

Heidelberg & Diamond Valley Weekly

TO HELL AND BACK HONESTLY by MICHAEL QUIN

There are a few things Christine Lister never understood, like why people think talking about things makes them happen, why it's okay to laugh in public but not to cry or why melanoma had to take her beloved husband Rex away.

But in her book, *The Hidden Journey: Melanoma Up Close and Personal*, she confronts these things in the hope of bringing more honesty to how we deal with cancer - something that touches most of us in some way. The public face of brave celebrities battling the disease is only part of the story, she says. While the other half remains hidden - while fear and defeat are unspeakable - cancer is even harder than it needs to be.

"This mantra that you have to be brave and strong all the time is unnatural and unhealthy. What it means is the real ups and downs are tucked away inside you to fester and create all sorts of stress. It becomes like a monster consuming you from the inside like the cancer itself," she says. Yet to acknowledge fear feels like betrayal. It's a pressure that can weigh heavily on communication at the time its needed most.

She describes the superficial conversations about cancer, skirting the real issues and never mentioning death through a strange fear of making it happen.

"When cancer strikes it scares the shit out of you. Then the dialogue stop and you talk superficially. You get thrown into a pretend situation where the realities and your fears about what is going on are actually hidden," she says.

In the four and a half years Rex had cancer, Lister's mum never once mentioned it.

She believes this reaction, although common, risks leaving people to suffer in silence. Others she knows missed out on a proper goodbye because the end was never acknowledged.

Lister admits her book's themes aren't attractive topics, but after experiencing the isolation of a disease nobody wanted to talk about she realised the damage we do ourselves in letting it stay that way.

"People need to have the courage and compassion to get up close and personal, past their own fears and say 'I can be there for you. I can take some of this pain'. That's what I hope people will take from this book," she says.

It consists of excerpts from the 15 journals she kept while her husband fought the disease. It's frank but it's not all gloomy. There are the moments of joy and humour in the garden of their Montmorency house and nearby Westerfolds Park: settings for as many reflections on the preciousness of life as moments of despair, the highs and lows that reflect her experience.

"It's almost euphoric. Sometimes the experiences you have with cancer are some of the most beautiful and precious that you will ever have. You have this heightened sensitivity," she says. Nature and her garden were the focus of that euphoria, and remain her greatest pleasures today.

Lister's book is ultimately about accepting the best and worst parts of any journey for what they are, and sharing those experiences honestly.

"The book is a way of saying whatever you feel is okay, you're not alone; lots of people have been there and lots of people will go there," she says.

Books and topic links at

www.christinelister.com.au

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