeadows Inpatient Unit, Mikah understood the importance of support to assist her throughout her cancer journey.





From the Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre

She kept a journal, Ken visited her almost every day and she set in place regular phone counselling sessions with Lifeline. Her work colleagues initiated a roster of visits while she was an inpatient.

"I had phone calls with fellow friends with mental illness also, so I got a lot of empathy with them, and visits. And because I worked in mental health at the time when it all went down, the people I worked with – [my] colleagues – all came and saw me at the hospital. And there were fellow patients who were on my consumer advisory group who I rang – way to the top to the area manager.

"So I never knew on a particular day who was coming in, and I looked forward to them."

Further to the supports set in place during her treatment, Mikah was keen to

see an education program around end of cancer treatment and return to life and work.

"It's like, there's a prisoner [and] when he gets released they give him equipment to move on with. With cancer, you get finished and its like, 'Okay, now what?'"

Mikah explained that she did not relate to the term 'cancer survivorship'.

"I don't do labels, I don't need to be categorised, pigeonholed, slotted and given an issue date and number.

"If anything, cancer made me reinvest in my life and I appreciate it more. I understand I'm older, maturing, that life is what you make it. So, that's all cancer reinforced to me, some stuff to get on with, pulling out the bucket list and enjoying your cheeseburger all the more!"

Her philosophy and her advice for others in similar circumstance is simple. "If I can do it, they can do it. Not to listen to statistics or others and find the strength in yourself. Yes, there's supports, but you've got to dig deep and do it yourselves. There's no happy pills or magic wand – they just don't exist.

You set up that network around you, but in the end it's just you."

Four-plus years from her initial diagnosis, and with her friend Ken moving into a nursing home, Mikah is about to relocate to live with her sister in Bendigo. With her checkups extended from every three months to every six months, she concluded: "I used to look at other people and smile and say, 'What's she on?' and I realised she's just, at the end of the day, trying to do the best that she can. So I might try and do the same too".

Further information and support:

- Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, Survivorship & life after treatment <https://www.petermac.org/services/cancer-information-resources/survivorship-life-after-treatment>
- Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, Coping with cancer: practical and social support <https://www.petermac.org/services/cancer-information-resources/coping-cancer-practical-social-support>
- Lifeline: 13 11 14 <https://www.lifeline.org.au/>
- Re-gen: 1800 700 514 <http://www.regen.org.au/>
- Cancer Council Victoria, Phone support <http://www.cancervic.org.au/how-we-can-help/phone-support>
- Cancer Council Victoria, Wellness and Life after Cancer Program <http://www.cancervic.org.au/how-we-can-help/wellness-life-after-cancer>

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A Richard Pratt Legacy



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