

Michelle ... I really had to look at my own situation and realize that the biggest challenge I had with my own "disability", Alopecia, was psychological, and that there was so much I could do if only I could rise above the challenge it posed.

My story of embracing Alopecia is as much about embracing "difference" in many forms, as it is about embracing alopecia itself.

I first developed patchy alopecia areata in my late teens, towards the end of high school, however it was not until after I had re-grown, then re-lost almost all my hair, at age 21, that alopecia was properly diagnosed. I "made do" with hats and scarves, but struggled badly with low self esteem. For about a year, I was terribly depressed and anxious. I hated my appearance, and feared for my future. I had been working full time in a Childcare centre and studying at TAFE in the evenings, part-time, but I was not coping well at all, so I resigned from work and studied full time for 6 months, to complete my Diploma in Social Science.

My first job after graduating, was a 6 month maternity leave position at the Handicapped Children's Centre of NSW. I worked as an assistant to the Physiotherapist and Occupational Therapist, with severely physically and intellectually impaired children, from ages 3 to 18. There were children who had cerebral palsy, Down's Syndrome, autism, Angelman's syndrome, and other conditions. I embraced them all, and loved them, whilst they broke my heart, and stretched my caregiving capacities daily. Yet, this role meant that I really had to look at my own situation and realize that the biggest challenge I had with my own "disability", Alopecia, was psychological, and that there was so much I could do if only I could rise above the challenge it posed.

The position was well paid, and enabled me to purchase my first quality suction human hair wig, which helped in restoring some of my confidence and sense of adventure. I was also able to save sufficient travel money for a world ticket, and along with some additional sponsorship from family and our church, I travelled overseas at the end of 1999 with a good friend, Rebecca, who is an English Teacher. We spent 2 months each in Lebanon, West Africa (Nigeria & Burkina Faso), and London, where Rebecca taught English to African refugees, whilst I cared for their children. I embraced these beautiful people with all their cultural differences, as we shared photographs, stories, and food! We learned to laugh at ourselves in the midst of many difficult and frustrating circumstances. I celebrated my 23rd birthday in a freezing basement in Beirut, with about 20 Sudanese refugees dancing, clapping and singing around me.

During our travels, we saw heartbreaking poverty, and heard many stories of loss, and despair. Again, I was challenged to look at my own situation and embrace it, realizing how fortunate I was, to have good health, education, finance, and freedom, even though I had no hair!

When I returned to Sydney in June 2000, I believe I had grown a lot as a person. I had renewed confidence, joy and a sense of purpose. And a Nigerian friend of mine, Uchenna, (Uche) took more notice of me, as I had been to his country! We started dating towards the end of the year, and before long, were falling in love! Now Uche (pronounced "Oochay") did not know about my alopecia, or my wig, and it was a huge step for me to tell him about it. However, I need not have feared, because, being African, wigs are normal part of ladies fashion to him, as his mother, sisters and female friends all wear them. He told me I was beautiful enough for him and wanted to marry me. I burst into tears!

Uche and I were engaged on my 24th birthday, and married in April 2001, just 10 weeks later, in an amazing traditional white Australian church wedding with a traditional black African reception! We have recently celebrated our 16th wedding anniversary. We have been blessed with 4 beautiful mixed race, coffee-coloured, wild-afro-haired daughters who are now 13, 11, 7 and 3 years of age. I recently had my 40th birthday and we went on a family cruise to New Caledonia with 2 other families to celebrate. I still have alopecia, and I still wear quality, suction, human hair wigs. I still work part time, with children who have special needs, and volunteer in programs through our church, working with people from many backgrounds, including refugees. Alopecia has gone from being a massive part of my life, to just a very small part of it. I have gone from hating alopecia, to embracing it (in a wig), along with embracing all the amazing people who sew up the fabric of my life with their unique and wonderful differences.

