

'YOU DON'T NEED HAIR to be beautiful'

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Kylie Baker, 25, Drouin, Vic

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Doctors diagnosed me with alopecia areata – a condition where the body's immune system attacks its hair follicles. They didn't know why I'd been affected but they prescribed me tablets and creams, which failed to help. Over the next year I lost not just the hair on my head,

but also my eyebrows, eyelashes and even the hairs on my arms.

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Mum could see I was suffering and taught me how to stick up for myself. As I practiced saying 'so what?' with my hands on my hips, I tried to summon the strength to fight back.

By grade three, I'd swapped my hats for an expensive wig made from real European hair. Mum hoped it'd help but it only made me more self-conscious. When I got home from school I couldn't wait to throw it on the floor to play with my younger siblings Crystal and Travis. But if the doorbell rang I'd be in a

mad panic to put it back on before anyone could see me.

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On holiday that year though, for the first time I revealed my secret to people I didn't know.

With Mum's support, I found the strength to visit the beach without my wig. And when I started senior school and began playing netball, it made much more sense to go wig-free.

I also started to realise how lucky I was. I wasn't sick.

I should be embracing life – making the most of it, as there were a lot of people worse off than me. I began to accept my baldness, but it wasn't easy. After years of bullying, my self-esteem had taken a real battering. How would anyone love me with no hair? Who'd want a bald bride?

But after the hell I'd had with hats and wigs, it was liberating not having to worry any more.

By the time I left school and started at uni, I was much more confident. My experience had given me a purpose in life – to help others – so I decided to train to become a teacher.

Standing up in front of my first class with my bald head proudly on display was an incredible moment. For so long, I'd hidden myself away – now I was determined to use what I'd been through to educate kids about alopecia.

'It's not a sickness,' I told them. 'So I choose not to cover it up.'

I even wrote to their parents to explain my condition, urging them to ask questions. Being so open really encouraged people to learn more. Five months into my new job, I was feeling great.

My self-confidence must have been shining through, because it was then that I met Mathew on a night out. I'd had a couple of boyfriends before, but when Mathew pulled me up to dance, I knew he was unique.

'Look, I don't have cancer,' I sighed, assuming that's what he'd think. 'It's called alopecia. There's nothing wrong with me.'

'I know that,' he said, unfazed.

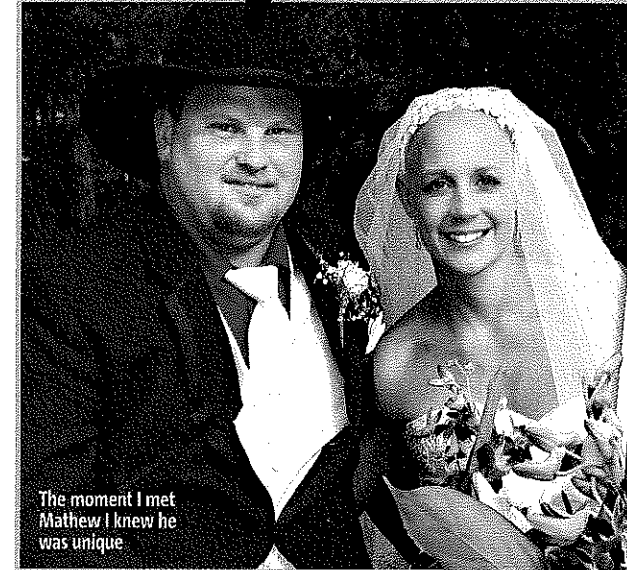
For the next two months Mathew pursued me and when we went on our first official date, I just knew he was The One.

He was so easy to chat to – and he accepted me for me. It was something I'd hardly dared dream of when I was younger. When he proposed 18 months later, I was thrilled to say yes!

Two weeks after that, the wedding plans began in earnest. Shopping with Mum and my bridesmaids, I found a gorgeous dress with a long train. I really wanted a veil too, but flicking through the bridal magazines, I saw, of course, that the models wearing veils all had luscious locks keeping them in place.

I experienced a sudden pang of jealousy and doubts crowded my head. Was it possible to feel beautiful as a bald bride? How would a veil ever stay in place? As tears of frustration threatened to overwhelm me, I had to give

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The moment I met Mathew I knew he was unique

myself a talking to. If there was one thing I'd learnt, it was that beauty came from confidence.

I didn't need a wig for my wedding. I needed to stay strong.

I was thrilled when we found a shop that offered to make a special headband from which a veil could hang. As I tried it on for the first time, Mum couldn't hold back tears of pride. 'You look gorgeous,' she said.

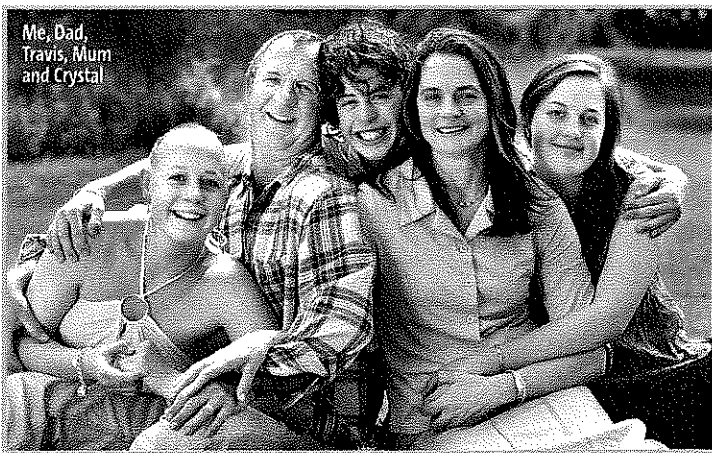
And when I walked down the aisle to marry Mathew last month, I *did* feel gorgeous. It was the happiest day of my life.

I might not have had a single strand of hair, but I felt every inch the beautiful bride. I'm determined to carry that feeling with me forever. ●

As told to Katherine Davison
To support the Australian Alopecia Areata Foundation visit www.aaaf.org.au.

PHOTOS: SARAH KLEIN

I felt every inch the beautiful bride



Me, Dad, Travis, Mum and Crystal

\$600

See story to learn full details

TELL US YOUR STORY

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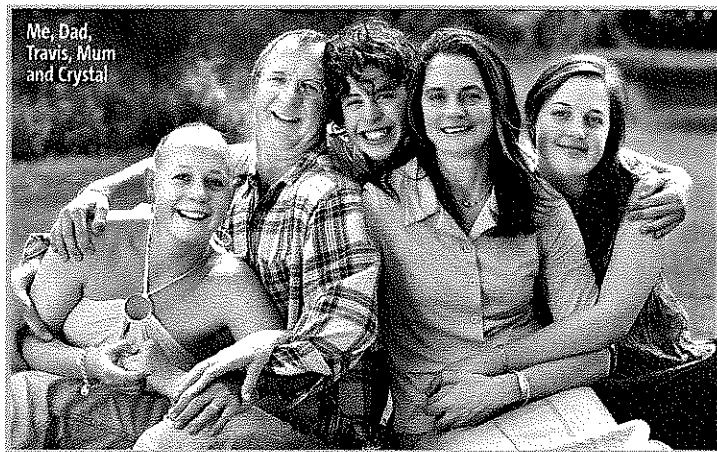
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