Kiera Rigby— Miracles and milestones

Imagine getting up one day, everything is as usual and you head off to do the shopping, and then by day's end, you find your life is hanging by a thread and the world as you knew it irrevocably changed. Kiera, a 25-year-old mother, 37 weeks pregnant with her second child, experienced exactly that on 24 February 2024.

Diagnosed with epilepsy when she was seven, Kiera was no stranger to dealing with debilitating episodes from grand mal seizures (now known as a tonic-clonic seizures) for short periods, but nothing prepared her for the near year-long fight for survival after an aneurysm ruptured in her brain, followed by a stroke, nearly ended her life and that of her unborn child, a child she met for the first time as an eight-month old after she came out of a coma. Kiera had no recollection of being pregnant, or of giving birth, and on seeing the child asked, 'Whose baby is it?' It is one of many questions Kiera has asked, or been unable to answer, as she slowly reconstructs her life.

A year later, at the Supported Independent Living (SIL) home in Hadspen she shares with her Aunt Rel who has Huntington's disease, she is still struggling to remember who she was before the aneurysm and stroke stole her past and compromised her future.

She knows she grew up in Launceston, has an older brother and sister, and had a pet Chihuahua called Buffy. She also remembers she went to Brooks High School and that she didn't like the school or her teachers. The only subjects she did like were the cooking classes taught in Home Economics, and she recalls liking what she cooked. She also liked sport, particularly swimming and netball. Out of school she would go roller skating with friends, but she can't remember their names, and she remembers going to the cinema and watching films like Shrek 2 – she is very specific that it was Shrek 2, not the first Shrek movie.

Kiera was a party girl when she was younger, and she loved to dance whatever the music- from rock'n'roll to country. She is delighted that she has recovered enough now to regularly attend adaptCARE's monthly discos to enjoy the crowd, music, lights and party snacks. On disco nights she tells her care team she will not eat dinner so she can eat the party snacks. She would love to get up and dance again at the discos, but for the time being she has to be content doing the 'nutbush' in her wheelchair.

Kiera has come a long way to even sit in a wheelchair. After a year of being bed-ridden, her muscles had wasted and getting out of bed was excruciating. Now she goes to the gym once or twice a week and lifts weights and rolls on a stability exercise ball to build strength back into her

arms and legs. Her efforts are starting to pay off – she can now sit by herself and has stood with assistance; she could do neither a few months ago.

After Kiera left school, her ability to work was limited because of her epilepsy, but she did manage to do some shifts at Spider's Takeaway when she was 17 to gain some work experience. At18, she had her first child, Azaria, and she loved being a stay-at-home mum taking her daughter to playgrounds and organising birthday parties. Kiera loves parties and she remembers arranging a unicorn-themed party for one of Azaria's birthdays. Kiera is now planning something big for Azaria's 7th birthday in September, but she is not sure what the party theme will be yet. What she is sure of is, to make it happen she will rely on the help of her mother Tania, who lives nearby and is bringing up Kiera's two children, Azaria and Kaliyah.

The bond between Kiera and her mother Tania has always been close. A family history of Huntington's Disease has always made Tania intensely protective of her children, but Kiera's epilepsy made her 'mum's girl', and the bond has only got stronger since Kiera's collapse and recovery. 'Kiera is a miracle,' says Tania. 'That she survived her ordeal is nearly beyond comprehension. But I believe 100% that she fought to be here for me and for her family. She knew losing one of my children is my biggest fears.'

Tania was an hour away in Bridport on that day in February when Kiera collapsed while sitting in a car in the Kmart carpark waiting for her partner. However, they were talking together on the phone when the aneurysm burst and nearly took her life. When Kiera suddenly became silent mid-conversation and Tania could only hear a strange noise on the line, she knew immediately that Kiera was in serious strife, but just how serious she could only guess at. After getting no response from Kiera, Tania remembers hanging up and ringing Kiera's partner who was close by to go and check on her. She then rang Kiera's phone again, hoping a passer-by would answer it to tell her what was going on. A passer-by, who has since become a friend, did answer the phone and called an ambulance. After Kiera's partner arrived on the scene, he video-called Tania to show her what was happening to Keira. Tania knew that it was not a typical epileptic seizure, but what was to follow was beyond any mother's worst nightmare. The next conversation she had with Kiera was in November.

Once the ambulance arrived on the scene, Tania told paramedics via the phone that she could tell that Kiera was not having a typical epileptic seizure. She had witnessed what they looked like since Kiera was seven. However, instead of listening to what she was telling them, they focussed on the ethics of filming Kiera without her knowledge or consent – a furious and frustrated Tania argued the point with Ambulance Tasmania later, but of more immediate concern was their failure to successfully incubate Kiera, leaving her and her unborn child with little or no oxygen during the 45 minute drive to hospital.

