

BRITTANI NICHOLL

Intro by Elish Emery | Words by Brittani Nicholl | Images by Michael Hayes | Designed by Madison Watkins

Brittani Nicholl is a surfer. She loves the ocean and it is here that she has found her passion. On the outside Britt is like any surfer girl, she lives and breathes surfing and is most happy when she is out in the water. However what many people would not guess is that for years she has been living with an at times crippling disease with symptoms as unpredictable as the New Zealand weather. Yet this has not stopped Brittani from doing the things she loves. She is the perfect example of a 'glass half full' type of girl. Anyone who comes into contact with Brittani will realise she is a true role model for how to live your life despite adversity. I think we could all learn a little from this girl who continues to cross the finish line before her disease every time.

Brittani Nicholl has been living with Crohn's disease ever since she was 7 years old. For those of us who aren't too clear on what Crohn's is, it is a form of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). This is where the body's immune system attacks the gastrointestinal tract causing inflammation and ulceration with any part of the gastrointestinal tract from the mouth to the anus, but most commonly affecting the small intestine and/or the colon. Within a diseased section, Crohn's disease can affect all layers of the intestinal wall, not just the lining.

We caught up with Brittani when she visited New Zealand earlier this year to compete in the Taranaki Surf festival. We were keen to see her surfing again however, she had to withdraw from the competition the day before due to developing an abscess which required immediate surgery. Although devastated to miss the competition, in her usual positive fashion Britt made the most of her time in NZ and with her boyfriend Michael, explored the local region where she climbed Mt Taranaki and made her very first snowman.

Brittani generously gave us a background to her life of living with her disease and how she has overcome its evils.

Brittani takes up her story.

"Prior to being diagnosed with Crohn's disease I attended the doctors on a few occasions, only to be diagnosed with giardia. Though due to still being unwell I returned to my local GP who then referred me to a gastroenterologist in Brisbane, in which after further investigation it was found that I had Crohn's.

I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease at just 7yrs of age, which at the time was very surprising to find it in someone so young. Some

of the symptoms I endured include, abdominal pain, lack of energy, rectal bleeding, weight loss, skin problems, fevers, headaches, diarrhea, vomiting, and anemia.

I've had plenty of hospital admissions over the years but 4 major admissions. Two which took place when I was at the ages of 10 and 11 years; with one stint being 6 weeks and the other being 9 weeks, where I received a central line and was being fed through a tube.

Growing up with the disease wasn't an easy thing, especially with the symptoms I was dealing with. It was actually a common thing for me at times to have to go to the bathroom 15+ times during the day/night. I was on one medication in particular, prednisolone, which caused me to have a fuller and round face whilst also putting on weight. Coping with this at school wasn't the best; most kids knew I was sick although it was hard to understand what I was going through and why I was like that, so I did cop a little bit of bullying not only off kids but also one or two teachers throughout my schooling years.

In the May of 2007 at age 16 I was weighing in at 43kg, it was at this time that I was told the news that that nobody wants to hear; major surgery was inevitable due to a stricture (narrowing) in my bowel.

The surgeon advised me that without further investigation they would not know the full extent of the surgery needed.

Due to this, the doctor gave 3 possible outcomes:

1. Have a bowel resection and require no bag.
2. Have part of my bowel looped and require a temporary ileostomy bag.
3. Have all of my bowel removed and require a permanent colostomy bag.

I came out of surgery with 30 cm of my colon removed, which was where the structured bowel was, which meant I did not require a bag. You could have imagined the excitement!! But that excitement was very short lived and two days after leaving hospital I was at home when a major haemorrhage occurred, I was rushed into emergency surgery to stop the bleeding and receive blood infusions.

After a very near death experience I was then home for a month, though ended up in hospital with more complications, to a point where I spent weeks in complete agony.

The doctors tried everything, to a point I was in hot and cold sweats hallucinating from a mixture of pain medications, but nothing

would even slightly ease the pain. It wasn't until they went in to perform a simple surgery to fix what they thought was the problem, only to find out that it was much worse than they intended. I had perianal Crohn's disease and now had no skin in my anal passage, which meant further surgery was required, as I would now require an ileostomy bag.

The ileostomy bag would allow the bowel to rest, but at that time doctors could not say how long I would have the ileostomy for and there was still discussion with the surgeon that they may have to remove the entire bowel.

It was a very hard time in my life, where looks and appearance seemed so important. You could imagine my fear and worry. I definitely didn't think I'd be able to live a normal life with an ileostomy and the first thought running through my mind was that I wouldn't be able to surf ever again. But it was a visit in hospital from a stranger at the time who picked my spirits back up and inspired me to continue living my life doing the things I loved. With a great support network I was able to get through it and to my surprise, I was able to surf and live a relatively normal life.

