

## Being blind won't stop me living my dreams

When Tasha Floyd, 20, was diagnosed with a brain tumour her world fell apart.

As the optician peered into my eyes, I tried to stay calm. I was 16, had been suffering from bad headaches and dizziness for the last six months and had been diagnosed with migraines.

By lately my symptoms had worsened. I was unsteady on my feet and strange black shapes were sliding across my vision.

My mum, Shona, 43, took me to the optician to see if there was anything wrong with my sight. 'There's a lot of pressure on your optic nerve', he said. 'It could be a brain tumour'.

I felt a burst of nausea in my stomach.

I was sent to The Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead for an MRI scan.

'You have a tumour on your brain stem', a consultant told me. 'It's inoperable but we can give you radiotherapy'.

Mum started crying and reached for my hand.

Doctors gave me a shunt – a tube that drained fluid from my brain – and I started to feel better. But the next morning I woke up and was watching TV when I realised something was wrong.

'The colours are all blurry', I cried to Mum. I was sent back home and prayed my vision would go back to normal. But a week later all I could see were white blobs on a sea of black.

Doctors discovered my optic nerve had been badly damaged by the tumour. 'I'm afraid it's irreversible', they told me.

I was going blind at 16. It wasn't fair.

I tried to pull myself together – I had to be grateful I was still alive – and started a six-week course of radiotherapy.

But I was told that, although the tumour had stopped growing, it hadn't shrunk.

'The survival rate isn't good', our consultant admitted. It was another bitter blow, but I was determined to prove them wrong. So Mum, my dad Graham, 46, and I embarked on a "gap year", touring the world and doing all the things I loved.

First stop, Melbourne, to visit the set of Neighbours. Alan Fletcher, who plays Karl Kennedy, showed me round the set and I met Jackie Woodburne, who plays Susan.

Our next trip was to Salzburg, Austria, where The Sound of Music, one of my favourite films, was made. We ran around the fountains and even knocked on the nunnery door!

Back home I went to a McFly concert and got to meet the boys. Being diagnosed with a brain tumour and losing my sight wasn't going to stop me living my dreams.

Four years on I'm doing really well. I've started a college course in music and made lots of friends.

I had a boyfriend, Frazer, who was also blind but sadly passed away from a recurring brain tumour.

I was devastated but somehow I pulled through it and I'm now seeing Harry, 23, who was born blind. It's hard seeing friends move on with their lives. But I'm determined to keep on fighting and enjoying life to the full.

Shona says: Tasha is my only child and I couldn't contemplate losing her. Luckily she's gone from strength to strength. I'm so proud of her.

I feel protective of her but I know she wants to do things on her own. The only times I've seen her upset is when she's missed out on things her friends are doing, like getting jobs or moving away from home.

But she always picks herself up again and keeps going. She's an inspiration.

Headsmart is a campaign to raise awareness of brain tumour symptoms in children and young people. For more details visit [www.headsmart.org.uk](http://www.headsmart.org.uk)

## Calendar Girls: 'Meet the Mums stripping for my son'

When Karen Reep's son, Ben, eight, was diagnosed with a brain tumour, her world fell apart. Now in a bid to raise vital research funds, Karen, 46, and a 40-strong group of mums from her home town of Ampthill, Beds, are posing naked for an amazing new calendar.

'If you had told me two years ago that I'd be posing naked and showing my body off to the world I would have laughed in disbelief. After having three kids, I'm no supermodel. But two years ago my life changed forever, when my son Ben, now eight, fell ill. It's then you realise you'd do absolutely anything for your family – nothing else matters.

In summer 2009, my husband Jon, 46, and I went to Center Parcs with our kids, Sophie, 13, James, 10 and Ben. He couldn't swim properly anymore and was holding his arm flexed. By the time we got home, Jon and I noticed Ben's smile has started to turn down at one corner. Alarm bells rang. Soon, Ben was struggling with simple things like getting dressed. I knew something was terribly wrong. When my sister Hazel, who's a doctor, suggested I take him for a scan I just blurted out my deepest fear: 'He's got a brain tumour, hasn't he?'

