

A girl with three names

– Eleanor Venables

THIS is the story of a girl who lived with three names.

One was Tim, for when she was good.

One was Toby, for when she was bad.

The other is June. June Alexander, to be precise.

June, who strived to be Tim, and who more often than not seemed to feel like she was Toby instead. June, who lived for more than 10 years not even knowing the name of the mental illness that plagued her every day.

Now, having finally overcome her hard fought battle against mental illness, June has published her third book, *A Girl Called Tim*; memoirs of her youth, the onset and establishment of her eating disorder, as not only a form of personal catharsis and therapy, but also to help provide hope for others who may be as lost as she once was.

SITTING at the back of a coffee shop in Sale, sipping on green tea, June explained the odd pair of nicknames she was given when she was growing up.

“The name of the book comes from my mother, who called me Tim,” June explained.

“I was the younger of two girls and my mum called me Tim when I was good, and Toby when I was not so good,” she said with a chuckle.

“Which led to a bit of identity confusion at the age of 11, as you can imagine, when I entered puberty and I was the only girl in my school with breasts.

“I didn’t want them, because it wasn’t in keeping with my image of Tim.”

While agonising over the development of breasts during the confusing times of puberty is something all women are familiar with, for June, in the small schoolyard of the Woodglan primary school in late 1950s, the onset of puberty also heralded the onset of her lifelong battle with depression, anxiety, anorexia and bulimia.

“I became very anxious because the school doctor was coming, and in this one room school where we had these lattice windows, I was afraid of the teacher seeing me undressed,” June explained.

“My anxiety increased to the point where I was sitting on the ground at school, surrounded by pine trees and the playground and I just felt a ‘ping’ in my brain.

“It was just like that.

“The eating disorder just clicked in. It was like an answer to my anxiety.”

Comforted by her newfound control, and by the fact her breasts were shrinking due to anorexia, June was able to face the school doctor.

Yet mental illness had already sunk its talons into her mind, and it would take June decades to learn what was happening to her, let alone prise herself free of its stranglehold.

“I didn’t know what was happening to me, but I started to become anorexic and unable to eat,” she said.

“I would get very anxious if I ate. It was like it was another will that was stronger than my own will and not only that, I started to exercise more every day, so I began to run where I’d used to walk.”

Sensing something was wrong, June was taken to the doctor numerous times. One doctor concluded she simply was afraid to grow up, and another put her on a hormone pill to restart her menstrual cycle, which had stopped due to malnutrition.

Not once during her adolescence was her mental health ever considered.

“I kept my illness to myself,” she said.

“I really didn’t know it was an illness. I knew I was depressed, because I kept my diaries and I wrote about being depressed, but I didn’t know what was wrong.”

From anorexia, June moved on to bulimia — that is, excessive binge eating with punishment afterwards. In *A Girl Called Tim*, she wrote how she would frequently



June Alexander and her pet family, who are an important part of her support team cats Ginger and Dora, and Staffordshire Terrier, Harley.

eat a plateful of her mother’s drop scones or half a kilo of sultanas, and then force herself to go without food for hours on end and go for long runs to compensate for the food.

“I looked well, because I’d gained some weight, but I hadn’t had a period for three years and I certainly got rid of my boobs for a while,” she said with a wry grin.

“I didn’t like myself at all, so the binge eating became worse. I eventually got my periods back, but my mind wasn’t well and I would suppress my anxiety by counting calories.”

FROM the outside, June’s life appeared healthy and normal. For her slight frame, she appeared a healthy weight.

A talented writer from a young age, she secured a position as a cadet journalist at the Bairnsdale Advertiser at the age of 18. She was engaged to her highschool sweetheart at 19, married by 20, had her first child at 21 and had four children by the age of 25.

Yet internally, her mental illness raged harder than ever before, driving her to the brink of suicide. But upon reaching that brink, June was finally able to reach out for the help she’d needed for the past 15 years.

“By the time I was 26, I was suicidal and in very deep depression,” she said.

“It was my children that actually gave me the strength to go and tell a doctor, because I thought I was going mad to be honest.

“It was really scary, going and telling a doctor that you think there’s something wrong with your mind; it makes you wonder, are you just plain weak or are you suffering an illness and can you be helped?”

“It was really scary.”

Fortunately, in the years since her first visits to the doctor as a child, June was finally pointed in the direction of healing

and recovery. Yet mental illness diagnosis and treatment was still in its infancy, and it took June a further six years to find a psychiatrist whom she could work with.

At the age of 32, some 21 years after that initial ‘ping’ in the schoolyard, June was finally able to begin to heal.

“By that time there was only five per cent of me left and it was 95 per cent illness — my thoughts and behaviours had become quite entrenched and so it was like I had to rebuild my sense of self,” June said of the effect of her illness.

“Everything had to be untangled, it was a bit like a ball of wool where a kitten had got at it — my mind was in many knots and it had to be unravelled.

“Then all the eating disorder thoughts had to be separated from my true thoughts, and that skill I wasn’t really made aware of until I was 47, where I had to work out what was really me and what was my illness and had to learn to deal with my thoughts and not eating to numb my pain.

“I had to do a lot of learning and gain skills in recognising triggers and catching them before they went off; defusing them and gradually building up my sense of self.”

AS she began her recovery, June then turned her efforts to seeking out other avenues of support and therapy for eating disorders.

In particular, her focus is now on promoting family based support for young people with eating disorders, as she believes it’s an approach that would have helped to curb her mental illness when it first manifested all those years ago.

“I’ve become an advocate now for mental health,” she said.

“I kept it undercover for all those years because I knew I wasn’t strong enough to speak or to do anything.

“I learnt about the research of family based treatment for my book, *My Kid Is Back*, which is how mums and dads can help their children with anorexia.

“People don’t realise that an eating disorder affects the whole family, not just the child who has it.”

For June, due in part to the lack of recognition and knowledge of mental illness as she was growing up, her illness did irreparable damage to her relationship with her family.

“My illness took a terrible toll on my relationship with my parents and my sister,” she said.

“I didn’t understand me, and they didn’t understand me, and by the time I could understand me, it was too late.

“I lost my family of origin, which is a reason why I put a lot of my energy into talking about family based treatment, because I don’t like to think of other children losing their family.

“There’s nothing more important in your life.

“It’s so important to be able to let them guide you when your illness thoughts are stronger than your own.”

“That’s what I’d just wished had been around when I was a kid.”

As well as promoting family based treatment, June now also advocates for older people to consider seeing help for any mental health issues they may be experiencing.

“My message is for older people — at any age you can improve your quality of life and at any age it’s important to reach out,” she said.

However, raising awareness is only one aspect of June’s writing. Despite the often bleak nature of her memoirs and subjects, there is still an undercurrent of inextinguishable hope in June’s writing.

“The epilogue to *My Kid Is Back* is a letter to my granddaughter, who is just one year old, Olivia Rose,” she explained with a smile.

“I like to think that she’ll grow up in a world where mental health is accepted just like physical health, where it’s all part of our one body.”

June Alexander will be speaking about her latest book, *A Girl Called Tim* at the inaugural Women of Interest dinner next Wednesday, February 23 from 6pm at the Laurels, Sale Turf Club. Cost is \$25, with drinks available from the bar. To book, phone Collins Booksellers on 5144 6262.



June Alexander and her memoir, *A Girl Called Tim* which tells the story of growing up on a Gippsland farm and developing an eating disorder (anorexia nervosa) at age 11.