

Law graduate's long, hard road to recovery

It was a huge leap of faith that saw 42-year-old Sue Scutter give up her previous career in floristry and enrol at university for the first time.

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It took even greater courage to battle an aggressive and life-threatening cancer during her degree, and refuse to give up her dream to graduate.

This Wednesday, Sue will receive her conjoint degree in Law and Criminology, marking the successful end of her five-year academic journey that was pitted with intensive chemotherapy, surgery and a myriad of side effects. At times her characteristic positivity wilted.

“I can’t believe I’ve done it,” she says. “There were days where I thought I wouldn’t make it to this point.”

Sue has always been interested in psychology and law and with the support of her husband John, enrolled at Victoria in 2011. It was a big step for Sue. As well as having the usual student concerns about coping with the stress, pressure and workload of full-time study, she was a mother of two, commuting from Kapiti Coast every day and relying on her husband’s income.

Sue says the first year was “blimmin’ scary” as she navigated the “rollercoaster ride” of university. By second-year she had topped a couple of classes. In fourth year, she discovered a lump in her breast.

“It felt like my world fell apart. I had an aggressive form of cancer. They thought it was all through my bones and the specialists didn’t know whether I would respond to the treatment.

The oncologist said there was a 50 percent chance the treatment would not work, but we tried to remain focused on the 50 percent chance that it would work.

“I asked if I could continue my studies and they said: ‘Absolutely not. You’re going to feel like you’re going to die [from the treatment]. We need you to give up your life and commit to this so your body has the energy to fight it’.

“I was in the middle of two Law papers when I was diagnosed and I thought ‘I am not a quitter’. I had done the internal assessments and could apply for aegrotats because I wasn’t able to sit the exams.”

For the next 11 months, Sue focused on fighting the cancer.

She underwent a six-month course of chemotherapy, which was followed by a mastectomy and five weeks of daily radiation.

“The treatment makes you sick. I lost my hair, I was constantly tired, achy and sweaty. Being depressed was a real biggie. And the fatigue, some days I just couldn’t do anything.”

Sue persevered and the tumours shrank. Nearly a year after the diagnosis, Sue returned to university determined to finish the last three papers.

But her journey wasn’t yet over. The treatment had left her with ‘chemo brain’, which makes Sue’s head feel “a bit scrambled”.

“I also have a really bad memory because of all the chemo, and have to read things a few times to process the information. I get hot and cold, I’m indecisive and get very tired. I don’t like crowds anymore, and I can be quite anxious in some situations.

“When I came back, I was recommended to the University’s Disability Services. I didn’t think I had a disability, but they were great and helped me get extra reading time in my exams. My Insurance Law lecturer Bevan Marten really went that extra mile supporting me to complete my final Law paper.”

Sue’s health suffered another blow when she contracted peritonitis, an inflammation of tissue covering most internal organs that is potentially fatal.

Again, Sue asked if she could resume her studies while recuperating from the emergency surgery, and the answer was no, not until her health had returned.

At the end of 2016 she completed the final two BA papers, completed Legal Professionals and was admitted to the Bar.

Sue’s already secured a job with Integra Law and although she loves practicing as a lawyer, she admits she contemplated whether to return to work.

“I always worry that the cancer will come back. But I worked so hard to be a lawyer, I’m not quitting this.

“I’m really excited to be graduating—I feel like it completes everything.”