

SYDNEY

The Saturday  
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# WEEKEND

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ANIKA WELLS  
YOUNG MINISTER IN  
HEALTH BATTLE  
SATURDAY ESCAPE  
EXPLORE SIGHTS AND  
FLAVOURS OF BARCELONA

## *The* \$50M TRAILBLAZER

How Di Westaway turned personal sadness  
into professional success, spearheading the  
successful hiking event Coastrek

ANGELA MOLLARD

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”



# WALK FOR GOOD

Coastrek founder, the inspirational Di Westaway, found a way through personal hardship by walking with friends. And those walks are now stepping closer to raising \$50m for charity

Story ANGELA MOLLARD Portrait TIM HUNTER

**D**i Westaway still remembers the night she baked some roast almond and chocolate chip cookies, put her three young kids to bed and set off to walk in dark bushland with a head torch, a backpack and a group of women she'd convinced to join her.

It was 2001, her marriage was crumbling, her washing basket was overflowing and the energy and purposefulness she'd once felt as a young gymnast and fitness industry professional had been lost in the blur and banality of motherhood.

She loved her kids but surely, she thought as she strode out that evening in her beloved purple shorts, she could love them and still pursue a passion for something else?

Twenty years on that frustrated mother from Sydney's Northern Beaches is an adventuring and fundraising dynamo. As the woman behind the national hiking event, Coastrek, she will shortly cross the magic milestone of raising \$50m for charity.

"It's so exciting when you realise your work and passion can make a difference to someone," says Westaway, whose partnerships first with the Fred Hollows Foundation, then Beyond Blue, and now The Heart Foundation mean she has had enormous impact on eyes, minds and hearts.

She's modest about the \$50m – to be honest she's less interested in the dollars than she is in meeting her goal of 100,000 Coastrek walkers (there's been 65,000) – but she acknowledges money is what makes a difference.

"That figure means we've made an impact on

**Wild Women On Top founder Di Westaway, main; and, below, in her earlier days as a gymnast, model, aerobics instructor and showgirl.**

women's health globally because not only have we restored sight to a million people through the Fred Hollows Foundation but we've seen the benefits ripple through a family, whether that's getting a little girl to school or a parent being able to work."

After nine years supporting the foundation, her company, Wild Women on Top, then partnered with the mental health charity Beyond Blue. As Coastrek exploded around the country, with walks now in Sydney, Victoria, South Australia, the Sunshine Coast and Margaret River, a staggering \$17m was raised from 2018 to 2022, providing access to phone support services for people in moments of crisis.

Keen to spread her hiking love as well as her fundraising dollars around, Westaway is now aligned with The Heart Foundation, where she believes the concept of walking for physical and mental health benefits makes for a natural affiliation.

"We identified them a long time ago as a partner," she says, enthusiastically. "They've recently gone from being federated to a national model, they have a whole new lens on getting people moving and they're addressing the gender issue with heart disease."

As she makes clear, any focus on women's health issues has a ripple effect since women are influencers within their families and micro communities.

If Westaway's philanthropy efforts and her plans to take Coastrek international are impressive, so is the petite 62-year-old walker, rock climber and mountain biker who gets a thrill from doing handstands on the most precarious of clifftops. It's not many OAMs and Telstra Business Women of the Year finalists who would rock up to coffee in bright red pants and a purple singlet having fixed a bike tyre en route but Westaway not only talks the talk she (literally) walks the walk.

As she slides a container of homemade bliss bars across the table – a delicious concoction of dates, nuts, buckwheat and toasted coconut – it's hard to imagine her ever being constrained and despondent.

Yet she relates deeply to her walkers, many of whom take to the nation's coastlines in teams of four after a personal struggle or obstacle. Mental health challenges, family dramas, work >



## COVER STORY



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fragility, grief and relationship issues are somehow processed over the long walks which range from 30km to 60km.

“Walking in nature and starting my business gave me such a sense of purpose outside my own misery,” she says. “I hit rock bottom when I realised my marriage was dysfunctional and I spent seven years trying to extricate myself from the trauma. It was a hard journey and it was the Wild Women community who got me through. I don’t know what I would have done without it.”

As she says, the idea for her hiking business began with a “big, fat fail”. A friend had invited her to climb Mt Aconcagua in Argentina, the highest mountain in the southern hemisphere, and while they failed to make the summit, the experience – her 40th birthday present to herself – ignited something deep within her. Life had been distilled to water and shelter and yet it had been exhilarating.

