

A BEAUTY QUEEN AT 60

Robyn Canner, 61, found a beautiful way to cope with grief



I think Scotty must be proud

GENERATION Y NOT



Walking into Ms World I was so nervous



Me with my supportive canoe girls

Winning Ms World in Seattle

Helping me unpack my equipment, my son Scott winced. I was a sports therapist with the Tour de Cure, a cancer charity that raises money through sponsored bike rides, and Scott, then 20, often came by to help. 'Mum, my neck and head hurt,' he said. He'd had the strong pains for three days. Scott wasn't one to complain lightly, so I took him to St George Hospital, in Sydney. Never in my worst nightmare had I imagined what the results would be.

'Your son has non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma,' the specialist told me. Without aggressive treatment, my cheeky boy had just eight weeks to live. As a single mum, Scott was all I had. The doctor's words broke my heart into a million pieces but there was no time to cry. When we told Scott his diagnosis, he was stunned. 'We're going to save you, Scotty,' I said, determined. 'Let's get on with it.' Scott had surgery to remove a tumour at the top of his spine, then began chemo and radiation.

'I can beat this, Mum,' he said. My boy was a fighter. In and out of hospital, things looked positive at first. But then they took a terrible turn, and there was nothing the doctors could do. Two years after he fell sick, my beautiful Scott passed away, aged just 22. I tried my best to carry on without him, but I felt my life had no joy or hope. One night in January 2015, as I lay awake browsing the internet, I was at rock bottom and seriously thought about not carrying on. *It's too hard without you, Scotty*, I told him. Suddenly, an advert about the Mrs Australia Quest flashed across my screen. The beauty pageant was for women of all ages and you would be judged on charity, fundraising, and personality as well as looks. 'Wait a minute,' I said aloud. 'Why don't I try this?' It was such a random idea. I'd done some film and TV commercials decades earlier, but never anything like this. On the spur of the moment, I entered. It would be good to have something to focus on.

The best part was I could use it as a platform to raise funds for Tour de Cure. When my entry was accepted, I was thrilled. Loving the outdoors, I've been a member of a canoe club for more than 20 years. When I told the girls about my new hobby, they couldn't wait to cheer me on. Now, I had to get ready. Enrolling in make-up classes, I then went shopping for new gowns. I didn't even know what to practise for the pageant, so I just decided to be myself. That April, I nervously put on my glittery dress and took to the stage. I had to walk the catwalk in two outfits and answer questions in an interview round. Then, it was time for the judges' verdict. To my utter surprise, my name was called as runner-up! 'Scotty, you must be proud,' I said, punching the air. My grief was still there, but

AS TOLD TO ASTHA GUPTA. IF YOU'VE BEEN AFFECTED BY ANYTHING IN THIS STORY AND NEED HELP, CALL LIFELINE 13 11 14 (AUS) OR 0800 543 354 (NZ).

now it was propelling me. Over the next three years, I went on to be named runner-up and crowned winner in more national and international pageants. Each time I entered, I got to tell Scott's story.

I wondered if I had any place among beauty queens from 22 countries who were so much younger than me. *Suck it up, Robbie*, I thought, and smiled. We were judged in fitness

Walking into orientation, I stopped, my heart pounding.

the catwalk at New York Fashion Week. I've been on magazine covers in 50 odd countries, and I judge pageants and do mentoring. Recently my portrait was included in an international project, called Women, The Exhibition, that showcases inspiring women over 40 and will travel around the world. I feel humbled that people look up to me. Saying good morning and good night to Scotty never gets easier, but becoming a beauty queen saved me. Now, I'm sharing my story to help other people in need of hope. **U**

People say I've inspired them to battle their grief

Soon I started receiving messages from all over, with people telling me how my story was inspiring them to battle their own grief. 'Why don't you enter Ms World?' my friends urged. So far, I had competed with women of my age group, but Ms World was open to participants aged 26 and over. I laughed off the idea. *But why not?* a voice said. *Let's go get ourselves a new challenge, girl.* So, I signed up and flew to Seattle last year to compete.

wear, evening dress and through panel questions. Then it was time to hear the verdict. When my name was called as the winner, I burst into tears. It was so surreal – I was 60! But my achievement didn't really sink in until I came home and was on a train. *I'm the reigning Ms World, and I'm tapping off with a Seniors Card*, I thought, laughing. My life has changed since then. This year, I became the world's oldest model to grace

COMPETITIVE SPIRIT

CROWNING GLORY
Beauty pageants have risen in popularity in recent years, with several new ones being launched Down Under. Entrants are often judged on their charitable work and environmental efforts as well as appearance, and modern pageants are open to women of all ages. There are also competitions for children and teens. With pageants charging fees as high as \$500 to successful entrants, it's important to make sure you budget for your, or your little one's, beauty queen dream.

ICING ON THE CAKE
If you're more at home in a kitchen than on a stage, the world of cake decorating could prove to be a creative outlet. Cake shows around the country run contests to find the most stunning creations. The biggest in Australia is run by the Australian Cake Artists and Decorators Association, with its 2020 show in Brisbane in May. See acada.com.au for details.

STORY SUCCESS
If you enjoy writing, why not enter a short story writing competition? Many are free to enter, or have a modest entry fee. Down Under based contests include the Banjo Paterson Writing Awards and the Newcastle Short Story Award. For more, visit writerscentre.com.au



Scotty, my cheeky boy, and me

ARE YOU PART OF GENERATION Y NOT?

Generation Y Not are 40-plus women who are grabbing life with both hands. Are you doing anything a bit different? You might just inspire women like you in ways you won't even know.

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