Surfing with an ileostomy bag took a bit of time getting used to, but I soon adjusted to it all. People weren't aware I even had a bag attached to my stomach unless I was to tell them or they'd see me getting ready in the car park, but other than that it wasn't noticeable. I'd learnt not to eat at least 1-2 hours leading up to going for a surf and I surfed in a one piece swimsuit, at times a wetsuit as well to keep everything in place on my stomach. I had a few mishaps with leakage and irritation whilst surfing with the bag but it was all worth it in the end just to be doing something I loved.

I was insecure about my body, and still am but my scars tell my story and are a reminder of how far I have come. I had no choice but to have the surgeries I have had and it was just something I had to learn to deal with. Whilst having the ileostomy bag I still continued to travel and achieve a lot with my surfing in the following years.

The ileostomy bag was the best thing for my health, I was no longer in pain and I was the healthiest I had ever been...sure you still have your ups and downs, but it's something that I'd recommend to anyone who is in a similar situation. It is a very daunting process and it takes a bit of getting use to; but I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for having the bag.

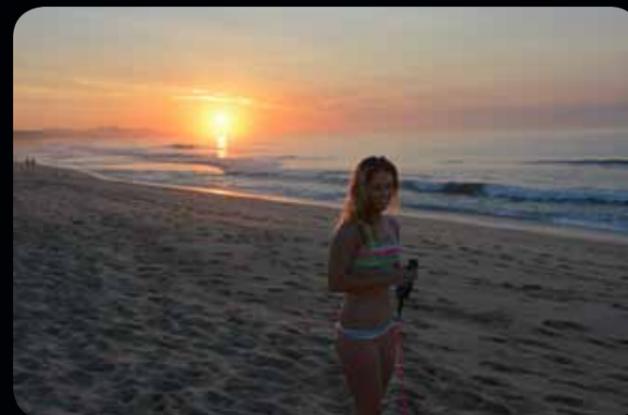
Surfing has changed my life dramatically; it has kept me fit and healthy, in and out of the water and I honestly believe it has been the best thing for my health. When I am in the water, my mind is on my surfing and not everything else that is going on in my life; it is the only time where I really forget about my illness.

In November 2009 I broke my ankle in two places whilst out surfing a local break at home. I required surgery and a screw which kept me out of the water for almost 5 months; and whilst out with my ankle, my surgeon thought it'd be best to get the reversal done...giving me less time out of the water in the long run.

So after almost three years of living with a stoma and ileostomy bag, I had the surgery to get it reversed and remove the bag in early 2010. It was a daunting feeling because the bag had been the best thing for me and my health, I was scared that if I was to get the reversal things would go back to being as bad as they were before I'd had the surgery in 2007 and my health would go back downhill.

Fortunately this was not the case and in late 2012 I had my first colonoscopy





since having the reversal operation...and for the first time in 16 years, I could say I was and still am currently in remission!

Those who are close to our family and those who I have grown up with can't believe where I am today. I have had and still do have great specialists and with the advancements of medicine I have been living as normal life as I possibly can.

I believe a combination of both resting of the bowel and the medications I have been taking have assisted in me now being in remission, though again I could build a resistance to the current medications I am on, and the long term effects of these medications is still not a clear path...this is why funding and awareness is necessary to be able to give us all hope in finding a cure for this debilitating disease.

After everything that has happened, I have learnt to appreciate everything so much more. I soon realised how quickly everything could potentially be taken away from me, including life. I am just grateful for the life I have, and sure things can be tough and you can get pretty down about things, but I always think to myself that things could be worse and there are many people out there that are much worse off than me. I now figure just to take every day as it comes and not to get too far ahead of myself, whilst trying to stay as healthy and happy as I can.

Crohn's & Colitis Australia was founded to help support the Crohn's

and Colitis community with a focus on confidential support programs including education, advocacy, counselling, increasing awareness and generating funds for research and support.

The 'Can't Wait' campaign is a program created by Crohn's & Colitis Australia to help raise awareness to the general public, retailers, businesses and venue operators to allow people with IBD to access their toilets in times of urgency.

There are over 70,000 people diagnosed with Crohn's disease and Ulcerative Colitis, and there are many more people being diagnosed daily as that number is on the rise. This can affect anyone; when I was diagnosed there didn't seem to be as many people with IBD (Irritable Bowel Disease), and having someone to talk about it with was difficult.

An IBD problem is difficult to speak about, as it is bowel related. My wish is to promote this disease more openly, as it can affect anyone at any time, and for people to have a better understanding of this disease gives hope to others. Just dealing with this disease on a daily basis can be a struggle but if I can share my story and provide hope by inspiring and helping others through tough times and put a smile on their face, then I'm happy!"

For more information on Crohn's & Colitis and what you can do to help please visit, www.acca.net.au or www.crohnsandcolitis.com.au