Years on, Westaway believes it’s a happy accident rather than design which led her to conceive a business which not only prepares women for world-class treks but takes the simplicity of a coastal walk and makes it a fundraising juggernaut.

The concept works, she says, because it brings together four pillars of wellbeing: the endorphins from exercise; the happiness which arises from

being in nature; the sense of togetherness that combats our epidemic of loneliness and the “helper’s high” which comes from doing something good for others. As she says: “You’ve got these four elements that bring joy and it’s that combination that was the accident.”

With regional Coastreks being planned and negotiations underway with charity partners in the UK, some might imagine that Westaway can continue to rake in the millions as her concept balloons. But it’s no “set and forget”, with the business rocked in the past few years by Covid and issues with a previous business partner. There’s also the challenge of getting more people to commit to fundraising in an increasingly crowded charity space, not to mention the golf course owners who balk at letting a trail of trekkers meander across their pathways.

But she’s an optimist who perseveres – whether that’s signing up new ambassadors to join the likes of Olympian Libby Trickett, wellness advocate Jo Stanley and broadcaster Jennifer Byrne, or mapping trails to take in some of our most picturesque coastlines.

Ask her which Coastrek is the best and it’s like asking her to pick a favourite child. “Mornington Peninsula has varied landscapes, multimillion-dollar properties and that mix of rugged and calm; the Sunshine Coast has big

open beaches; the Fleurieu Peninsula is like the rolling hills of England; Margaret River has whales, wildflower and wine; and Sydney has those towering cliffs,” she enthuses.

The one Coastrek she tries hard to forget is the first. Held in 2009, she sent off a bunch of hikers on what she thought was a 100km course, but it was before mapping apps and the walk ended up at 126km with the 40 participants trudging from 6am Friday to lunchtime on Saturday. “They wanted to kill me,” she says grimacing.

If the upcoming \$50m milestone, which should be achieved either during Sydney Coastrek in March or Mornington in May, is a source of pride, so is the OAM. “It’s an honour because I’ve always struggled intellectually with being taken seriously,” she says. “It’s why I’m doing a Master’s degree in Lifestyle Medicine but the OAM gives me a level of kudos. It’s not just, ‘Oh here’s Di again with her cookies’.”

The fact is the former radio producer – one of broadcaster John Laws’s infamous handmaidens – is a women’s health expert in her own right. She’s concerned that the pandemic, particularly, has left us with a mindset that illness is inevitable whereas she advocates for agency over your own health. “We’ve unwittingly created a culture where we get sick then go to the doctor and get a pill and the pharmaceutical companies are happy to hand them out for the rest of our lives,” she says. “There’s so much we can do to have healthier, happier lives but the problem is, prevention isn’t sexy.”

Health and body attitudes, she reveals, can also spring from unlikely sources. She recalls how as an aerobics champion in her teens, a Japanese judge placed her second rather than first and noted she was “beautiful in her bigness”.

She was mortified and has only recently learned that she has an eating disorder. Worse, in conversation with her 29-year-old daughter, she learned that her attitudes had caused her daughter to be deeply self-critical of her body as well. “She worried that if she wasn’t skinny I’d be ashamed of her,” relates Westaway, who began researching her own behaviours and learned she has long had a moderate food addiction which caused bingeing which dates back to her childhood. Her recovery is a work in progress.

“I’ve lost that mechanism which tells me when I’ve had enough to keep a steady body weight,” she says. “I don’t know how to use hunger to guide my satiation so that’s the main thing I need to relearn.”

It’s these struggles and her challenges as a single mum which allow her to connect and empathise with so many who push themselves to hike and raise money for Coastrek. While she has a new partner – a fellow adventurer who also loves the wilderness – it’s also those exhausted teams of mostly women walkers emerging from a bush track or stumbling to the finish line who continue to spark her heart.

“It can be very emotional and overwhelming, sometimes because of the physicality of the event but often because of the deep personal story behind taking part,” she says. “But if you don’t have adversity, you’re not going to grow which is why my work brings me a great sense of fulfilment. I’ve found the sweet spot. I’ve found what I’m here for.” ■

**The author is a volunteer ambassador for Coastrek. For more information [coastrek.com.au](https://coastrek.com.au)**

**Businesswoman Di Westaway, pictured at North Curl Curl, runs the organisation Wild Women On Top, delivering life-changing adventures to women. Picture: Tim Hunter**