

feature

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# A life over too soon



2003: Tracy Morrison, happy, healthy and loving life - checking out Dr Seuss.



2003: Tracy and husband Paul Shelley at Yankee Stadium, celebrating life and love.

Tracy and Paul met in London in 1993.

At 22, Tracy was experiencing freedom for the first time. She'd flown the coop - mum and dad, Eileen and John, and sister Karla were left behind in New Zealand. She was on her big OE; life was just beginning.

The couple started dating in 1994 and then the travel bug hit. Over the next three years they visited 61 countries. "We saw Paris, Moscow, Venice, the pyramids in Egypt, the Taj Mahal in India, wild animals in Africa and many more amazing places. We travelled from the top of Europe to the bottom of Africa. Everything we wanted to do, we did," Paul said.

In 1997 they moved back to New Zealand and continued to chase experiences, from tandem skydiving and walking the Milford Track twice to car racing. They lived life at a fast pace, grasping every opportunity that came their way.

While Tracy and Paul may have notched up 61 countries on their way back home, the travel bug was still there and in 2002 they moved to the United States, to Stamford, Connecticut (45 minutes from New York).

"Over the next two years we travelled around 28 of the 50 states. Everything was great. We had an awesome life, but in October 2005 our lives changed - forever."

## Early indicator

Tracy had been experiencing blood in her stool for over a year but gave little thought to what would prove to be an early indicator that something was badly wrong. Their lifestyle was so good, their health appeared robust. Both felt nothing could be wrong.

But on October 15, at the age of 33, Tracy started having severe pain at the base of the ribs and by her right shoulder. The pain lasted all weekend.

Come Monday, they decided it might be a good idea to have the problem checked out. No cause for alarm, the experts said, the pain was probably due to colitis or haemorrhoids. Just to be sure Tracy was booked in for a colonoscopy in three weeks' time.

Unconcerned, Tracy and Paul continued living their lives at full clip.

Still unconcerned they checked in for the procedure. What happened that day would change their lives forever. To the horror of both the Shelleys and their medical team, the colonoscopy showed a huge cancerous polyp. It was so big it needed to be removed by surgery.

CAT scans were taken and indicated Tracy had Stage 4 (metastatic) colon cancer and 80 per cent of her liver was cancer.

Surgery in November removed 12cm of colon and 12 lymph nodes. The cause was removed and by January, feeling her health was improving, Tracy and Paul returned to New Zealand to see friends and family. They were filled with optimism, but the nightmare was far from over.

"What we thought was a sciatic nerve problem turned out to be another metastasis tumour in the sacrum. It was easily removed by radiotherapy but left a hole in the bone," Paul said.

When Ashburton woman Tracy Morrison was a little girl, like all little girls, she thought she'd live forever. Like most other little girls she thought she'd marry, have a family and watch that family grow, husband at her side. Tracy Morrison was wrong. With life just waiting to be lived and a new husband, she discovered she had colon cancer. With her husband at her side she fought a brave battle and with her husband at her side she died on Christmas Day. Paul Shelley shares his wife Tracy's story with chief reporter Sue Newman



2004: Celebrating New Year's Eve and planning a great 2005.



2005: Tracy, baby husky in her arms and cancer lurking in her body.



2006: On limited time, Tracy, husband Paul and mum and dad, Eileen and John Morrison.



2006: Turning 35 in hospital, her body weakened by cancer, but still smiling.



2006: Tracy days short of Christmas and days short of death.

This tumour might have been a setback, but the couple were determined the disease would not beat them.

"We talked a lot and told everyone who would listen what was happening. We were very positive the whole time, thinking we would beat it," Paul said.

By mid-January Tracy had started chemotherapy.

"Thank God for insurance, the chemo drugs were \$US32,000 a month."

From day one, no-one ever put a limit on Tracy's life.

"We always guessed it would be three to six months, but were determined to beat that. We knew the survival rate was only 8 per cent for stage four and everyone I read about had liver re-sections," Paul said.

Chemotherapy was taking its toll and come February Tracy couldn't walk more than 100 metres without a rest, but over the next few months she started to look and feel better.

"We found ginger helped her nausea, vitamin B stopped her hair falling out and vitamin B reduced the numbness in her fingers (a side-effect of the drugs) and we never gave up looking for other cures," Paul said.

## Feeling great

Come May another scan showed a reduction in her tumours. She was looking and feeling great.

