

'WOMEN HEALED MY BROKEN HEART'

Auckland heart surgery survivor Ta'afuli Andrew Fiu has survived five operations. His secret? Strong women – including his “female” heart

weekly people

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

Andrew Fiu has achieved a world record he never hoped to hold: Surviving the most open heart surgeries.

And after being cut open and sewn up again five times, he is adamant his still-beating heart is a woman's.

"It's easy to think of my heart as female because all the strong people in my life have been women," says Andrew, as he cuddles up to his Australian partner Michele Coulston-Grey. "I think of my mother, my grandmother, the nurses who have looked after me, my three sisters, my three gorgeous daughters, two stepdaughters

and my granddaughter. If there's any one entity who could help a young boy through what I went through, it's a woman."

With the launch of his autobiography *Purple Heart*, Andrew (43) has taken the chance to thank all the strong women who have helped him since he contracted rheumatic fever at 14.

But he hopes his account of growing up as a Samoan immigrant in Ponsonby, Auckland, and later in Mangere, surviving five heart operations, and managing the media design company Pacific Mango will also inspire both fellow heart patients and Pacific Island teenagers to aim for success.

"What really brassed me off in hospital was people being depressed after their operations. That made me so angry. You have to enjoy your life.

"I also hope Pacific Island students

might look at my life and think, 'He was in hospital for most of his fifth form year and still managed to get a book published.' The Pacific Island mentality is that if you're not good at school you can do a factory job. If you're 'normal' you can be a policeman. That's seen as a glory job. Now that I'm physically impaired, I have realised I have to use my head."

Growing up, Andrew remembers jumping from house to house as he knew most of his street's residents. Named Ta'afuli by his parents, he was renamed Andrew by a Roman Catholic school teacher who randomly picked class names from the Bible.

Andrew also has vivid memories of his brother Vile being whipped by his father with a belt, then the cord of an iron, because he was brought home by police one time too many. →

"I couldn't gloss over that, but it only ever happened once, and my brother was never in trouble again. I take issue with people saying violence against children is a Pacific Island problem. In my life there were no drunken parties and we had to go to church on Saturdays and Sundays. When I eventually go back to church, I've got credits!" he laughs.

Andrew spent a total of three-and-a-half years in hospital, meeting everyone from kindly motherly types to a complete racist.

And on the two occasions when he died and was brought back to life, he says he had a heart-warming meeting with his beloved deceased grandma. In his near-death experiences, they met on the sand and he rolled his grandmother's tobacco leaf.

But he says many people don't believe his accounts.

"They want to hear the real story, the I-woke-up-and-saw-this-light, it-was-bloody-amazing, I-mean-bright-like-the-sun story. People don't want to know the truth," he says.

Andrew had three daughters with his first partner, Lita. However, this relationship ended and these days, Andrew divides his time between Auckland and Brisbane with his partner Michele, who he met seven years ago while looking for a flat.

"I lost the address, so I went trawling through the rubbish bins looking for it. I got cream cheese on my arms while trying

to find it. When I arrived half an hour later, she took a piece of bacon off me. We hit it off. Three days later, we decided we didn't need a second room."

Michele, who has faced the agony of knowing Andrew might not survive another operation, says their differences help make them a strong team.

"If I didn't get my way, I would walk out for three weeks"

"We come from different worlds and look at things a different way. I remember seeing his operation and thinking, 'They're killing him to make him live!'"

"It was my first brush with the possibility of losing Andrew. You do adapt to that – but it doesn't make

it any easier. One of the things I've always had is admiration for Andrew's courage."

Not that living with him is easy, Michele admits. Andrew grins and nods in agreement.

"I'm used to having my own way. Since I was 14, I have had people serve me and I was treated as if I was precious. If I didn't get my own way, I would walk out for three weeks. But I would always come back.

"If love was a fuel, I would have been to the moon and back hundreds of times because of all the love from my family. People might think I have had a tough time with my health, but I am one of the luckiest guys in the world. I feel really blessed that I've had such a good life."

Jenny Forsyth

★ *Purple Heart* by Ta'afuli Andrew Fiu, Random House, \$27.99.

Andrew with daughters (from left) Parvenah, Jahna and Afega, and granddaughter Jorjia

Left: Andrew with his siblings: (back, from left) Andrew, Theresa, Annie and Vile (front) Tirasi and Seine

Michele has supported Andrew through his ups and downs