



Age: 34
Height: 178cm
Weight: 68kg
Body Fat: 13.5%
Dress Size: 10-12
Birth Date: 28 July 1974
Hometown: Rochedale South, Qld
Occupation: Motivational Speaker, Personal Trainer, Mother

Cover Girl Confidential

Angela Berens

BY IOLANDE SKINNER

Your votes are in and a winner has been declared. Angela Berens touched your hearts with her real-life tale of courage, strength and determination. With the dream of running a marathon in mind she transformed her hospital bound lifestyle and her body to achieve the impossible. We are proud to name her the Oxygen Fit & Fabulous Winner 2008 and our newest Cover Girl.

PHOTO: JEMMA ENTRIKEN-WHITE WISH PHOTOGRAPHY

Why I entered the Oxygen Fit & Fabulous Competition... At the time, I was finishing a traineeship (Certificate 3 in Fitness) and working at Lifestyle Health Club in Springwood. My goal was to be a personal trainer and I wanted to understand my future clients' needs better so I decided to do the hard yards myself and I was going to do a 13 weeks challenge. When I saw the Oxygen Fit & Fabulous Competition I thought "This is me! This will give me purpose in my training and will help me focus with my diet."

All of the other finalists achieved amazing transformations in their own right, so I didn't expect to win the competition. Sure, I was hoping to win the but I had come so far in the last six years since the stroke, so I viewed this competition as the catalyst to progress to a higher level of fitness. When I looked at the photographs for the competition entry I felt proud of my achievements and regardless of the outcome, I already felt like a winner.

How I felt when told I was the winner of the Oxygen Fit & Fabulous Competition...

Wow! Double Wow! After the stroke I had thought that I would like to write a book about my journey but I have never felt that I had an ending of the book until now. Me winning the competition and being on the cover of a fitness magazine makes me feel that I have turned full circle. I have my ending of my book and I no longer feel like a stroke survivor. I finally feel like me!

I was thrilled, excited, proud and very grateful for all of the people who voted for me. I had fantastic support with family, friends and the staff and members at Lifestyle Health Clubs.

My favourite way to keep fit... I have a fantastic personal trainer (Hi Mark Manhire) who helps me push my fitness boundaries and keeps me focused. My favourite way to keep fit that challenges both energy systems is combining resistance and cardiovascular exercises. I am a goal junkie, and as they say variety is the spice of life. That is why I joined forces with two other personal trainers to create a new business called "Vigour" Group Training!

What I am most proud of in my personal life and career... I believe that everybody has personal power which means the ability to achieve what you want. More than anything else, it is personal power that brings you success and happiness. I believe that anything is possible!

Because of this belief, I am most proud of the choices in my life. That is, the choice to have a positive attitude after the stroke and now in everyday life; the choice not to be fearful in completing my first marathon after epilepsy or the decision to have another baby; the choice to be healthy and fit and be an example for my children and the choice to be myself – to challenge my disability and to achieve my full potential. ☺

Cover Girl Diet

- Breakfast** 1 Apple, 1 tablespoon low fat, low GI yoghurt, 2 tablespoon low fat cottage cheese, 1 yakult, amino acids
- Morning Tea** 1 piece of fruit, trail mix (almonds, sultanas, sunflower seeds, pepitas 30g) and glutamine
- Lunch** Salad, 1 tablespoon low fat cottage cheese with fish or chicken
- Afternoon Tea** Trail mix (30g) and turkey, vegetable sticks with cottage cheese
- Dinner** Salad or vegetables with fish or chicken and 1 tablespoon of low fat cottage cheese
- Supper** Low fat, low GI yoghurt

Weekly Exercise Routine

- Monday:** Morning: Back and 30 min run
Night: Body Step
- Tuesday:** Morning: Chest and 30 min stairmaster
Night: Body Attack
- Wednesday:** Morning: Legs and bike class
- Thursday:** Morning: Biceps and boxing 30 min
Night: Bike class
- Friday:** Morning: Shoulders and triceps and bike class
- Saturday:** 1 hour run
- Sunday:** Rest

PHOTO: BARRY KIEPE-OZZIEIMAGES





From Coma to Cover Girl

AS TOLD TO IOLANDE SKINNER

Have you ever felt that you've gone through life, day by day just drifting with the tide? Or that you are rowing against the current but you really don't know what your destination is? Five years ago, my life was normal, then my very own existence was challenged and the experience has changed my life. This is my story...



My husband rushed me to emergency in our car while I moved in and out of consciousness, groaning and vomiting. As I moved from the car, my headache pierced my brain and I was screaming. I woke up two weeks later. I am a stroke survivor, with aphasia (a language disorder from a head injury like a stroke). I am 90 percent recovered and I believe that anyone can do amazing things – I call it “personal power”.

