

**An interview with Craig Hamilton
on his experience of Bipolar Disorder
- A feature article by Josh Callinan**

Craig Hamilton arrived at Broadmeadow train station with the world at his feet. Craig Hamilton left Broadmeadow train station with his feet in a paddy wagon and his world torn apart.

It was Tuesday, September 12, 2000. The day Craig was leaving to cover the Sydney Olympics and embark upon the biggest assignment of his media career. However, life as sweet as he knew it was about to come tumbling down. Well life didn't actually crash down. That had already happened during a deep, dark, incapacitating bout of depression earlier that year. No, it was quite the opposite. It was more like a soaring sensation that leapt beyond the boundaries that are within the reach of any reasonably minded individual. Although Craig wasn't worried, he had other ideas. As Jesus Christ.

“The delusion was severe. I mean to the point where a few days before the Olympics I was not sleeping and I was thinking what a great job I'd do. Within 24 hours the job was getting bigger and bigger and I was more and more excited. Then I was thinking this is world scale. Hang on a minute, I think I'm Jesus Christ. Hang on a minute, I know I am,” said Craig.

The popular ABC radio broadcaster didn't know it at the time but he was going through the manic phase of bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder is a mental illness that produces

periods of emotional highs and lows, which is best represented through the extreme poles of mania and depression and it affects two per cent of the Australian population.

“I never thought that I would be affected that way by that sort of illness, yet it happened and it was very severe,” said Craig.

Imagine it. One day you are happily married, have three kids, are surrounded by friends in an area you grew up in and have a job that you love. The next you are in James Fletcher Hospital surrounded by nurses, monitors and that particular medical institution smell, believing you are the Messiah with a message to spread to the world.

But now it’s nearly five years down the track and it doesn’t seem to faze Craig. He talked about his experience with bipolar disorder with a twinkle in his eye, an upbeat tone and a positive energy that seem to capture the feeling of self satisfaction that must come with battling this brute head on every day. But Craig doesn’t tackle this illness as a sufferer or a victim. He has become a well-trained and hardened fighter who has learnt a lot along the battle weary way.

“Response is the key. Make the best response you can make so you can heal and move on to the next challenge,” said Craig.

It seems the 42-year-old has always been on the heels of a challenge. For years, the Singleton born and raised sport enthusiast played season upon season of successful cricket and rugby union at high levels of representative competition. This was all

happening while Craig and his wife, Louise, were starting a family and he was still juggling work commitments in the coalmines, with dabbles of work in the media industry. Not to mention he was partying hard.

But not any more.

“Many things have changed,” said Craig.

Now, the New Lambton man takes a more holistic approach to life. This prevents him from being the ‘yes man’ and from ploughing on through it all, regardless of any sense of personal wellbeing.

“The goals are still there but they are not all-consuming anymore. If it’s meant to it’s meant to be. There is a certain fatalism to the way I live now,” said Craig.

This appears to be a much wiser option, which ensures the greatest possible balance is achieved between home, work and relaxation.

“Life is a lot more sedate, a lot more organised and I manage my lifestyle and my illness well. I am more aware of the self and that I’m not ten foot tall and bullet proof like I once thought I was,” said Craig.

However, the sports journalist cum rugby league commentator, is on the ball when up against this illness. When the alarm bells ring now, Craig reacts accordingly so that the chain linked to keeping fit, healthy and happy is not broken or damaged.

“It is an ongoing process of remaining well and functioning properly without being complacent.

“Whenever I’m feeling a bit raggedy, a bit short with people, overwhelmed or tired, the first thing I do is have an early night so I can get up early and clear the deck the next morning. Then I won’t take on anything new for the next two weeks,” said Craig.

Since the release of his book, *Broken Open*, in 2004, Craig has probably become twice as busy as he was before the incident. This is due to his commitment to mental health advocacy that incorporates travelling around Australia with speaking engagements, interviews and just going wherever it is that he is invited. However, all the factors are more carefully considered now, with an enhanced appreciation for the network of friends and family who have supported him throughout the times when he needed them most.

“I could have lost my job, my marriage, my family, my friends; the whole box and dice.

“You don’t recover to where I am now, which is probably better than what I was, unless you have that support,” said Craig.

This is the loving and helpful support Craig wants to reciprocate to others who are dealing with mental health issues, especially as a tool for those who have lost their support. If anyone knows how tough these circumstances can be, Craig does.

“Mental illness is a really hard one for many people to get a hold of because there are so many unknowns,” said Craig.

These unknowns contribute to the stigma that surrounds mental health in the community. Dealing with this attitude toward mental health can often be the hardest part of the battle, despite the fact that statistics reveal one in five Australians experience mental illness at some stage in their lives. But against the stereotype, people who experience mental health troubles are not old, batty people who walk around the street talking to themselves with their pants down searching for the good old days when the war began. These people are often ordinary people like the farmer, like the next-door neighbour, like Craig. These people can often be young, free, vibrant people and statistics show that 18-24 year olds are the group most at risk. This is evident in the fact that more and more young people in their teens and school years are being diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

“It is the old story of what you can’t explain and you can’t see and you can’t touch you should be fearful of. Stigma is fear and to reduce and nullify stigma you need someone to overcome fear and I’ve done that. Nothing could be more terrifying than what I’ve been through already and I’ve come out the other side and moved past that,” Craig said.

Almost five years have passed since that fateful spring day. Two Olympics, a war on terrorism and a Newcastle Miss Universe who took on the world without a skirt, have gone by in that time. Much can happen during such a period and some events can define an era. But Craig has not let his illness define him; rather, he has merely used it as a stepping-stone to transform his life.

A life in a world where Craig Hamilton's feet are finally his own.