



AMBASSADOR: Mash Ferris

Mash Ferris, 45, is a freelance audio engineer and lives in Sydney. He has worked for artists such as Kate Ceberano, Dragon and Jenny Morris. For the past 14 years Mash has worked with jazz singer/trumpeter Vince Jones, touring nationally and internationally. Mash has been legally blind for the past 15 years. He is a keen runner and completed in his 10th City to Surf this year.

“My condition is genetic and is called Leber’s Hereditary Optic Neuropathy (LHOC). It is carried by the mother, and there’s a 40 to 60 per cent chance of it occurring in male offspring. Being a genetic condition, and despite the fact it is quite rare, I guess I always knew there was a chance I would be affected by it. In some ways I think it prepared me for when it did happen. I lost my sight over a two month period when I was around 30.

“My older brother Nick had already been through it when he was 10. He lost his sight from the condition at that very early age which was quite unusual. He had to go to Blind school but after four years his eyesight miraculously came back and he returned to mainstream school for his final two years.

“Nick’s sight returning has given me hope that one day my sight might also come back or that there will be a breakthrough with gene therapy. I’ve never been jealous or angry however, that my sight has not returned.

“Strangely enough, it wasn’t scary to lose my sight. I think it was because my life continued on pretty normally. I was still working and I think because it happened to Nick I was prepared on some level.

“When people hear I’ve have lost 94 to 95 per cent of my sight they assume all I see is black. The condition affects my central vision. I have 4 to 5 per cent quite good peripheral vision. My mind though tends to fill in the missing blocks of colour, so I’m never sure that what I see is real.

“My most valuable tool is my memory, which I draw on regularly when I’m travelling. Getting around is my biggest challenge. If people say to meet at a specific address then it can be quite tricky to know when I’ve found the right place.

“Regardless of the state of my eyesight I’ve always been a pretty relaxed, patient and laid-back person. I just deal with whatever comes my way. I think that these qualities have helped me deal with my disability along with my family who have always been supportive and treated me the same as my other siblings.

“One of the other big challenges I face is lack of understanding. People find it hard to imagine what it’s like. I think it will always be this way because you can’t really know what it’s like to have a disability unless it happens to you. I have a hidden disability so people don’t see me as ‘disabled’. It’s something I don’t necessarily tell people.

“Sometimes there’s a fear that it might be used against you at work but as I often work with different people and mostly in dark or low level lighting, it tends not to come up. The people who have worked with me longer know and it doesn’t make a difference to them. I feel I’m treated the same as everyone else. Overall, I’ve found people to be quite accepting.

“I don’t see my disability as a bad thing. Everyone’s got some kind of problem they have to deal with. This is mine. My friends were concerned and supportive when I lost my sight. Some were over sympathetic but my attitude was to go with it.

“The worst thing about having a disability is the loss of independence and aspects of my privacy because you need help to do things like banking. There are things I’d prefer to keep more private. But the best thing is that I probably treat people better and take them as they come. I can’t rely on my sight to get a visual impression. To be honest I don’t analyse it that much. In some ways I think it’s perhaps better that way.”



AMBASSADOR: Tracy Barrell

Tracy Barrell, AOM, 34, is the face of the 2008 Don’t DIS my ABILITY campaign. Tracy competed in the Barcelona Paralympics in 1992 winning a gold medal in swimming. She was awarded the Order of Australia in 1993 for her contribution to sport. In 2007 Tracy represented Australia at the Shanghai Women’s Sitting Volleyball Tournament and was selected as an Australia Day Ambassador. She lives in Holsworthy NSW with her sons Bryce 7, and Oscar 4, and works at the Southerland Shire Council.

“I was born with no legs and only one arm. It is not my parent’s fault and it’s questionable if it was a medical fault, but I don’t think about it. To me I was given the gift of life. It isn’t so much about what I didn’t have but more about what I could do.

“My family played a big role in my attitudes. They could have felt sorry for me and wrapped me up in cotton wool. But they chose from the start, to give me a chance to be who I

was able to be. My family always believed that I would make an impact in some way. I have always felt compelled to speak out and be counted, even as a kid. I was never willing to sit back and wait for people to give me things in life; I was always out there, trying to make the most of what life had to offer.

“I would often hear people say that I couldn’t do something, so I would dig in and try to do it anyway. And most of the time I would do well, usually even better than well. I am very stubborn. I think I have had to be, because growing up I used to believe people when they would say I would never have the adventures I’ve had.

“The philosophy I live by is: ‘if you still have life, live it!’ Everyone makes their own destiny. Sure, I have had a few more hurdles but I am having the life that I want. I feel I have achieved what I wanted and even received more than I expected.

“I have my health and I have my boys, but most of all I have the freedom, choice and my own voice. And these are the things people miss while they are so busy with their day-to-day lives. The average person takes life and living for granted.”

For more information about the campaign log on to www.dontDISmyABILITY.com.au

Designated by the United Nations, **International Day of People with a Disability** is always celebrated on December 3.

The day celebrates diversity, achievements and abilities of people with a disability.

This year’s United Nations theme is “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Dignity and justice for all of us.”

- 1 in 5 people in Australia has a disability
- Approximately 800,000 people in Australia care for a person with a disability.