That night I had a burst brain aneurysm and at the time, the neurosurgeon told my husband that the most probable outcome was death. I was on life support, and was undergoing brain surgery whilst still preg-

nant. One week later the doctors consulted with my husband and it was decided that they would deliver the baby. They were confident that he would survive but they had extreme concerns for me as a caesarean section would be another trauma which my body may not be able to handle.

Seven days after the burst aneurysm my son Makenzie was born. A further week later, I woke up. That was survival but for me, the major part of the story lay ahead. I have no recollection of being on life support or having a baby. I awoke to find myself occupying a lifeless body; unable to move, unable to talk, even unable to breath with-

out mechanical assistance.

One quarter of my skull had been removed to make space for my swollen brain and I looked like an alien. Everything seemed to happen in ultra slow motion, a feeling very hard to describe. The only two people that I recognised were my parents. I knew I was very sick but had no idea what had happened.

Makenzie was introduced to me seven days after he was born when I was still in intensive care on life support. It wasn't until I held him that I realised that I had been pregnant and that he was my son. Coming off heavy drugs a few days later, I became aware of my surroundings.

The Doctors spoke to my husband saying that there was no reflex on the right side of my body. There was a chance that I may not be able to use my right leg ever again. I became frustrated and angry. I couldn't speak, I couldn't move and I felt that I was treated as an invalid. It only takes a short time for the mind to grab negativity! Because I couldn't speak I played charades, trying to ask my mother, “Am I going to be an invalid and do I have to go to a nursing home.” I was at a crossroad - flight or fight?

At that point in my life I didn't want to just survive, I wanted to live. It was a conscious decision. I believed, without doubt, that I was going to have a good recovery. I now had a purpose, I had my destination!

I'm sure that most of you have heard the phrase “through adversity comes greatness.” Wouldn't it be amazing if you could harness personal power without the adversity? Well of course you can! Why do you have to wait to finally commit to diet changes or stop smoking after you have the heart attack? Don't wait for a crisis to give you purpose in your lives, business or worklife. When you realise that you have personal power, you can move mountains. My thoughts and actions changed and the medical team soon realised I was a determined woman ready for the fight. Two days later my right side started to respond to stimulus.

I wanted my independence so I started to clean my teeth with the suction tube by myself. I used exercises to strengthen my paralysed hand by moving pen lids from one cup to another. Sometimes, however, you can overshoot the target. One day I stood up and fell flat on my back. Now, this is a very dangerous thing because the only protection between my brain and the floor was a thin layer of skin. I laughed but the



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nurse didn't and I was given a helmet until the skull bone was replaced.

This little stunt got the attention of the rehabilitation manager and a day and a half later I was wheeled to my new home - the presidential suite at the rehab ward. I was the first person ever to go from Intensive Care straight to rehabilitation without first going to a ward.

A lot happened during the next two months. The neuro-surgeon booked the operating theatre to replace my skull. Rehabilitation at the hospital consisted of Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy and Physical Therapy. There was frustration, anger, minimal independence and a lot of hard work. But if I thought that it was all too hard, I only had to think about the alternative – to live like this. I made a conscious decision to challenge my disabilities.

Looking back at my recovery, it would be self-centred to think that I did it all by myself. One of my true life lessons from having the stroke is that you need to appreciate and thank your support; whether it is your team at work, your family or in my case at the moment, my thanks go to the babysitter and my therapeutic masseuse.

I carried out Occupational Therapy to help me to learn to look after myself and my son. I had to learn to use a knife and fork all over again. I had to learn to bath Makenzie without drowning him and to use strategies to distinguish between hot and cold as the paralysis left me without feeling. The simplest of tasks seemed almost impossible. The Physical Therapy consisted of learning how to walk and developing my coordination and balance. I started with one step aided by physical therapists at each side, progressing to walking on a balance beam.

I remember the day that my brother flew from Canberra to visit me and at the time I was still in a wheelchair. He

told me that he had just run the Canberra Marathon. A light went on in my head. I thought if I attempted a marathon, then I would give myself the best chance to have the full recovery. So, why not! If I want to walk, why not run a marathon. I couldn't talk, so why not talk to an audience. I couldn't write, so why not write a book. Other people can do amazing things, why not me – why not you! I put these thoughts out there and I finally had a direction.

As a result of the stroke I have aphasia, which damages the language centres of the brain. People with aphasia have difficulty talking, listening, reading, writing and using numbers. We have intelligent thoughts; we just have problems getting the messages in and out. A month prior to the stroke I was a Human Resources Manager responsible for many people and now I had nothing; no speech, no movement on my right side, and no skull.

