

## Cover story

A true fighter ... Laya Manasseh

Photo: Ingrid Shakenovsky

# Bouncing back



A 1994 car accident left Laya Manasseh with a massive brain injury and in a coma for nearly four months – but miraculously, she survived. **Chantal Abitbol** speaks to her about her inspiring recovery.

Laya Chaya Manasseh doesn't remember anything from that fateful early rainy morning in July 1994 when she was a passenger in a car barreling down an inner-city backstreet at 120 kilometres an hour.

She can't recall the impact when the car ploughed into a telegraph pole after losing control, crushing her in the front seat, or when the emergency crews arrived on the scene, taking two hours to cut her out from the mangled wreck.

Around the same time, across town in North Bondi, her parents were waking up to every parent's worst nightmare: the dreaded 5am knock at the door with police waiting on the other side to inform them their 22-year-old child was at death's door.

In the days that followed, Laya was lying in a coma in hospital, pronounced brain dead. Doctors said she was unlikely to wake again – and even if she did, she'd be in a permanent vegetative state – and advised her parents to remove her off life support. As observant Jews, they refused.

Nearly four months later, Laya awoke from her coma, but she still couldn't talk or eat and barely moved. She was transferred to a rehabilitative clinic and two years later, after intense therapy, she finally left in a wheelchair – a shadow of her former self, but nevertheless alive.

Flash forward to today: Laya, now 36, is every bit a force to be reckoned with.

When we meet, she bursts into her parents' North Bondi home, walking on her own with a carer close in tow, spotting her just in case.

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Laya Manasseh  
Car accident survivor

She's sweaty and still dressed in her gym kit after a tough workout, but she's all too keen to dive into conversation. Just don't mention the word disability.

"I don't like to be labelled as disabled. As far as I'm concerned I'm just me, no labels. I've got a temporary disability, and it's all healing itself," she says.

Her speech is slightly slow, but the words roll forth with such force and conviction there's no denying the will behind them. Or what she's achieved so far.

The once wheelchair-bound in-patient is now a gym junkie exercising four times a week with a personal trainer. She's learning to walk again and won runner-up in the Fitness First "New You" Achievement Awards last month.

She's also forging a career as a public speaker, talking to students and traffic offenders about the perils of speeding and reckless driving – her next public talk is at Waverley Library in Sydney this Monday.

And she's travelled the world, touring

Europe and Israel in 2004 and Thailand last year.

"Doctors said I would not survive without life support machines, but I did. They told me I wouldn't be able to stand or eat, but I did," she says. "I've come so far."

It's estimated that one in 45 Australians has an acquired brain injury (ABI), according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Common causes include accidents, stroke, lack of oxygen and degenerative neurological disease, with often devastating results: impaired senses, memory problems, slowed thinking and impulsive behaviour, among them.

On top of that, victims often suffer social isolation and discrimination because of their disabilities, says community access worker Jim Pescud from HeadEast, a government-funded service for people with ABI, based in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs.

"By and large, friends drop away over time. You're not the person that you used to be, and there's only minimal resources out there to help these people," he says, citing Australia's lack of policy to secure active employment for ABI sufferers. "It's one of those cultural hang-ups that we've still got with segregating people with disabilities from mainstream society," he says.

For the past year, Laya has turned to HeadEast for support with her various projects and, not surprisingly, has left a strong impression on staff.

"She's fortunate that she has such an outgoing personality; she doesn't buckle under," says Pescud. "She's committed and determined, and she's got a lot of goals she'd like to achieve."

Laya wasn't born with the name Laya. Her parents only gave it to her 10 days after the accident as a symbolic "rebirth".

At the time of the accident, Laya was known as Lily Marsha – and by her own account, Lily was a rebel.

The one-time Yeshiva Girls High School student left home at 17 and, against her parents' wishes, refused to observe Shabbat, wear modest clothing or keep kosher.



A few months after the accident ... lying in hospital in a semi-comatose state.

Though she never got drunk – she doesn't like the taste of alcohol – she used to be a regular on Sydney's night scene.

"I didn't like the rules and regulations of Judaism at the time. I loved to party and drink loads of coffee to stay awake," she admits candidly.

