

Thank God I'm a COUNTRY GIRL

Leila Sweeney, 29, Tatyoon, Vic.

My heart pounded as I stepped outside, ready for another day at school. The sound of blasting horns and traffic was enough to give me a headache. There was also the crush of commuters to contend with.

Is this really where I want to be? I asked myself, as I made my way through Sydney's CBD where I was studying fashion design.

I thought back to growing up on my family's farm in Walcha in the Northern Tablelands of

NSW. Now I missed my parents, my younger brother Dean, and all our horses. I'd always been a tomboy who spent every day mucking around in the great outdoors.

But as I grew up, I felt drawn to the world of costume design, even imagining myself working with the stars in Hollywood.

"If that's what you want to do, go for it," my mum said.

I loved my studies and was thrilled when I went on to create garments and headresses for celebrities such as the Spice Girls' Mel B, Tina Arena and



I want to promote farm life

Costume design was my passion



Sonia Kruger. But I was based in Sydney and the city never felt like home.

One day, visiting my family back in Walcha, I went to the local pub where a handsome man caught my eye.

His name was Sean and he was the kindest bloke I'd met. "I'm working on a property here for the next 12 months," he explained.

Sean was different from other guys I knew. As a farmer, he understood me and my world so well.

There was no denying

the attraction between us. Our conversations about sheep and cattle stirred something in me: I wanted to come back to the bush.

After dating for a year, I finally made the move to rural Victoria to be with Sean.

"I'm finally home," I said, breathing in the fresh air.

We later married and had two kids: Vincent, 20 months, and newborn, Vivian.

Realising that farming was in my blood, I started Live Rural - a charity to support and promote farmers and farming life. It saw me awarded Mrs Australia, a national beauty pageant for married women over 25.

But my work's not done yet. I'll continue to do everything I can to make people aware of the challenges farmers face.



Me (second left) next to Dr Khan, and other doctors

Help me, DOC

Taylah Miranda, 17, Patterson Lakes, Vic.

Inished the last of my toast and struggled to find the energy to get up from the kitchen counter.

"C'mon Taylah, we've got to get you to school," Mum said.

At 14, I normally woke up bouncing, but today I didn't have any motivation. My whole body felt heavy.

When I told Mum, she took me to hospital. I was given a blood test and spinal tap to check the fluid in my back.

"It's just to check for all the possibilities," the doctor assured me.

At home four hours later, Mum came into the living room with a look of terror in her eyes.

"The hospital just called," she said, tearfully. "You have leukaemia."

Tears sprang to my eyes as I pictured myself sickly thin and bald. Was that how I would become?

"Am I going to die?" I asked.

Mum swore she'd never let that happen, but I knew she didn't have that power.

At hospital, my heart was beating loudly in my ears but my doctor, Sara Khan, smiled confidently.

"I'm going to help you get better," she promised.

She seemed so self-assured and kind that I couldn't help but believe her.

Luckily, we'd caught the cancer early, but I still had to undergo weekly chemo.

I cried as Dr Khan told me that I'd lose my hair, but she assured me it would grow back.

Two days later, Mum held my hand as the chemo drugs flowed into my body. It made me nauseous and I vomited constantly.

At my lowest, Dr Khan lifted my spirits. "You're going to be fine," she soothed, patting my arm.

She made me feel brave, like I was strong enough to escape this nightmare. A month



Receiving chemotherapy

into my treatment, I was resting at home when Dr Khan rang.

"We got rid of the cancer," she said, triumphantly. "You're in remission."

Mum and I held each other and cried in relief.

To ensure the leukaemia didn't return, I had to continue chemo for two and a half years and, so far, it's worked. I'm still clear.

Now, at 17, I've finished treatment and am looking to the future. I'll never forget Dr Khan and how she supported me through the toughest time. Now I want to become a doctor, too.

Someday, I'm going to help kids like me and do everything I can to save their lives.

Saying goodbye to the hospital team



All eyes on Bella

Charlotte Brown, 31, Burnside, Qld.

Ashudder ran down my spine as I watched milk ooze slowly out of my newborn bub Bella's nose.

"Something's wrong with our little girl," I said to my husband, Joel.

I'd been over the moon about becoming a mum for the fourth time. But as soon as Bella was born, it became clear she wasn't well.

The doctor assured us it was just reflux and would restore itself over time, but my mother's instinct told me it was something more.

As the months went by, Bella struggled to gain weight, coughed constantly and even had

to be rushed back to hospital after choking during a feed.

By then I was inconsolable.

Little Bella was eventually diagnosed with DiGeorge syndrome, a genetic disorder that results in a poor immune system, developmental delays and an underdeveloped palette, which had caused the leaking milk.

Joel and I were relieved to have an answer, but we faced a difficult road ahead.

"I'm afraid there isn't a cure," the doctor told us.

He explained that early intervention, such as speech therapy and learning sign

language could help give Bella the best life possible.

As she grew up, she remained non-verbal. But what she lacked in words she made up for in personality.

Whenever we went out, she'd run up to strangers and try to hug them. She loved nothing more than meeting new people. "Can you imagine how talkative she'd be?" I said to Joel.

Then, one day, when I was home I heard a voice cry out, "Mum!"

Turning around, I saw it was Bella, two.



Bella in hospital

Hearing her voice for the first time was amazing. It brought tears to my eyes.

Joel later got his own turn at being teary when she signed "Dad" to him.

Bella, now four, loves being the centre of attention, so she jumped at the chance to share her story and raise awareness for Jeans for Genes Day.

I couldn't be more proud of our little girl.

She's faced plenty of obstacles in her little life, but she doesn't let anything stop her from being happy.

AS TOLD TO MITCHELL JORDAN



Me with Bella



She's such a happy girl

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