

*After experiencing the darkest depths of life with cancer, a local photographer is focussing on capturing the essence of people's personalities in a single frame to enhance their new-found online identities.*

While the dentist pulled 15 of his cavity-free teeth out by their roots, a thousand thoughts raced through Brad Delaney's mind, not many of them positive. If he had something to be happy about, it was that he wouldn't lose his tongue.

Fifteen days earlier a doctor told 42-year-old Brad he had non-smoking related throat cancer. To cut the cancerous cells out of his swollen throat would also mean taking a large portion of his tongue. A marginally better option was eight weekly doses of a new trial form of chemotherapy and radiation every day throughout that long two-month period. It was hoped the combination would kill the cancer cells that had invaded his throat.

But before they could do that, they had to pull out his teeth. One of many cruel side effects of cancer treatment, firing high-energy radiation into his neck for five to 15 minutes every day, would also kill all the blood vessels in the vicinity, and thus starve blood flow to his jaw and gums. His teeth would slowly die and fall out.

"Sitting in that chair to get my teeth pulled out was probably singularly the worst thing. I don't think the dentist enjoyed it either because they were perfectly healthy teeth!" Brad can now laugh with a cosmetically enhanced smile.

There wasn't a lot to smile about throughout his treatment. He had to eat as much as he could to put on weight that would soon fall off him when it would become too painful and sickening to eat. A couple of weeks later he would start to feel constantly nauseous and couldn't keep food down.

"The next eight weeks was pretty shitty," Brad admits. "Because the radiation is burning you from the inside it's creating a hole. Imagine the feeling of having a finger down your throat – that gagging reflex – constantly.

"There was a lot of dry reaching, not a lot of sleep, dark nights soul searching. There was a lot of psychological stuff going on after all the trauma of the treatment and wondering whether I was going to survive or whether I was going to die.

"When the treatment finished I was probably at my weakest. I hadn't eaten for six weeks; I'd lost 25kg; I was addicted to morphine; I was psychologically weak. I wasn't confident I'd knocked it on the head.

"At the same time I was trying to put on a happy face for my new wife who hadn't been in the country long. We had to put our life on hold. I wasn't in a great frame of mind to think about the future and make plans, and I spent a lot of time thinking about the past and had to come to grips with what I'd achieved."

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More than five years on, he's out of remission and has a lot to smile about. After being told he probably wouldn't be able to have kids, he and his Japanese wife Yuko – whom he had married just a year before he got sick – have two healthy, happy young sons. He's also following a dream – a dream that became clear in the darkest hours of his treatment. If given the chance, he wanted to make a living from one of his greatest passions, photography.

Armed with a renewed enthusiasm for life and an MBA business degree he attained before he got sick, Brad started thinking about how he could make a business out of photography.

“It was an exciting time because my whole world opened up again,” he says. “I had decided I wanted to focus on photography and that was the direction I wanted my life to take. I felt like I had a second chance and I didn't want to waste my time doing something I didn't enjoy.”

It was something few business-savvy men might have contemplated – he had to start afresh without any money, at a time when the Global Financial Crisis was starting to strangle confidence from the Gold Coast economy. “When you've got nothing, you don't have far to fall,” he laughs.

He worked for a business broker to get some cash coming through the door, but on the side was starting to book freelance photo shoots. When the surf was on, he'd also sit in a red tent on the point at Burleigh taking surf action shots and selling them to surfers he'd snapped. Soon he was tying enough jobs together that he decided to take a punt and go out on his own full-time. He was shooting commercial buildings, weddings, portraits, parties... anything!

He joined a local business network and started working with a business coach, who suggested that Brad think about finding a niche market he could develop. With the Gold Coast's infatuation with property and development, architecture was the obvious choice but in terms of a niche, it was already very much filled.

One day he came across a guy in America who had a unique take on actors headshot photography. Originally a portrait photographer, he was using his skill for capturing a person's spirit in a single frame to help them sell themselves in an increasingly online world. Facebook was already huge and starting to play a part in employers' recruitment decisions. LinkedIn was starting to gain traction and while Google+ was still a way off, it was obvious to Brad that Australians would start to want to make sure their online image presented them in their best light. Brad thought that if he could take the same or similar techniques that the best headshot photographers in the world use for shooting actors, and apply those techniques to corporate and business profile images he might be able to create something unique in the corporate market.

“I started looking at headshots in relation to marketing and personal branding,” he says. “I relate personal branding and relationship marketing back to the old corner store. We'd buy our milk and bread and two cent lollies at the corner store and the lady behind the counter would

know me and my mum and dad, and my brothers and sisters. And if I went in to buy milk and I didn't have enough change on me, she'd say, "Bring it in tomorrow". You had a relationship with that lady.

"Now, so many of our decisions are being made online, there's a desire for people to have that sort of relationship with the people they're dealing with online. Headshots allow us to put a face and a personality to an email or a website and the people we're communicating with, and bring us that intimacy we grew up with."

Resume photos were traditionally little more than passport mug shots taken in a suit at the post office. Brad felt that just because it was a corporate photo, didn't mean it had to be boring. These days people need a picture to tell a story about them – the 45-year-old professional wants to look knowledgeable, professional and approachable, without looking arrogant. And that image comes across in an instant.

"You only get one shot at a first impression," Brad says. "At the suggestion of my brother who was an actor, I started shooting people in what they call cinema-scape in the movies (essentially landscape format). Our eyes are next to each other, not on top of each other, so when you shoot cinema-scape it makes more sense to our eyes. We see in landscape, that's why our TVs, our computers, our tablets are all in landscape. It made sense to start shooting my headshots in this way!."

"But then it comes back to an ability to extract natural expressions from people. For me, it's all about the expression. I grew up in a pub in Melbourne and I believe I spent 25 years working on that skill behind bars. You're dealing with people from the chest up and you're honing that skill that allows you to communicate. I worked in local pubs, cocktail bars and nightclubs and I was able to communicate with anybody who walked in and make them feel comfortable. And make them want to come back and get another drink!"

A typical headshot shoot will take about an hour. Brad admits he rarely gets the money shot in the first few minutes. It's only after half an hour or more of chatting and letting the person forget they're in front of a photographer that he can really capture their natural expressions.

"You don't need to be the best looking person on the Gold Coast to get a great headshot and I am not trying to make you look like someone else. It's about giving you the tips and tools that actors have known for years and helping you create the very best image of yourself. Everyone has their own unique personality that is obvious in full animation, but I look to capture all of that in a single frame. It's amazing that at the end of a one-hour shoot there's always one shot that stands out head and shoulders above the rest."

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