On the evening of the accident after a night out, Laya had returned home earlier with a girlfriend. But when they discovered Laya's cat had soiled the lounge room floor, her friend insisted on going home. They called another friend for a lift and all packed into the car.

What happened next changed their lives forever. The driver and Laya, who were wearing seatbelts, took the full force of the crash, both sustaining traumatic brain injuries.

Laya also suffered a broken pelvis and hip, and damage to her intestines requiring emergency surgery.



Left: Before the accident ... meeting Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneersohn in 1992. Right: Five months after the accident.



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Laya Manasseh

At one point, doctors told her parents to say their goodbyes and turn off the life support.

"It was a nightmare. I said to them, we're Jewish and don't you ever turn off that switch. I had to make them promise," recalls Laya's mother, Aliya Manasseh. "As long as there is life, there is still hope. I said I don't care what happens to her, she's alive and everything can come later. We will deal with the problem."

Hoping for a miracle, the family turned to Rebbe Leibish Leiser, the current Pshavorsker Rebbe of Belgium and descendant of the Leiser rabbinic dynasty, who was visiting Sydney at the time.

"The Rebbe went to Laya's bedside and he cried and cried. I've never seen someone cry and pray the way this Rebbe did," recalls Aliya. "After about 30 minutes, he turned to his assistant and said this girl must be religious and keep Shabbat. The assistant told me that I had to promise that she would do this."

The request left Laya's mother in a quandary. "It was so hard for me to promise knowing that she was a rebel and against the religion. How do I promise something like this to a Rebbe? I said, 'When she wakes up, I will try my best and I will keep my promise and never give up'. He said, 'That's all I want to hear from you. Your daughter will live and improve.'"

The Rebbe's words held true.

A few hours later, Laya started breathing on her own and was later transferred to the recovery ward.

It was just the beginning on the long road

back to health that saw her spend two years in hospital and rehabilitation units, receiving a slew of treatments, including counselling, occupational, speech and physio therapies.

It took five months to start talking, and almost two years to eat on her own. Laya admits it wasn't easy. "There were times when I was really depressed and I wanted to give up, but I never did."

And as for her mother's promise to the Rebbe, Laya is doing her best to keep her end of the deal. "I do three things: I keep Shabbat, I keep kosher and I wear long skirts. And the rabbis think that is good because I used to never do anything. It's a big thing for me."

These days, she's made peace with God, her parents and the accident.

"The ending isn't sad. The ending is happy. I can do everything the doctors told me I couldn't do," she says. "Of course I wish this accident never happened, but it did. I feel Hashem has chosen me for a reason. It may be to spread his words that Hashem is the ruler and the king of the universe ... But I still don't know why he chose me. I really don't know."

Laya Manasseh will present her story in a public talk at Waverley Library in Sydney on Monday, December 8, at 7pm.

## A stroke survivor ... at age 27

OVERNIGHT, Lara Friedman went from being a physiotherapist who once worked with stroke victims in recovery to being a patient herself.

Last May while travelling overseas, Lara suffered a sudden stroke at her sister's home in England. She was only 25.

From that point on, she went into locked-in syndrome – a condition in which a patient is aware and awake, but cannot move or communicate due to muscle paralysis resulting from damage to the lower brain and brainstem.

Doctors still don't know what triggered the stroke.

These days, after months of rehabilitation, the one-time physiotherapist and netball-playing Maccabiah Games athlete is wheelchair-bound. But she has learnt to talk again and can move her arms enough to write on her laptop computer.

This week, she launched her book, *Lara's Gondola*, detailing her life experiences, including her early life spent in South Africa, surviving the 1997 Maccabiah Bridge disaster and the stroke.

Titled after a ski-lift in Canada, Lara says she used the lift as a metaphor for life.

"You can always predict these ups and



downs of life ... and we might have very hard times or life-changing events, but it isn't what totally makes us," says Lara, now 27, from Wahroonga, NSW. "We can essentially keep our spirit, even though physically we may change."

She says she hopes to raise awareness

about strokes and community acceptance for people living with disabilities. "People are shocked to hear I had a stroke at 25, but it can happen and there is support," she says.

Lara's *Gondola* can be purchased for \$23 at Book Review in St Ives shopping centre or at [www.larasgondola.bigpondhosting.com](http://www.larasgondola.bigpondhosting.com).

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