



◀ **LIVING STRONG**  
(clockwise from far left) Clare with husband Cam and sons William (left) and Joseph; Clare practising walking with her father about five months after the accident; surrounded by nurses at Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital.



## CLARE SULTMANN TALKS ABOUT THE ENDURANCE THAT HELPED HER FIGHT BACK FROM NEAR DEATH TO HAPPINESS

**O**ne day I was thinking about getting the ferry to work – and a few hours later I was in a hospital fighting for life and limb. I'd only been in Sydney for eight months. The world's your oyster at 23 and I loved the city's lifestyle and all it had to offer. I was so naive; I'd never been in a hospital or even had a broken bone. I thought I was untouchable and nothing bad could happen to me.

It was the year 2000, and I used to go for a 10km run every morning from my apartment in Bondi. I don't know if it was intuition, but on this particular morning I looked out the window debating whether to go. I looked at myself in the mirror for a little bit longer than usual – I'm sure it was only milliseconds, but it felt like forever – before I went on the route I'd gone on so many times before.

I headed down the street to the pedestrian crossing, looked both ways, saw nothing and began to cross. As I did, a garbage truck rounded the corner and, by the driver's own admission, failed to see me. I remember thinking I was going to be hit. And I was.

The police report said one of my legs was tangled under the



truck as one of the wheels screeched over the other for a few metres. The full weight of the vehicle came to rest on both my legs as I lay screaming. The driver got out and asked what he could do for me, and I said, "You've done enough; you've probably already ruined my life." Thinking back, I hope he didn't carry what I said with him.

The pain was indescribable – like a deep, burning sensation. I could see what had happened to my legs; they were a mass of flesh and blood with most of the skin torn off. It's a sight you never think you'll have to see. I was given 48.5mg of morphine, which is a significant amount, but I was still screaming for more. I was then taken to St Vincent's Hospital as Triage 1 – the most serious.

When I got to the hospital I remember being put on the phone to my mother in Queensland who said, "Don't worry, we're driving down," and I said, "Why are you driving?" I found out later they were unaware at that stage of the gravity of the accident.

As I was taken into theatre I thought, "I don't want to go to sleep," because I didn't know if I'd wake up or if I did, whether I'd have my legs. As a vain 23-year-old, I thought my legs were my best feature.

I had 37 operations over eight years – 16 in the first six months. It was a continuous round of dressing changes and skin grafts – a fight to save my legs. When you're so sick and everyone says to you, "You're so lucky to be alive and have your legs," you do believe it. But at the same time, I never realised how bad my injuries really were. In the beginning, my surgeon said I'd be in hospital for at least six weeks and I thought that was too long, but in fact I was there for six months, and went back for daily dressing changes for months. Some doctors – who I called Doom and Gloom – told me I might never walk again, but when so many other people are so positive, you start to think positively.

I started writing about my experiences six weeks into my hospital stay and continued for the following 12 months. I never told anyone I was dying inside, nor how hard it was for me, so writing was one way I could express how I was really feeling. It was very therapeutic.

I believed things would get better and that I should keep fighting. That was my reason to get up. I had no alternative. You can't turn back time, so you deal with it and face what life throws at you.

For a long time it was hard to accept – I was asking, "Why me?" I don't think anyone really knew how unhappy I was because I never showed it. The accident changed my whole life, but it also changed the lives of my parents and friends. It literally took me minutes to walk a couple of metres, while in chronic, constant pain with disfigured legs.

It took years of recovery, both physical and emotional, but I think it was a journey I had to go through on my own. I remember one day my mother said to me, "It's not the accident that will define ▶

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you; it's what you do with it and where you go from here." Yes, I have significant physical limitations, I can't run or play tennis, but I think I'm very lucky. The accident taught me a lot – I want to look at the person I was before and shake her.

I met my husband, Cam, after moving back home to Brisbane and starting to work with a charity, Youngcare, that helps get young people with high care needs out of aged care. At the end of 2007 we had a big function and he came up and introduced himself. I turned round and said, "I don't talk to randoms." I can't believe I was so rude to him and he still bothered to strike up a conversation! But it went on from there – we went backward and forward from Brisbane to Noosa, where he lived, and we got married in 2010. Our first son, William, was born in June 2011 and our second, Joseph, in November 2012.

On our first date I tried to steer the conversation away from the accident, although Cam knew something about it as he'd spoken to one of our mutual friends. We did chat about it, but there are little things he's only realised as the years have gone on – like how I have to apply cream to my legs every day to protect my skin grafts, and how he always has to find me a chair at parties because I can't stand for long.

Physically I knew I'd be able to have children – had the truck hit me just five centimetres higher I wouldn't be around to tell the story, let alone have a family. In the early years I didn't think about relationships or babies; I figured it wouldn't happen for me. I was so focused on walking again and regaining some form of the life I'd lost.

Children are so honest, so I'm sure my boys will ask why I walk funny, but I'm not self-conscious of that fact because this is who I am.

I hope they'll be proud of me, and when they read my story they'll realise how lucky they are to be alive.

Because of the trauma my legs went through, they're still terribly scarred and disfigured, even after years and years of surgery, and despite all my efforts I still walk with a limp. On my right I've also got some foot drop and my left foot is fused and doesn't move at all. My right knee doesn't bend past 60 degrees, making stairs difficult, and I get significant pain in my legs. I know I'll never take a bike ride with my sons or run after them.

I do think about the kind of person I might have become had I not had the accident. I wonder if I'd have liked that person. Still, I'm married to a gentleman I would have fallen for anyway and I have two beautiful children. I went to the bar in 2008 as a barrister just as I'd planned and I still have the same friends I did when I was 23.

I constantly worry about safety and roads and I always have the thought in the back of my mind that something could go wrong. I don't know if that's because I was conscious throughout the whole ordeal, or because I was on a pedestrian crossing and got hit anyway.

I'm nowhere near as self-conscious about my legs as I used to be. Yes, I may have these terrible legs that don't work properly, but I can still go out and look good. I haven't lost all my vanity. It's taken a major hit, but I accept it because I can't do anything about it. You just have to move forward. **AS TOLD TO MEL EVANS**

Clare's book, *Standing on My Own Two Feet* (Halstead Press, \$28.95), is out now (visit [standingonmyowntwofeet.com.au](http://standingonmyowntwofeet.com.au)). All profits received by the author go to Youngcare.

Follow Mel on Twitter @melevans