

# Swimmer is a champion

**I**f Sophie Findlay thought her ex-swimming champion father was a star for his feats in the pool, he has turned positively cosmic in her eyes in the way he has dealt with life-changing illness.

Ian Findlay's life has been one of physical contrasts.

In the early 1980s, he was an Australian butterfly champion and, by the late 1980s, was coaching alongside Laurie Lawrence.

Six years ago, that same body that had cut through the water with indomitable power and strength began to let him down.

At 40, with his third child on the way, he was diagnosed with early onset Parkinson's disease.

For two years, he hid the diagnosis from Sophie and Dylan, his two older children, who were living on the Sunshine Coast with his first wife.

Sophie, now 18, who has moved to Brisbane, said there had been no obvious signs that something was wrong with her father, although in hindsight, there were subtle symptoms, like weakness and fatigue.

When she was told about her father's diagnosis, Sophie immediately realised that it was the same illness that afflicted actor Michael J Fox, and therefore had some basic understanding of its implications.

She said her father and his second wife, Nicole, now on the Gold Coast, made it clear from the start that Parkinson's was some-

**Janine Hill** talks to Ian Findlay's wife and daughter about how they coped with his Parkinson's disease diagnosis



**FAMILY MAN:** Ian Findlay with his daughter Sophie (right) and son Max (above).



thing he would live with.

"Nicole made sure that we knew that people didn't die from Parkinson's. That was comforting," she said.

The family got on with living. Ian would still see his kids every fortnight, although there were some limitations in how much they could do together.

Sophie said her father's condition improved dramatically after deep brain surgery in 2008. But the

success was short-lived when the neurostimulator device implanted to block the abnormal nerve signals that cause the tremors and other symptoms associated with Parkinson's failed. A subsequent operation in August last year has been successful and returned to him some of the control over his body that he was losing.

Sophie said her father had proven he was a true champion.

"After the operation, I think we

all knew he was a bit scared, but he was so strong through it. I went and saw him the day after the operation and he was sitting in bed making jokes about the bandages on his head. He was in great spirits," she said.

Nicole, who was 8½ months pregnant with their son Max when Ian was diagnosed, has also learnt to find a strength she never knew she had during the past six years.

She has returned to teaching

while Ian, who had been coaching before his condition deteriorated, has assumed a Mr Mum role.

She said symptoms such as cramping and the involuntary and weakened movements had eased since Ian's second surgery.

Nicole has produced a book to help other people and families living with Parkinson's disease.

The Parkinson's Day by Day Diary, launched last Friday, documents patients' medication, combined with advice for living with Parkinson's.

Nicole said Ian's neurologist told the launch party that the book would be an invaluable tool for doctors in trying to treat Parkinson's patients, allowing them to cross-check symptoms against medication use.

The book was produced with the help of a \$1000 grant from the Sunshine Coast-based Encouragement Foundation.

Nicole said all the proceeds from the diary would provide much-needed funding for Parkinson's disease research at the University of Queensland's Centre for Clinical Research.

Sophie said the most important thing for a person or family dealing with a diagnosis was that it need not be a death sentence.

"It's not the end of the world. They shouldn't completely give up. Life goes on," she said.

For more information on the Parkinson's Diary, go to [www.parkinsonsdaybyday.net](http://www.parkinsonsdaybyday.net).



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