

Colette's life-changing challenge

Actress Colette Mann encountered adventure and self-discovery in Papua New Guinea

When Colette Mann agreed to participate in a Kokoda Trail documentary to commemorate the end of WW2 51 years ago, little did she realise the effect it would have on her life.

The actress - perhaps best known for her role as inmate Doreen in the long running TV series, *Prisoner* - credits the nine day trek through rugged terrain, monsoonal rains and raging rivers with a huge boost to her self-confidence and her career, and the formation of a wonderful relationship for her family with a New Guinean teenager.

Colette decided to join the trek, which retraced the steps of WW2 diggers in Papua New Guinea for a Channel Nine special shown on Anzac Day, because 'it seemed like a bit of an adventure'.

"I'd had a lacklustre worklife last year and I was starting to feel middle-aged. Two of my uncles had fought on the trail and I'd always had an interest in it. It was a once in a lifetime chance.

"I didn't know how hard it would be but I went to Kokoda to see if I could do it. And I made it! It's the hardest trek in the world and one of the most dangerous and I walked every step of the way.

"I know it sounds cliched but doing the trail has changed my whole life. Now I couldn't care less how old I am - age is no barrier to me. If I could do the trail I can do anything!"

Colette believes the trek helped turn her career around, due to the exposure the program generated, and the mental fortitude she displayed to finish the trek has given her renewed

confidence.

"On the trek it got to the point where I'd say, If I can take 20 more steps I'll be alright. I've applied that to my life since I've been home. If I want something, I can do it. I won't accept no the first time and I'm more confident when going for jobs."

But it's a New Guinean porter named Donald to whom Colette gives the most credit. He saved her life when she slid down a steep incline, and encouraged her to complete the trek.

"Every morning I'd get up and he'd be there with my pack and he'd say, 'You'll be alright, you'll get through it today, we'll manage, we'll



Colette Mann, actress

get there together'. Some days I'd had only an hour's sleep and he'd say, 'You're the strongest woman I know, you're very strong in the head and you will make it', Colette recalls.

"I know people find it weird that I'm so bonded to a 17-year-old boy but he's an extraordinary person and



Above: The Kokoda Trail team, from left Dermott and Toni Brereton, Colette, leader Charlie Lynn, Dr Kerry Phelps, Daryl Braithwaite, Grant Kenny and Angry Anderson.

Right: At the end of another exhausting day.

he saved my life."

Donald and his cousin Eddy, Daryl Braithwaite's porter on the trek, recently spent three weeks with Colette and her family at their Melbourne home. As well as going to watch rugby league and the AFL and touring Victoria, the two boys became friendly with Colette's sons Sam, 8 and Charlie, 5.

"It's my dream that when my boys are old enough - in their teens - they can go and spend some time with Donald in his village. It's beautiful but very primitive - no running water and holes in the ground - and it would do my boys the world of good," Colette says.

Colette and her 'unbelievably tolerant' husband John Hall have also decided to pay for Donald's education. Donald has already completed high school, but Colette believes that without a tertiary education in New Guinea 'there's no chance of a life'. She helped Donald find a job in Port Moresby and will support him financially through tertiary education.

The story of Colette's relationship with Donald is interwoven through a follow-up documentary being made by Channel Nine. It looks at the stories of two New Guineans Colette and her fellow trekkers met on the trail. One, an elderly woman with a broken hip who was airlifted from her village, has since had a successful operation. The other is a little boy with club feet who they hope will be walking by the end of the year after two operations.

As well as her documentary work Colette is keeping busy with rehearsals for her new play, *The Rover*, a 16th C Spanish feminist comedy which opens August 31 at the Playhouse at the Melbourne Arts Centre.

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