As Kiera was pregnant, the initial diagnosis given for her collapse was a combination of pre-eclampsia and an epileptic seizure. Instead of sending out a Medical Emergency Team call, an in-hospital system for quickly responding to a patient's worsening condition, a variety of medical specialists were independently contacted to attend Kiera to assess and implement

treatment, but an anaesthetist was not included in the call out. Fortunately, one was walking past at the time the decision was made to immediately deliver Kiera's baby by caesarean section. Tania is convinced had that not happened, neither Kiera nor her baby would have survived. Even then, the baby required 4 minutes CPR to get her breathing before being flown to Hobart on a ventilator. Although she wanted to stay with Kiera, Tania went to Hobart with the baby, fulfilling a request made by Kiera when she became pregnant that in the event of a medical emergency/episode, she was to support the baby. Three weeks later Kiera's baby was released into Tania's care, while other family members cared for Kiera's 5-year-old daughter.

The day after her baby was flown to Hobart, Kiera too was air-lifted to the Royal Hobart Hospital. Further medical tests revealed she had a category 5 aneurysm, which required surgery to stop the big bleed in her brain. A craniotomy removing four pieces of her skull was performed to reduce the swelling in her brain. Further medical complications followed. After stopping the bleed in her brain, another bleed in her arteries caused a stroke, affecting a different part of Kiera's brain. Then they found a blood clot in her leg and an infection in her gall bladder that was leaking bile into her liver. Chances of surviving another operation were slim, but if they didn't remove her gall bladder and stop the infection she would die, so a theatre was booked. On the morning of the operation, the medical team decided it was too risky to perform and opted to insert a drainage tube to try and remove the infection. It worked, but Kiera remained on life support. Tania was terrified.

As weeks slipped into months, Tania was told by medical staff that there was nothing more they could do, no more treatment they could offer. They were now treating Kiera as palliative. Every day they asked Tania's permission to turn off Kiera's life support. Every day she refused. Tania couldn't make the decision to let her go. In her heart and soul, she just knew Kiera wanted to be here and she was going to help her fight to do so. Tania had never been told Kiera was a vegetable with no brain function and she was convinced that everyday Kiera was getting a bit better. She banked on patience and persistence being the key to Kiera's recovery and regularly asked Kiera to poke her tongue out to see what she registered. Six days after a three-day period to wean Kiera off her tracheostomy, she did poke out her tongue.

Still, few expected Kiera to live. Her peg feeds and fluids were stopped. Tania went into emergency care suffering anxiety attacks. Then she got angry. She insisted Kiera's peg feeds and fluid be reinstated and she gave staff at the Royal Hobart Hospital 48 hours to get Kiera back to Launceston. She was transferred to the Launceston General Hospital the next day. If Kiera was going to die, she would do so surrounded by family and friends.

It was now June, five months after her collapse. Tania continued to tell anyone who would listen: 'my daughter is not dying; she is getting better.' Visitors were encouraged to actively engage with Kiera by talking to her, moisturising and massaging her hands, or play music she liked; two Jelly Roll songs, 'I'm not OK' and 'Save Me' were favourites. Slowly Kiera started to speak. In the beginning it was through copying repetitive speech, then she started to formulate her own words and sentences, albeit jumbled. Then she began to eat on her own. Her first meal was a cheeseburger.

Tania started to plan for Keira's future needs. She knew she couldn't take Kiera home with her as her house was not suitable for the ongoing care needs Kiera would require. So, she contacted Ben Greaves at adaptCARE and told him: 'If Kiera is as strong as I think she is, you're her person. Get supports ready for when I bring her home.' Having cared for a number of Tania's family members suffering from Huntington's Disease – her mother, several decades previously when

she went into care at Peacehaven Nursing Home and now providing care to two of her sisters living at home, Tania trusted Ben and was confident he would arrange what was needed.

In November 2024, surrounded by applauding hospital staff and well-wishers, most of whom had thought she would never recover, Kiera was discharged from hospital and moved into a SIL house where a team of 30 specially trained staff cover the 24/7 shifts required. While Kiera's future is far from plain sailing, she is now learning to stand unaided, attends adaptCARE's disco nights, and recently she resumed a favourite past time and went on a family outing to watch racing at Carrick Speedway. As her mum says, 'Kiera is a miracle.'

Kiera with her mother Tania and daughters Azaria and Kaliyah at adaptCARE's Christmas BBQ, St Catherine's Hall, Launceston, 29 November 2025