Speech Therapy was part of my rehabilitation and I am almost fully recovered now, but in the early stages progress was slow; I couldn't talk or write and desperately wanted to communicate.

Initially, the rehab team told me that I couldn't go home until I met my objectives. The program time frame was six months. With determination and discipline, I was able to achieve this in seven weeks. The day I left hospital I could not recite the alphabet, but I could walk for a total of 800 metres non-stop - just another 41.4km to go.

Two weeks after coming home from hospital I started to build the foundations for my marathon and went for my first jog; I completed 10 metres. My husband Rob was with me and he said I had the grace and style of a buffalo rather than a gazelle. Pretty soon 10 metres became 100, 100 became 200, and

PHOTO: BARRY KIEPE-OZZIEMAGES



**“I HAD NOTHING,
NO MOVEMENT
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AND NO SKULL.”**

200 became 500.

It is ok having a purpose but you also need a plan because a purpose without a plan is just a dream. Setting and re-setting achievable goals helped my progression. I continued my therapy, I strengthened my body and my mind, ran and went to the gym four times per week. I was also very conscious of my diet and began eating appropriately. I continued my Speech Therapy and continually tried to challenge my situation. Self discipline enabled me to achieve milestones no matter how small the steps. I was confident that my purpose would become a reality.

After having completed the Brisbane half marathon, I started to read my first novel after the stroke (it took me eight months). Slowly, I was getting my life back in order. I had accepted my circumstances and I was comfortable living with aphasia. While I accepted my disability, it didn't stop me trying to improve my situation.

In July 2003 I was ready to take the Gold Coast Marathon head on. I was confident that I would make the 42km and I started tapering my runs down. One week before the marathon I was anxious though filled with enthusiasm. But I didn't get to run the marathon. On the Tuesday before the marathon I had two major epileptic seizures and ended up back in hospital; devastated, my dream of running the marathon was shattered.

One thing people didn't realise was how important running the marathon was to me. It wasn't about running 42kms, it was proving to myself and the world that I could accomplish what I put my mind to. I set this goal when nobody would have believed that I could do it. I

had a purpose and I was going to follow it through.

The funny thing about setbacks is that they are fundamental to achieving success. They make us take a good look at ourselves and decide if we really want what we say we want.

Four hours and 20 minutes was my time! In September 2003, I completed the Sydney Marathon. Now that one of my goals was realised, it was time to find other ambitions. I wanted to focus on my language difficulties and put my effort into speaking, reading and writing.

I decided to challenge my disability head on. I set my goals to be a motivational speaker and was thinking about taking the voluntary role of Publicity Coordinator for the Australian Aphasia Association, speaking to the local community groups about awareness of aphasia.

How many of you procrastinate when deciding to try something new because it is complicated or challenging. Well, I realised that you cannot achieve anything if you are not prepared to take a risk.

Three years ago my life became very hectic. I became a mother for the second time, with a new baby girl called Charlee. Motherhood was a different experience than the previous time; this time I was able to enjoy it.

Two years ago I was given an opportunity which was not part of my current plan – a government grant to write and compile a resource guide for people with aphasia and their carers. Wow! Not quite the book I was picturing in my mind but what a challenge. I knew that it would help thousands (aphasia affects about 80,000 Australians).

This book, fondly called “The Guide”

was launched in October 2007. It was very important to me because it enabled me to give back to others, as so many people supported me in my recovery. I wanted to help other aphasia sufferers reach their potential and so far, the response has been overwhelming.

My current challenge is studying and working in the fitness industry I am on my way towards being a personal trainer. I am also launching a new business with two other personal trainers called Vigour Group Training (the exercises are a bit like Bootcamp, come the Biggest Loser, come Survivor). It is challenging, and for me work is not like work! This is a long way away from my previous position as a Human Resource Manager but life has unexpected blessings.

Before the stroke, I worked hard, I was exhausted, I had some goals but I didn't have a purpose. The stroke, and my situation, has given me a reason to believe in myself and I have enjoyed the challenges. When I look at the last five years and I look back at photos and videos I am amazed at what I have accomplished. And the best news is that anyone can do amazing things.

I will leave you with a Native Indian truth that illustrates my belief. It talks about two wolves fighting inside every person: One represents frustration, negativity, self-pity, ego, apathy and hopelessness. The other wolf is joy, sharing, determination, peace, love and hope. Which wolf will win the fight? The answer is, the one you feed.

Now my life has a rudder. I am in control of my destination and the scenery on the way is spectacular! ☺



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