



Two of us

IAN "LOFTY" FULTON & NICK MCKAY

Voice-over artists Ian "Lofty" Fulton, 51 (at left), of *MasterChef*, 2GB and Sky News, and Nick McKay, 47, of Channel 7, ESPN and Fox Classics, met in 1994 after signing with the same agency. They bonded immediately.

NICK: I had just signed with a new management agency and was in the office chatting with the owner when I saw Lofty. He had this incredible presence about him. After being introduced I recall thinking, "My goodness, this guy has one of the deepest voices in Sydney and he's only 4 foot 8!"

Lofty was like the first friend you meet at kindergarten when you don't know anyone else. We became inseparable. Each week we'd catch up over coffee and talk about everything from faith to politics to work. Sometimes we'd just entertain each other with character voices. Our coffees turned into yum cha: sometimes just the two of us, at other times with a gaggle of other voice-artists. Everyone knew and loved Lofty.

Lofty has some great one-liners and a quick wit. One time we were in a studio and the engineer said, "Can you make it sound bigger?" Quick as a flash Lofty's comeback was, "No ... this is as big as I get!"

Four years after meeting Lofty, I met Ali, the love of my life, while filming a TV commercial in the middle of Australia. Lofty was the first mate I called. "I've met someone," I said, "and she is pretty special."

By this time Lofty had come out of a bitter divorce and was very single and very jaded, so although Ali coming on the scene was probably a bit hard on him, in time he and Ali were like brother and sister. Lofty

became part of our family life – he emceed at our wedding, attended my three sons' baptisms, joined us on family vacations, and hung out at family barbecues. When he met the love of his life, Helen, the four of us were peas in a pod.

In 2013, my beautiful wife felt a lump in her breast. After having it biopsied, we were told she had stage four triple-negative metastatic breast cancer. It was such a shock. Again, Lofty was the first mate I called. "Ali has breast cancer." I said. There was a "What?"; then silence. Lofty began crying.

Throughout Ali's treatment, Lofty and Helen were there for us, calling or dropping in most days. Sometimes I would phone Lofty. "I don't know what to do here, Loft. I am losing my wife. What's going to happen to the boys?" Lofty got it. He had been through hell and back several times and now he was standing shoulder to shoulder with me in my darkest hour.

When it was time for Ali to shave her head, Helen announced, "Ali's not going to be the only skinhead around here." On a chilly Saturday afternoon, the four of us gathered on the deck of my family home for the official head-shaving event. Lofty dubbed himself Barry Ottoman, donned his most effeminate voice, and waved a pair of scissors around. "Ladies, I have a superb style for you both." It was such a funny day.

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INTERVIEWS BY
NICOLE PARTRIDGE

Reality hit a few months later as Ali's health declined and she went into palliative care. Days before she passed, I invited Lofty and Helen to say their goodbyes. Lofty fell apart. I stepped outside Ali's hospital room to see Lofty curled up in the corridor, sobbing uncontrollably, with Helen kneeling beside him. I will never forget that moment.

When I think of what we've faced, we've taken a few hits. But we're like two soldiers: we have some battle scars, but we've never abandoned each other in the trenches.

IAN: We work in a pretty competitive industry, so it's not often you find a mate who not only has your back but who encourages you in everything you do. On the day I landed the 2GB job, Nick gave me a big bear hug and said, "Fantastic, mate, well done." He was genuinely happy for me.

I am also Nick's biggest fan. Apart from having a beautiful natural speaking voice, Nick is an incredible voice actor, working at the top of his game. I've heard him go from impersonating a two-year-old child to a 90-year-old Anzac. At times his amazing gift has been intimidating, but I've learnt to appreciate our differences.

Shortly after meeting Nick, I went through a bitter divorce. Nick was my rock. I remember sitting in a cubby house at Nick's family beach home on the NSW Central Coast when the phone rang. It was my ex-wife for the third time that night. Nick looked over at me and said, "Don't worry about it, mate, just let the call go." There was no judgment, no preaching. Only support.

When Ali came on the scene a few years later, she was in many ways an extension of Nick – a beautiful, kind heart with the same openness, honesty and loyalty. I had the great privilege of being the emcee at their wedding. During the reception, a mischievous friend nudged me and said, "Hey Loft, tell the Jesus joke." I got halfway through the gag when it occurred to me that most of the audience, including Nick and Ali, were Christian. I looked at their stony faces and thought, "This was a bad idea!" When I got to the punchline, much to my relief, everyone roared with laughter.

In 2001, I was scheduled to have two bouts of spinal surgery – a challenge as a result of my dwarfism. It was a dark period in my life. At this point, I had already been through so much shit – being bullied at school, coming out of a failed marriage, then battling a general anxiety disorder. Nick and Ali stepped in and offered to care for me. For weeks they ran me to appointments and waited on me hand and foot.

In 2014, when Nick's wife lost her battle with cancer, it was like losing my own sister. A week before she died, I visited her in the palliative care ward. It was one of the toughest days of my life but observing Nick's strength was inspirational. I remember trying to hold it together as Ali said, "Don't worry about me, Lofty. I'm in the arms of Jesus."

Over more than 20 years of friendship, there has been much sadness punctuated with some very comical moments. As the years roll by and life does what it does, with all the crap and all the laughs, Nick and I will always remain brothers in arms. ■