

That which makes us strong

By Ruth Ostrow

LYNDA Dean is no stranger to pain. "There have been many days in my life where I didn't want to get out of bed, where all I could think about when I opened my eyes was how long it would take to be back in bed," she says, putting her head in her hands. "I just didn't think I was going to get through."

These are surprising words coming from one of the most successful and perseverant businesswomen in Australia. Lynda co-pioneered the tea-tree industry with her husband Chris through their natural-remedy company Thursday Plantation, one of the country's fastest growing companies, with a projected annual turnover of \$40million by 2003.

I have taken her out to lunch because she has become a role model for me, renowned for her kind heart, level-headed advice and boundless energy.

But as the afternoon wears on, it becomes obvious that this has come from years of battling the griefs and pitfalls of life. And that this strong woman, a council member of Australian Business Limited, awarded an OAM for her community work, has found her courage the hard way.

"On the outside people think I have it all: three wonderful children, money and success. But there have been years of living nightmare. People don't know what goes on behind closed doors.

"I've gotten through it all by putting one foot in front of the other. Living minute by minute, and trusting."

Born Lynda Abrahams, her story began in 1979 when the city girl from Sydney, then a social worker, set out with anthropologist Chris Dean and their one-year-old son on what she thought was a holiday.

She ended up on the edge of a tea-tree swamp that Chris wanted to farm, which is where the Thursday Plantation empire was born. It was a back-to-the-land fantasy for the pair, who believed in self-sufficiency. They lived in a primitive, isolated hut deep in the swamplands of Bungawalbyn Creek in NSW.

Lynda, now 50, soon realised it was a lonely and fearful environment. "The landscape felt hostile to me in that first year. I was afraid of being alone in the dark, petrified of it. Chris would head off early in the morning to cut tea-tree and I'd lie there in the pitch black with my baby, worrying that a snake might bite him out there in the bush, and he'd die.

"I had to learn how to make a fire to keep warm, learn to garden to grow our food. We were living in very primitive conditions for 12 years, no electricity. If it rained there was no solar power. Chris was away on business a lot and if there was a problem, like a dead animal in our drinking-water tank, I had to solve it myself."

Alone in the dark, she miscarried twice. But despite her tribulations and her fears, she went on to raise three children.

"I nearly walked away so many times. But I know that if I hadn't been so frightened, I wouldn't have learned the lessons that prepared me for what has happened these last few years."

It is her philosophy that each experience gives you the backbone to meet the challenges that follow, and that all of life is a cycle.

"You step outside and the flood is rising, the kids are coughing, the wood is wet and nothing will dry, the health inspector tells you you've got to bulldoze your house and live in a tent. There is so much negative energy coming your way.

"But if you just stick with it and take a step back, you realise that all things pass and this will pass too, the sun will come up tomorrow, the birds will sing, and your heart will lift again.

"I lived through severe bushfires. During one, all our tea-trees went up in smoke because melaleuca and gum have highly flammable oil. I stood there in the morning holding a hose, looking out on a landscape as barren as the moon.

"But out of tragedy came joy and another lesson in the regeneration of nature. The next year we had our best quality oil from the singed trees. It was nature's way of cleansing. There is always a different way of looking at life."

She says she's learned to look for the good in all situations. "We don't know why bad things happen, but they can be our greatest opportunities and lessons for spiritual growth." It is this belief that prepared her for her biggest challenge: illness.

First her own. It happened at the height of her success -- business thriving, money finally rolling in -- after they had moved back to the luxuries of urban life.

She was living in a fabulous home, the envy of all her friends. But behind the picket-fence she was going through private hell. In 1992 she came down with Ross River fever, which rendered her almost powerless for three years. Often unable to walk, full of arthritic pain, she soon developed thrombosis and landed in hospital.

"I had a lot of time to think about the nature of illness. Even though I was compassionate I had always believed that people somehow bring on their own disease. Or that if you had sick kids, it was your fault because you somehow neglected them.

"I had spent much of my life trying to control the outcome of things -- believing that if I was the perfect mother, and a healthy, good, hard-working person, things would turn out right. But that's not how life is."

Which prepared her to confront her greatest challenge to date. Three years ago, two of her teenage children were diagnosed with serious and quite unrelated medical conditions -- a topic she refuses to discuss.

She is not bitter about the turn of events. On the contrary. Her extraordinary life has given her the tools to carry on with wisdom, courage and a positive attitude.

"Over time I have learned to sit back and trust the cycle of nature. The sun has gone behind the clouds again, but it will re-emerge.

"I lived through countless floods. But just when you didn't think you could last another moment, the rain stopped, leaving a sparkling lake outside your door full of black swans and birds. There was an amazing transformation of the landscape into this beautiful thing.

"In my time, I have watched many rainbows arise from the fog," says an Australian pioneer -- a pioneer of the human soul -- beaming with energy and hope.

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