

RIGHT ON CUE

Tara Brown is one of TV's hottest reporters. Unafraid to ask the hard questions on camera, the youngest member of *60 Minutes* is elusive when the spotlight turns to her.

STORY **RACHAEL OAKES-ASH**
PORTRAIT **NADJA BERNHARDT**

Interviewing is what has made Australian journalist Tara Brown famous. The youngest member of the Australian *60 Minutes* stable, Brown has been earmarked for television greatness. She has reported with trademark compassion from sites such as New York's Ground Zero and the Thredbo landslide, and sat opposite celebrities such as Ashton Kutcher and Jude Law. Today she sits opposite me.

The setting is the Watermark restaurant overlooking Sydney's Balmoral Beach. It's a favourite haunt of Brown's, who grew up further north in leafy Terrey Hills, the eldest of three. She is guarded about her family history; her parents split up when she was nine years old and she has seen little, if any, of her father since. She was adopted by her stepfather.

Like doctors when they become patients, journalists make notoriously bad interviewees. They understand—and often resist—the tricks used by fellow interviewers, and Brown is no exception. I find myself mentally tap dancing around the conversation, trying every trick I know to put her at ease, but only end up compulsively disclosing my life when the lunch is supposed to be about hers. She's good: even as an interviewee she's an interviewer.

I am not alone in my discomfort. "I always find myself thinking I didn't get into her psyche and how she's feeling," says close friend Monica Martignoni, who has known Brown since primary school. "She would hate to burden someone with her issues. I come away thinking I haven't been that great a friend, because I am the complete opposite. I see it as her being considerate of other people's feelings; she is very discreet."

Brown's composure is disconcerting until I realise that she is nervous, so I order us another glass of wine. Not much has been written about Brown; for a high-profile Australian, she doesn't get many hits on Google. I take this as a testament to her private nature and her commitment to work over play. A friend once told me a story about sitting next to her on a flight from Melbourne to Sydney. Brown worked for the entire flight on a pile of folders filled with research, stopping to share a joke with my friend about the perception that on-camera journalists just show up, say a few lines and leave the producer to do all the work.







John Westacott, executive producer of *60 Minutes*, praises Brown's dedication: "She is a great reporter who approaches [her job] with a dogged passion that is her hallmark. Her determination and resolve invariably carries through. You need a certain style for *60 Minutes* which is 'God-given'; you need the confidence to carry the story, studio craft, interview and writing ability. It's rare to find all these skills in one person. Tara has all of them."

These skills were first recognised by Davidson High School english teacher June Maguire, who inspired a 14-year-old Brown to write. Later, while fellow Year 10 students spent their after-school hours partying, Brown was already working at the *Manly Daily*, a local Sydney newspaper. Marj Bellesis, at the *Manly Daily*, remembers her as being "tall and gorgeous and very pleasant. She must have been good at her job—look where she's got to."

"She was the perfect girl," recalls Matignoni. "She was tall and beautiful and a bit scary for me. She had this reputation for being the nicest person possible. We became best friends. I was more rebellious—I tried to push her into things she wasn't allowed to do. Her mum was really strict, which I thought was unfair, so I would push her on the bus to go shopping. She always knew what she wanted to do from an early age. I don't think anything else interested her [but] she still keeps it quiet as she doesn't like talking herself up. I found out about the *60 Minutes* job by reading the paper!"

Brown studied communications at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst, the alma mater of TV stalwarts Andrew Denton, Jessica Rowe, Amanda Keller and Mike Willessee Jr, all of whom attended at roughly the same time as Brown. "At university the courses were geared towards broadcast and I thought it was good to try camera work in a safe environment, as I couldn't imagine doing it in the 'outside world'. I really thought I'd be a print journalist," laughs Brown. A cadetship at WIN TV in Wollongong followed, before she won a job with Channel Nine's *Nightline*. In 1993, she joined *A Current Affair* and was touted by the *Adelaide Advertiser* as being Jennifer Byrne's replacement on *60 Minutes*, at the tender age of 24. But it was not meant to be—at least that year. It took another seven years, but eventually Westacott came calling.

"I felt so excited to get the call. The way he put it was, 'Would you be interested in being considered?' 'No—way too busy, washing my hair. What do you think?'" she recalls, laughing. "All of a sudden, your world is turned upside down."

Brown became one of two new recruits to *60 Minutes* in 2001, along with Peter Overton. Since then, she has reported on a variety of issues. Without a doubt, however, reporting from the aftermath of the Bali bombing was the hardest story she has undertaken so far. "For a week you

Above: From stories on global warming (far left) to Sudanese refugees (far right), Tara Brown has toured the world for *60 Minutes*.



came face to face with the grief of those looking for their husbands, their children, their wives,” she says. “These people just embraced you. As the media, you are so used to being the enemy. They were desperate for news and they saw you as a fellow Australian first and media second. Their grief was so intense.

“I spoke to John Westacott about it and I remember hearing an anecdote of a print journo who had a really hard time and needed debriefing. John said, ‘If you ever need a counsellor, go and get one, but at the end of the day you have nothing to get over in comparison to the people who have gone through it.’”

60 Minutes has been criticised in its time for practicing so-called ‘chequebook journalism’, most notably by former reporter Jeff McMullen, who received hefty compensation from Channel Nine for his dismissal. “Chequebook journalism is a sad reality of commercial television,” comments Brown. “If the media didn’t pay for it, I guess it wouldn’t be there. But we’re not calling for it. It’s definitely driven by agents. It’s not a guarantee of a good interview, that’s for sure. And you just don’t ever want to have to pay—you really don’t. There is a perception that we pay for a lot more than we [actually] do.”

At 34, Brown may be calmly professional under almost any circumstance, but even she isn’t immune to the odd girlie crush. She came face to face with her favourite actor, Jude Law, in an interview late last year. “I just said everything stupid on camera,” she cringes. “He was very accommodating and I got all silly and girlie. I don’t think I can watch that story.”

Brown is married to *A Current Affair* producer, John McEvoy. “John and I were good friends for a long time before we got involved,” she says. “He has brought lots of humour to my life and huge amounts of support and he is a lot more organised than I am—I now have a much cleaner house. John is incredibly supportive. On some days, it’s really hard because I’m absent a lot, especially when we’re invited to things. It teaches you to treasure the time you are together. The greatest aspiration when you’re away working is to be at home on the couch watching telly with your hubby. It’s the day to day things you cherish.”

As lunch progresses and the wine diminishes, Brown warms up and I begin to see the private Tara Brown that her friends and work colleagues so admire. It is hard to find anyone willing to give anything other than a glowing report of her, perhaps because to be invited into her inner circle is a real privilege, and one very few experience. Her husband sums Brown up as “someone who genuinely cares, in an industry where some people pretend to care and don’t. She rarely puts herself first, which is quite astonishing.” ■