June arrived and she did an 8.5km walk and scans carried out the following months showed there was no change in the tumours' size.

"We were of the thinking that we would find a cure and live until we were 90," Paul said.

Brimming with confidence, they took off on a road trip. They drove, they laughed and they simply enjoyed being alive.

August and Tracy's parents came to visit. It felt like she wasn't sick at all, that the tumours were just a bad dream. Paul said.

September arrived, another routine CAT scan and their world fell apart. The tumours were growing and chemotherapy was halted.

## Significant setback

That setback was to be significant.

"The kicker that ripped Tracy apart was the doctor saying he simply didn't know what to do next." But two weeks later, the medical team had a plan. They would try a different chemo drug.

The couple's spirits rose, but three weeks of treatment and no change.

By this time the cancer had spread to her ribs, sternum, thigh bones and forehead. Other drugs were tried, but nothing worked.

On November 27 Tracy began vomiting, her body rejecting all food, all fluids.

"I wanted to take her to hospital, but she didn't want to go. I eventually got her there, but her intestines had stopped working due to the pressure of her liver on them. They put a tube down her throat and out of all the needles and drugs, she hated this the most. It was kept in for two days," Paul said.

Tracy's downhill slide had begun.

Over the coming two weeks the hospital would become Paul's home.

"They were great. I could stay in each night and they would feed me," he said.

Paul and Tracy both celebrated their birthdays in hospital and with typical consideration for others, Tracy arranged a cake and card for Paul and had all the staff sing happy birthday.

During those weeks in hospital, Tracy never lost her dignity, Paul said.

"She always had to check her hair, what little there was of it, before we went for walks around the ward."

Two weeks down the track, Tracy just wanted to go home and on December 11 she left hospital for her bedroom that would now contain a hospital bed and an oxygen unit.

Paul gave up work to spend time with his wife; they knew their time together would be short.

For a few days they could enjoy just being a couple again, a couple for whom time was running out.

Seven days later, December 19, and Tracy desperately needed to be hospitalised again.

This time the doctors were measuring Tracy's life in just days.

## Family visit

Her mum and dad, Eileen and John, flew over to be with her.

They talked, they laughed and they cried together.

December 22 arrived. Tracy slept. December 23, she was alert and talkative. She spoke to her sister Karla.

Paul and Tracy shared egg nog, celebrating what they knew would be their last Christmas together.

"At that point I'm pretty sure Tracy thought it was Boxing Day. She didn't want to ruin anyone's Christmas, that's the sort of person she was, always caring more for others than herself," Paul said.

The next day, Tracy died, at the age of 35. It was Christmas Day.

She is buried in Ashburton Cemetery. There is no history in her family of colon cancer, but now her family members have all had colonoscopies. None showed any signs of cancer.

When it became apparent that colon cancer would claim Tracy's life, Paul said she wanted to let people know that the disease could be a young person's disease.

"People should not wait until they are 50 to get checked; we have heard of 28-year-olds having this," he said.

"We had squeezed a lifetime of experiences into the 13 years we were together. If you learn anything from this story it is this. Do the things you want to do when you can, as you don't know what is around the corner. Achieve your goals. Always look back and say to yourself, if I lost my partner today, what would I regret not doing something with them or spending too much time at work?"

Tracy made an impression on everyone she met, and no matter how bad her life became, she always had a smile, Paul said.

"She had an awesome personality. I am very driven and Tracy completed me. We are both left-handers, Sagittarians and very stubborn, but Tracy had some rules everyone in a relationship should live by."

## Tracy's rules

- Tracy's rules were:
- never go to bed unhappy or mad with your partner - even if it means staying up until the small hours to sort things out
  - always be together. In our 13 years, we spent less than two weeks apart
  - always check you are presentable before going out in public. Tracy still did this when she could hardly walk
  - never wear red with orange.

Tracy's only regret was that there is very little publicity about colon cancer, considering New Zealand has the highest rate of female colon cancer in the world. Colon cancer affects people of all ages. If you are worried about it, get it checked out sooner rather than later. Colon cancer is easily treated if discovered in its early stages.

Five months after his wife's death, Paul says he is coping - just.

"We are very positive people, we always look on the bright side. Tracy was in a lot of pain from the tumour in her sacrum, so finally she gets to rest in peace. The hardest thing I have done is write this and Tracy also wrote me a letter and it still tears me apart to read this."