Ben began to deteriorate and was rushed in to Luton and Dunstable Hospital, where scans confirmed he had a tumour the size of a small apple in the middle of his brain. I was so frightened. I feared there would be no treatment for him, and began crying hysterically. Ben was taken to Addenbrookes Hospital in Cambridge and underwent a seven-hour operation. I didn't even read the side-effect warnings because we had no choice. He had to be operated on: he was going downhill fast.

After what seemed like hours, we were taken to see him. The operation had gone well but the doctors had only been able to remove 80 per cent of the tumour, because it was too dangerous to touch the remainder of it. Thankfully the tumour was benign, but that doesn't mean our worries are over. The tumour has started to grow again and the pressure is now affecting Ben's right arm.

Ben has adapted brilliantly and for now, the doctors don't want to act. They have told us that if it starts to affect the quality of his life we will have to make a decision: either operate again – which could lead to a stroke – or have chemotherapy.

Understandably, Ben's tumour feels like a shadow that lives over us, but as a family we're determined to live each day to the full. We also wanted to help The Samantha Dickson Brain Tumour Trust, which has been so supportive throughout this ordeal. I've thrown myself into fundraising and I've been bowled over by the support of my friends. Earlier this year I jokingly suggested stripping to produce a calendar for charity - and to my amazement all my friends said they'd do it. From there the idea snowballed. Word got round the mums at Ben's school and before I knew it 40 women of all shapes and sizes volunteered to pose naked. I didn't even know many of them beforehand, so it was pretty surreal to find myself stripping off in front of strangers. All the mums were incredibly nervous, and we needed a few glasses of wine before we dared take our clothes off. One woman broke the ice by turning up wearing just an apron, and that made us all laugh.

The mums were such good sports – they said they'd be up for anything as long as it wasn't vulgar. One of the funniest moments was stripping off in Ampthill Park – the dog walkers looked a bit confused. We also took pictures in some of the mums' back gardens but we haven't had any complaints from the neighbours!

Our kids are shocked that their so-called mums could do such a thing, but secretly I think they are very proud. My husband, after 18 years of marriage, was pretty impressed by my pictures too...

### Brain Tumours: The Facts

#### **What is a brain tumour?**

A tumour is a growth that develops when cells reproduce in an abnormal way.

#### **What causes brain tumours?**

In some cases, a cancer that begins elsewhere can spread to the brain. However, it's not fully understood what causes a primary tumour to develop in the brain. Risk factors include family history of

tumours, exposure to radiation and a weakened immune system. There is no firm evidence that mobile phones are a risk.

**How common are brain tumours?**

There are around 4,500 new cases of primary brain tumours every year in the UK, affecting all ages.

**How dangerous are they?**

It depends on how quickly they are growing and whether they are cancerous or not. Tumours are graded from one (benign) to four (highly malignant). Malignant tumours are the most dangerous as they invade healthy brain tissues. Benign tumours don't attack normal cells but they can be dangerous if their growth places pressure on the brain. Some grow back after being removed in surgery.

**What are the symptoms?**

Nausea, headaches, epilepsy, memory loss, mental confusion and disturbances in sight, speech, movement and balance. Depending on the location of the tumour, either one or both sides of the body can be affected.

**How are tumours diagnosed?**

If you have symptoms, see your GP who will check the back of your eye for signs of raised pressure. If a growth is suspected, you'll be referred to a specialist for further tests and scans.

**How are brain tumours treated?**

Depending on the type and size of tumour, options include surgical removal, steroids, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. However, the position of the tumour may make total surgical removal impossible because of the risk of significant damage to the brain.

*To buy a calendar, go to [www.beckerphotography.co.uk](http://www.beckerphotography.co.uk) or [www.haymax.biz](http://www.haymax.biz). All proceeds are going to The Samantha Dickson Trust ([www.braintumourtrust.co.uk](http://www.braintumourtrust.co.uk))*