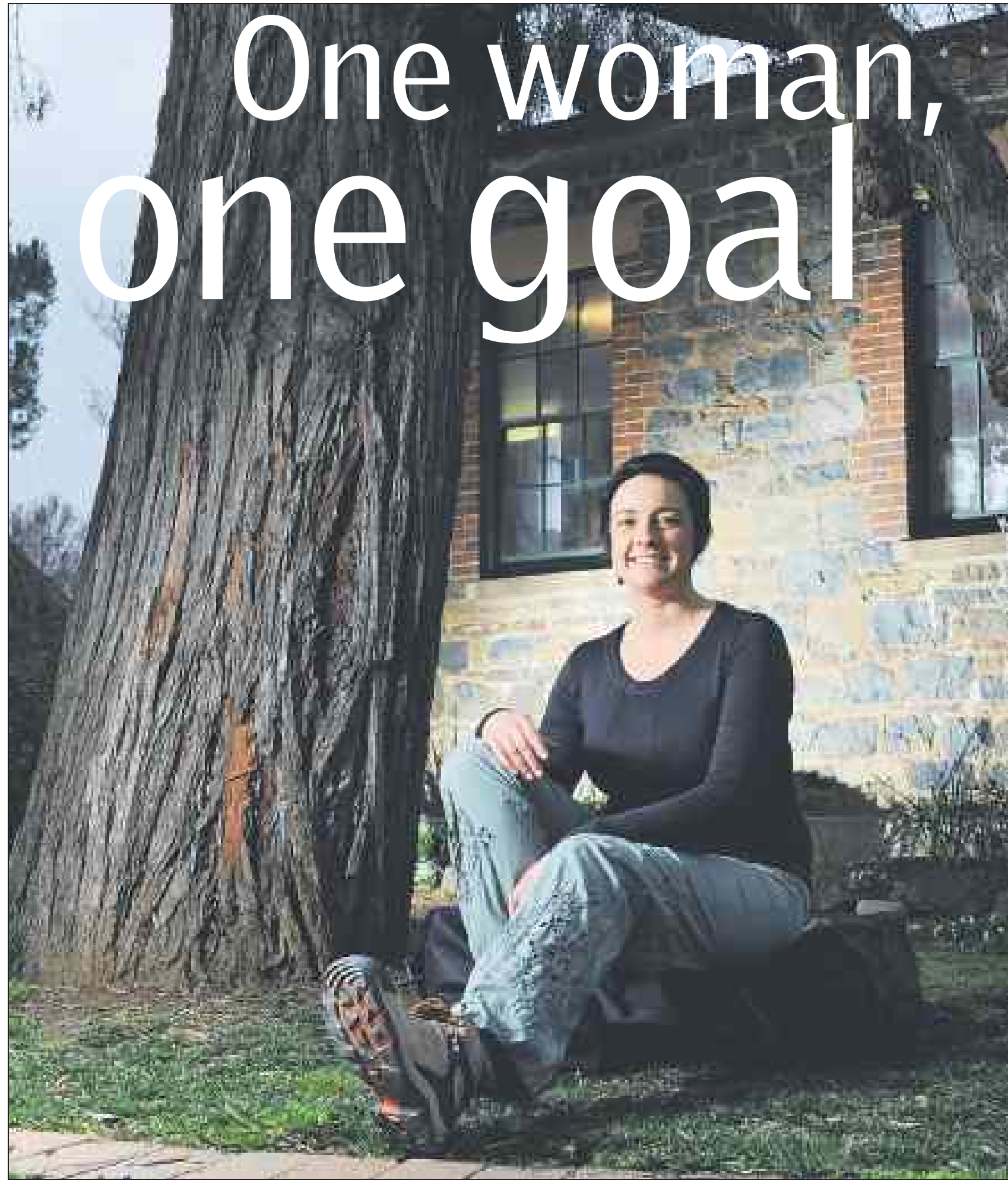


One woman, one goal



For a young cancer survivor, the word "remission" means "refinding her mission", as **Lucy Baker** writes

Remission might be the most amazing word in any cancer survivor's vocabulary, however it is attached to a constant thought of four words: will it come back?

