

# Healthy Harmonious Bodies

Is it a bird...

Is it a plane? No...

It's *Supermum!*

*After struggling for many years with bulimia, low self-esteem and a sense that life was spiraling out of control, mother of two Karen Newell talks openly about her journey from obsession to health and happiness.*

by Maggie Wilde

To her husband Mike and her sons, Jorel 5 and Cael 14 months, 34 year old probationary firefighter Karen Newell is 'Super Mum!' To the other Firefighters at the Beenleigh Fire Service, she is 'One of the Boys'. To the people she helps with weight and image issues she is 'Pure Inspiration'. To the fitness industry she is 'Miss Fitness' and to anyone who has ever tried to find the balance between family, career, health, spirituality and happiness she is 'Living Proof' that all things are possible.

Crowned 'Miss Figure' Southern Hemisphere in 2002 and runner up again in 2004, Karen has journeyed from the depths of despair in her twenties to international recognition in the field of health and fitness in her thirties. But if you ask Karen she is first and foremost a mum, a wife and a firefighter.

It's now 9.30am as I sit opposite Karen at the Sanctuary Cove gym on Hope Island. She's been up since 5am, "I've cleaned the house, caught up on the washing, cooked breakfast, been for a jog, got the boys ready and now I'm ready to tackle my day." she says with a glint in her eye.

I feel exhausted just thinking about it but Karen is the picture of health. She sits relaxed and calm with a manner that says 'there's nowhere else I'd rather be'. Jorel and Cael are happy playing in the crèche while 'Supermum' takes an hour out of her busy day to fill me in on a few of her life-balance secrets.



Like so many people today Karen struggled throughout her twenties to overcome bulimia and control her obsession with exercise. "I was a mess" Karen says. "One day my old boss approached me, he'd recognized the tell-tale signs because his wife had suffered through the same ordeal. I was devastated that my secret was out."

*"I just sobbed and sobbed until there was nothing left inside"*

"I remember sitting in my room for a whole day crying uncontrollably, I didn't even open the curtains. I just sobbed and sobbed until there was nothing left inside." Karen finally acknowledged she needed help. She confided in her mother and eventually found help through professional counselling and a personal commitment to heal.

Through years of soul-searching, emotional clearing, professional guidance, setting small attainable goals and making conscious decisions about her future, Karen learnt to transform the old negative energy that kept her focused on bulimia into a new balanced drive to be healthy and happy.

"It's not as though my obsession with bulimia or the way I looked disappeared overnight. For years I used to train and eat a certain way to look a certain way" she said. "But one day I woke up and knew my life had to change. I looked at myself and thought 'who really cares what weight I am; people still love me if I let them.'"

Karen's search for a balanced life had begun. "I've always been athletic, but with bulimia I had become obsessed" she acknowledged. "I saw exercise as something I had to do to counteract the food I had eaten."

After making the decision to stop training for a short period Karen gained a healthy perspective on her real reasons for wanting to train. "I realized it wasn't about losing 5 kilos anymore, it was about staying healthy. It was as though I woke up one day and thought 'I'm done with it, I can choose to be like this for the rest of my life or I can change my thoughts.'"

So change she did. Karen began reading self-help books like *The Celestine Prophecy*, *The Road Less Traveled* and *The Alchemist*, "They gave me focus" she said.

Once she had the beginnings of a healthy perspective she knew that fitness training was going to be a big part of her healthy future. "I then moved onto sports psychology books, they helped me keep my perspective on health while nurturing my spirit with what I had learnt."

I asked Karen about the importance of winning her titles. Was it about being fit and healthy or was it a relic of her past obsession? "There are a lot of people in the fitness industry who see winning as the main reason for competing, I'm different. For me it's not about the title, it's about my journey" she said. "Nowadays if I'm not happy as I progress on the way to my goals, I stop and re-assess. I have children, a husband, and a career and whether or not I win the title or lose it, the next morning I'm still going to get up at 5 o'clock, I'm still going to feed my children, I've still got washing to do. It puts it all into perspective."

My next question focused on how Karen finds the time to nurture her spirit. "My running is my meditation." She smiled. "When I run I'm not thinking about any of my problems or what I have to do that day. There's no children, nobody asking 'is the insurance up to date?'...it's just about me."

Karen trains alongside Glennis Nunn in preparation for future short distance athletic competitions.



"With Glennis telling me what to do I don't even have to think when I train. My mind is free to find the silence and just run. Tonight I will train for 3 hours and my spirit will be centered and balanced. Some people sit and meditate, I run."

With the focus on a balanced life I asked Karen how she possibly maintained a healthy marriage alongside the fire service, the children, her training & competing. "Mike and I decided it was important to get a babysitter regularly so we can go out and focus on being husband and wife. Jorel plays tennis with his dad who is a coach and has swimming lessons and then when Mike and I jog in the morning it's a family affair. Cael goes in the pram and Jorel tags along on his bike. We have a ball."

As if on cue, Jorel runs past our table smiling and waving on his way to his swimming lesson. "Perhaps the family that jogs together stays together" I laughed with Karen.

Knowing Karen's genuine desire to help people achieve balance in body, mind and spirit I asked her what advice she could offer to anyone struggling with issues like anorexia or bulimia? "Definitely get help, talk to someone." She offered. "Someone who understands how it consumes every hour of your day and gives you nothing in return. If I compare my life ten years ago to now everything is so much easier because I learnt to see past the bulimia to a better life. It took courage to look, but I'm glad I did."

Leaving nothing to chance Karen continued. "I know everything happens for a reason. If I didn't go through what I did I wouldn't be able to help the people I help now. I can relate to people because I've always struggled with my weight. Even years after my issues with bulimia I gained 43 kilograms with my first pregnancy, but I didn't fall back into old patterns. I managed my journey back to health with a balance of good food and healthy exercise. I ended up winning the international title after that."

Whether she is 'Miss Fitness' or Karen the mum her attitude towards how she got here doesn't waver. "We all need a little help sometimes to see through the fog but the help is there if you ask. Everyone has choices. I chose to find my life."

#### **Eating Disorder Support Groups:**

Mental Health Association  
Meeting 1st & 3rd Monday mthly  
(anorexia & bulimia)  
6.30-7.30pm Gold Coast  
Suite 7-8, 5 Davenport St. Southport  
Phone: 07 5591 5820

Eating Disorder Association & Resource Centre  
Phone: 07 3876 2500

See also Counselling-Eating Disorder Specialists  
in the P&S Guide