



that's courageous

Amputation opened an extraordinary new chapter in Tara's life

Tara Panayis, nine, Main Beach, Qld

What happened to his leg?" I asked my mum Jenni as we watched a man on crutches. His leg was missing below the knee.

'There was something wrong with it,' Mum replied. 'This is better for him.'

We said hello and the man explained how he'd been in a motorbike accident. 'Now I have a false leg but I don't wear it all the time,' he said.

I nodded. 'I wear a brace on my left leg,' I said. At four, I didn't understand why I had the brace, but when I was older, my parents explained.

'You were born with pseudoarthrosis, a false joint,' my dad Tony said. 'You have a bent bone in your left leg and your brace helps protect it.'

It didn't worry me. 'I was given this leg because God thinks I'm strong enough to handle it,' I shrugged.

But sometimes it was hard. I had seven operations to try to fix my leg, and once both legs were in plaster together. It hurt, but I pretended I was a mermaid.

Then I got a new doctor, Dr Paul Pincus. 'We'll wait for your leg to get stronger and then we'll decide what to do,' he said.

Mum told me that might mean a big operation. 'Or the doctor might take off your leg and you'll get a pretend one,' she said.

Then I'll be able to walk properly, I thought. Most of the time I was really happy, but I didn't like it when people stared.

But the brace wasn't much of a problem. I could do what my twin, Jade, and my sister Cassie, six, did - just not as quickly. I could even ride a bicycle and swim wearing my floaty brace.

One day Mum took us to Cassie's school. 'You'll be



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coming here soon,' she told me and Jade. I was so excited.

On my first day it was fun, but that didn't last long.

'The kids don't want to play with me,' I told Mum.

'It's because they haven't seen a brace like yours before,' she said. She gave me a cuddle and I knew at least she didn't care about my brace.

When I was seven, I got an infection in my leg. 'It hurts,' I told Mum. The doctor gave me medicine but my leg only got worse. I was in hospital for three days. I couldn't wear my brace after that because my leg stayed swollen, so I had to use crutches.

When the infection had gone, we met with Dr Pincus.

'I'd like you to chop my leg off,' I said. 'Then I can get a pretend leg and be like everyone else.'

'That's one option,' he told my parents. Dad looked a bit upset but I was happy - no more brace!

That week Mum explained what would happen. 'You'll be in Royal Brisbane Children's Hospital for five days,' she said. That was fine by me.

We had a 'goodbye leggie-loo' party the day before the operation. Mum's friend Gela made a quilt. She painted the bottom of my foot in different colours and pressed it onto the

quilt. Then I wrote goodbye messages to my leg on it.

On March 25, 2008, I had my operation. 'You'll fall asleep with this gas,' a nurse said.

When I woke, I was tired. 'Please can I have my leggie-loo quilt?' I said. Then I saw all the cards and presents my class had sent. It was so nice.

I couldn't stop looking at my leg. They'd cut it off just below the knee but it didn't hurt.

'At school, everyone will want to look at it,' Mum said.

They changed my medicine after three days and I had a lot of pain for an hour. That was the only time I cried.

Back home a week later, I used a wheelchair until my stump healed properly.

I had to go to the hospital every few days to have the dressing changed. I took

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my leg

Joey with me, the soft toy my friend Isla had given me. I learnt to go fast in my wheelchair. Cassie and Jade raced me on their rollerblades. Three weeks later I was back at school. 'Cool wheelchair,' said Isla. 'Can I push you?' 'Me too,' said Katy. Everyone wanted to have a go and my teacher, Mrs Donahue, had to make a roster! 'Does it hurt?' asked Katy. 'It's ticklish where my foot used to be,' I laughed. 'Mum told me it's because my brain thinks the leg is still there. It's called phantom pain.' 'What does the stump look like?' asked Isla. 'It was horrible at first, with lots of blisters, but now it's okay,' I told her. After 10 weeks I got my new leg fitted. It had a steel rod inside and foam outside and I tied it

above my knee. Mandy, the physio, gave me some crutches. 'It'll take a while to get used to,' she said. 'I'll be running soon,' I told Mum. 'Why don't you enter the Gold Coast Marathon Junior Dash?' she said. 'Yes!' I yelled. But on the day of the race it rained. 'Are you sure you still want to go?' asked Dad. 'Of course!' I said. On July 6, 2008, three weeks after I got my new leg, I ran the marathon. Jade and Cassie ran too. 'Don't wait for me,' I said. 'Run as fast as you can.' And they did, finishing in 14 minutes and 58 seconds. I took longer as I was still on crutches. I finished the race in 23 minutes and 33 seconds, coming 465th. 'Well done!' cried Mum and Dad. I felt proud,

especially when I got my medal. In November 2008 I got another pretend leg, which stays on by suction. It's great to be off my crutches. I can walk and eat an ice-cream at the same time! Now I'm having dance lessons and learning to rollerblade. I can do somersaults and swimming is really fun without my brace. I also run around the block three times a week with Mum, Cassie and Jade. And this year I was the junior ambassador for the Gold Coast Marathon. I was so excited when Premier Anna Bligh presented me with the certificate. She said she thought of me on cold mornings when she didn't feel like running. 'If Tara can do it, I can,' she said. On July 5, 2009, I did the Junior Dash again and knocked eight minutes off my time. I came 431st out of 600. It took me just 14 minutes 56 seconds – faster than my sisters last year! Now I want to help other kids like me. I set up a site, Go Gold Coast Kids (www.gogckids.com) to help children at the Gold Coast Hospital and I've also been selling red wristbands that say, *If I can, you can*. My new leg has made such a difference. Now I can join in with all the other kids and even wear matching shoes. And people don't stare at me anymore. It's funny that having my leg chopped off means I now have two good legs. ■

As told to Helen Chyrssides Tara will be using the payment for this story towards her fundraising. You can read Tara's blog at www.taramaria.blogspot.com



- Pseudoarthrosis is a rare condition where the tibia bone in the leg bends to create a false joint.
- Around 50 per cent of cases are genetic.
- Treatment can include inserting an elongating rod into the leg, or amputation.

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