For Canberran Fiona McWhinnie, the worrying thought springs to mind whenever she feels unwell or gets an unusual ache. Not that she's lacking in courage and tenacity – the 33-year-old beat the odds to conquer an aggressive intestinal tumour in 1997.

And now, a new challenge. McWhinnie's been in training for the Cure Cancer Foundation's Race for a Cure challenge, which starts on November 6 and involves four days of cycling and six days of trekking through Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

Organised by travel company Inspired Adventures on behalf of Cure Cancer Australia (whose mission is to give young and innovative scientists the support they need to pursue potential breakthrough research), this drive should attract travellers with a conscience and other adventurous souls who want to learn and give at the same time.

The physical nature of this is something she relishes – with a mission to her remission spurring her onwards, refocusing her mind on a search for a cure for a disease that strikes Australians at the terrifying rate of 300 cases a day.

McWhinnie is used to the upheaval that these new patients will be experiencing, having lost her own mother, Janet, to cancer the same year she herself was diagnosed.

"It was a few months after I moved here that my mum was diagnosed as terminal (she had an inoperable tumour in her pancreas)."

Two days later, McWhinnie became ill.

"I had started to fall ill with my own tumour, although we didn't know that at the time," she says. "In early April with no firm diagnosis, I collapsed in immense pain and they decided to do a laparoscopy and found I'd collapsed with a ruptured ovarian cyst," McWhinnie says. Even that was a lucky moment for her.

"It turns out if he hadn't taken out my appendix I would have only had a few months left as there

was a carcinoid tumour there – they typically don't present in those under the age of 40.

"A few months after my surgery Mum lost her battle."

Now, in honour of her mother and of her own survival, McWhinnie is intent on making the most of life, indeed, living it to the full. She has a job on contract at a government department, and has lived here since 1997.

"I love Canberra for the stark contrast in seasons, the freshness of the air, the culture, the vast array of lifestyles and the closeness of the community," she says. "I grew up in Beresfield, a tight community on the outskirts of greater Newcastle – and while I miss the area and the people I grew up with I'm happy in Canberra and I feel like I am part of the fabric here.

"I have a temporary pet cat

called Ming – she's actually my friend's cat but she is overseas for two years. Ming is very independent, doesn't like people at all and has the most wonderful cat park to play in."

As part of her return to the fitness she once enjoyed during her stint in the navy in earlier years, she is studying a bachelor of coaching science and is a qualified swimming and triathlon coach.

"Some of the things I've done once I started regaining health include sky diving, travelling through Europe, caving and abseiling in some amazing places," she enthuses.

"I have flown planes (flying lessons that were a present from my sister for my 30th), driven ships, been surfing and black water rafting, hot air ballooning, done turtle research in the Herald Cays of the Coral Sea and even

scored a role as an extra in a mini-series in Dunk Island."

It's becoming clear that this is a woman not to be messed with, and it seems that she is following in the footsteps of a mother who was, in her own way, inspirational at times.

"My mum had an effect on the lives of so many people in Newcastle," McWhinnie says.

"That gives me a great sense of comfort to think I could be a little like her. She was just an APS5 family claims clerk, but she always helped people to get all that they were entitled to and she was a pit bull on those defrauding the system."

There are fond memories of her mother's zest for life.

"One Christmas Eve she dressed up as Santa in the office, popping up from behind the counter as people were lodging their dole

forms. One punk with a massive Mohawk had a T-shirt on with a tartan-clad hand giving two fingers and the text 'Up yer kilt'. My Mum, being Scottish, and thinking it was a funny shirt, still dressed as Santa, reached across the counter, taking his hand and said, in her thick Glaswegian accent, 'I want yer shirt!'

"The guy started taking it off to give it to her at which point of course she panicked and said she was kidding and laughed with the guy about it all, everyone laughed and she helped him with his forms. He returned just after Christmas with another T-shirt for her to say thanks for helping him."

Fiona has a head start on the attitude needed to do such a physical challenge.

"Being so in love with sport and with my studies I'm fairly health-conscious," she says.