

Competing for Australia...

and winning!

# 'm losing my sight, but 'll never stop swimming'

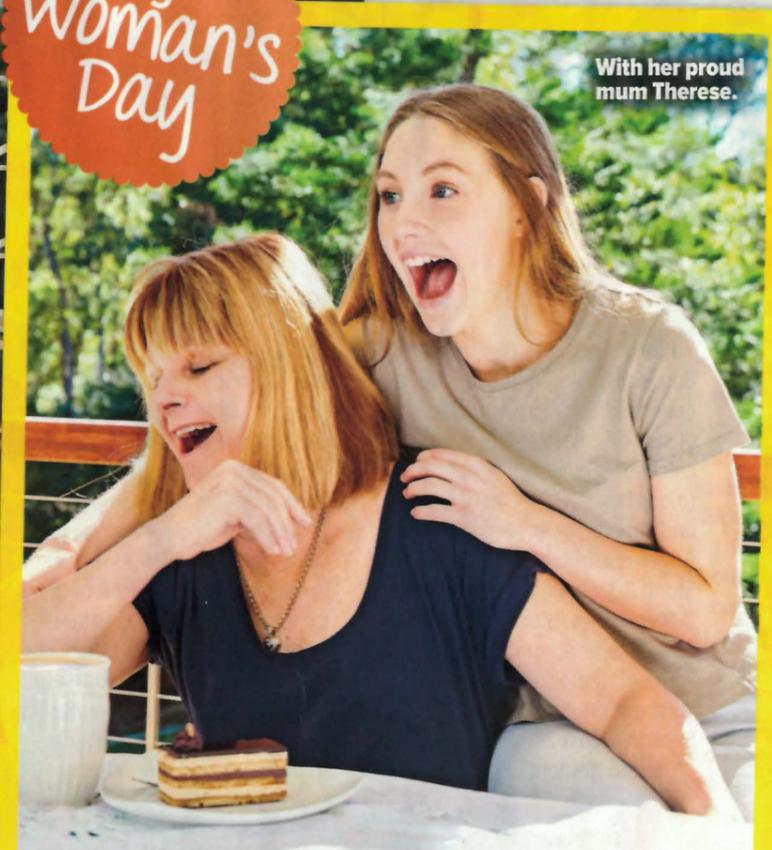
This Aussie Paralympic swimmer is determined to make special memories before she loses her sight for good



Jenna feels free in the water and swimming has boosted her confidence.



only in Woman's Day



With her proud mum Therese.

**W**hen she was in her first year of primary school, teachers thought Jenna Jones was a naughty, fidgety child. "I was always in trouble and constantly told to sit down," Jenna recalls. "But I wasn't naughty. I just had to move closer to the front so I could see what my teacher was doing."

When the school called her mum Therese and dad Brad, that was their first inkling something wasn't right with Jenna, who's now 17 and the second youngest of their six kids. "We thought she just needed glasses but when an ophthalmologist told us to go straight to Westmead Children's Hospital it began to sink in Jenna had a more serious issue."

### SHOCK DIAGNOSIS

At first, doctors feared a tumour on Jenna's optic nerve was damaging her eyesight - but after numerous invasive tests, she was diagnosed with the genetic condition cone-rod dystrophy when she was six.

"We were told she could go blind overnight," says Therese. "For six months afterwards, every time Jenna made a sudden noise I wondered if she'd just lost her vision."

The progressive disease damages the cells that sense light and means the optic nerve

is unable to carry vision signals to the brain. It's a very rare condition and there is no cure.

Jenna had no idea how serious her condition was and Therese says they didn't tell her then.

"How can you tell a six-year-old she's going to go blind?" she says.

When Jenna was eight, her eyesight deteriorated significantly. "I had to hold books right up in front of my eyes and it was hard to concentrate at school," she says.

It worsened again just as she started high school, which was especially tough. "Now I have about four per cent vision," she says. "Everything is blurry or even pixelated, especially when I'm tired, and I have complete blind spots in the lower half of my sight."

No one can tell the teen, who lives in the NSW Blue Mountains, how long the last of her vision will remain. "It's a genetic condition

**'Swimming's helped me focus on what I can do'**

but I'm the only one in my family to be losing sight," says Jenna. "That's been hard to cope with sometimes. You can't help but think, 'Why me?' I also used to wonder why Mum and Dad couldn't fix it."

The devastating diagnosis prompted Therese and Brad to encourage their already sporty daughter to try all the activities she wanted while she was still able - and swimming quickly became Jenna's favourite sport.

"I feel free in the water," she says. "I can't see the bottom of the

pool and I have to be careful not to hit my head or bash my hands when I approach the walls, but otherwise I feel just like everyone else."

### SETTING GOALS

Jenna's talent in the pool soon became obvious and after seven years of swimming lessons, in 2014 she began to train with the Australian Paralympic squad.

Her then-coach encouraged her to set competitive goals and at just 15, Jenna qualified for the Rio Games in 2016. She was one of the youngest swimmers on the squad. "That was huge for me," she says. "It felt like, 'I can do this!'" Jenna swims the 50m freestyle (she's one of the NSW top 30 swimmers for 50m, both sighted and vision impaired) plus the 100m freestyle, backstroke and breaststroke.

In Rio, Jenna competed in five events and qualified for the 100m backstroke and 50m freestyle final, in which she finished seventh. "I was thrilled, because I didn't even expect to be there," she says.

Now the teen - and her mum or dad! - get up at 3.30am every day and drive for an hour in the darkness to the Olympic pool at Homebush to train in preparation for Tokyo. "It will be worth it I hope," says Jenna. "I'll be going for gold in Japan."

Being the girl who swims, rather than the girl who uses a cane and reads braille has done wonders for Jenna's confidence, says Therese.

"Having a disability as a teenager is especially hard," she says. "Swimming has helped Jenna feel good about herself and her future."

While Jenna will never be able to drive and will lose the sight she has left, being an elite swimmer has taken her all over the world. "Swimming's helped me focus on what I can do, rather than what I can't."

### JENNA SUPPORTS JEANS FOR GENES

One in 20 Aussie kids is born with a birth defect or genetic disease. Jeans for Genes raises funds for Australia's Children's Medical Research Institute to research, diagnose and hopefully find cures for genetic conditions like Jenna's. Jeans for Genes Day is August 3. To donate, go to [jeansforgenes.org.au](http://jeansforgenes.org.au)



Words: Melissa Field. Pictures: Phillip Costello/boenewsyndication.com.au, Jeff Crow/Australian Paralympic Committee.