

Anja Christoffersen

Undefined by her medical conditions, this incredible woman continues to smash goals

Anja Christoffersen is a young author, motivational speaker, medical advocate and international model, born and raised in Brisbane, Australia. Anja was born with complex medical malformations called VACTERL Association, which has resulted in dozens of surgeries and over 150 hospital admissions. At birth, she had no way of getting food and water in or out of her body and survival was only possible with extensive medical intervention.

VACTERL Association is a condition that affects 1 in 10,000 to 40,000 births, where each letter stands for a condition. To be diagnosed you must be affected by 3 of the conditions. V describes vertebral. A is anal atresia (missing anal opening). C is cardiac. TE is tracheal oesophageal. R is renal (kidney) and L is limb. Anja was seriously affected by all components except limb abnormalities.

Survival was uncertain and the rarity of the condition meant that medical research was challenging, as it was difficult to find a large enough research group and track them throughout their lives. Each individual case of VACTERL is very different; with some able to function well in day-to-day life, and others crippled by the condition. Due to this, the doctors never described Anja's life past childhood. However, it was quickly discovered that this rare congenital disability carries with it associated stigmas and challenges faced at every stage of life. It impacted her social relationships, education and day-to-day life. Fortunately, Anja has transformed her setbacks into an incredible, passionate drive to improve the path for others walking in her footsteps.

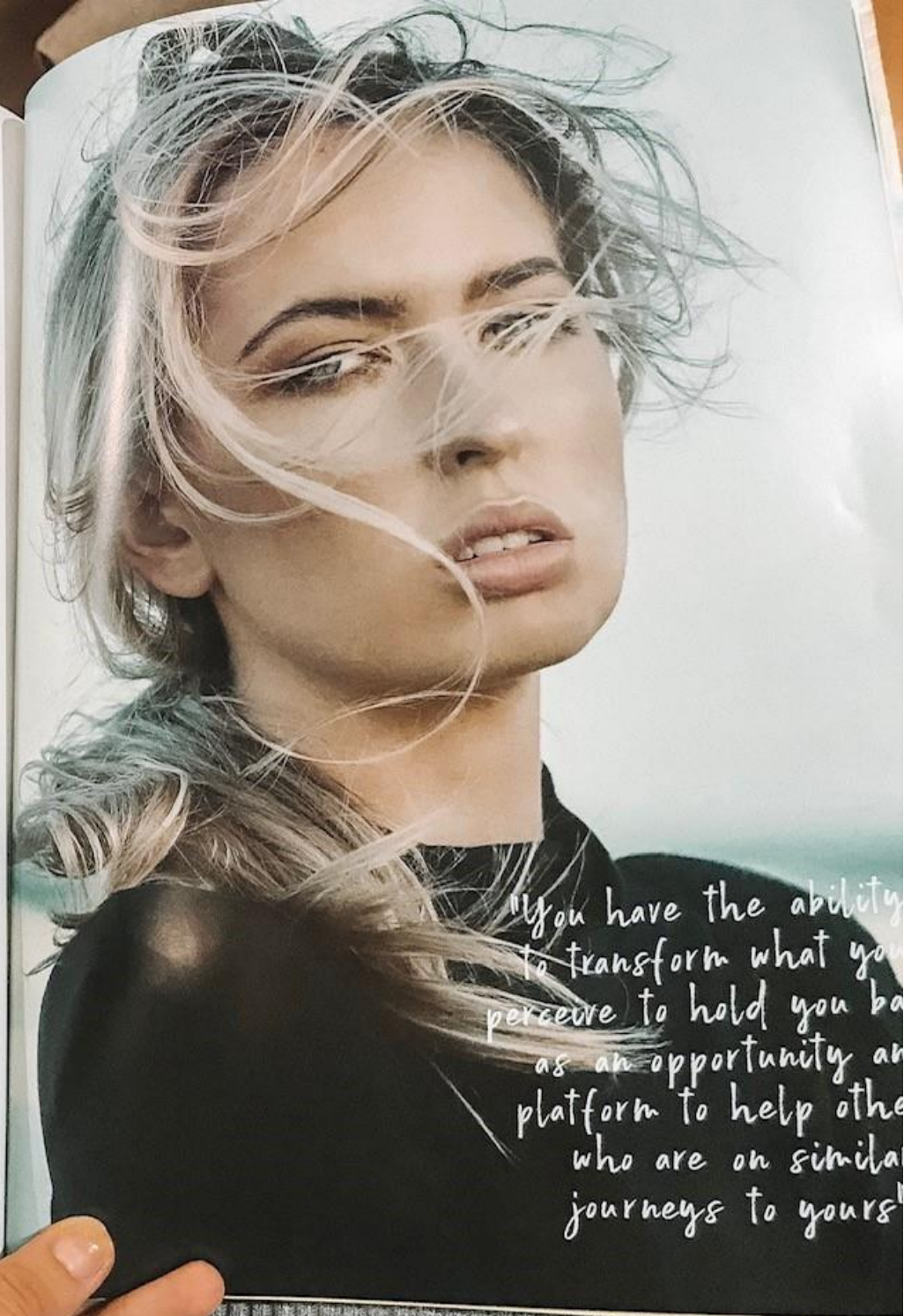
Beginning her public speaking career in 2018, Anja has now spoken at conferences in Australia, USA and Pakistan; raising awareness of VACTERL, sharing her motivational message on overcoming setbacks, and how the medical and education field can better accommodate children, adolescents and adults with chronic illness.

In late 2018, Anja published her autobiography, *Behind the Smile: An Inspirational Journey from Disability to Ability*. She details her life with disability, her path to becoming an international model and the experiences that drove her towards advocacy. She could not see any reason for anyone to feel isolated and unsupported in their struggles with illness and left to face the unrecognised psychological impacts of disability on their own. This also led Anja to commence her studies in the transpersonal therapy specialisation of psychotherapy, so she could work more effectively with people managing chronic illness.

"I thought I was living my dream on the catwalk, but I was only living a portion of it... my story is far from over, it is only just the beginning." Anja reflects in the epilogue of her first book, *Behind the Smile*.

Due to Anja's complex pelvic reconstruction at 7 months old – where doctors had to create each pelvic opening from scratch – she has struggled with faecal incontinence. This caused Anja much shame and embarrassment as she was growing up, trying to manage and face these issues with the help of only her closest friends and family. Incontinence is a taboo and highly stigmatised subject that is not discussed openly in society, however Anja hopes to change this on behalf of the 1 in 3 Australians over the age of 15 years old who have experienced incontinence. Anja is now a proud ambassador for the Continence Foundation of Australia and a member of the Consumer Advisory Committee. She works closely with the foundation to help break the stigma surrounding incontinence.

In June 2019, Anja competed in her first pageant, Miss Grand Australia – the third largest and fastest growing pageant internationally, and one of the five global Grand Slam Pageants. Anja is the first person with a disability to compete in a pageant in Australia at a national level. After dedicating months to fundraising, competition prep, a strict exercise and healthy



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eating regime and more. Anja was overjoyed to place second in Australia, taking home the title of Miss Grand Australia 1st Runner Up.

Anja's story has been shared globally by the Independent UK, 9Honey, Mamamia, Girlfriend Magazine and The Daily Mail Australia, which has been a significant step in breaking the stigma and isolation surrounding incontinence, and raising awareness of VACTERL and invisible disabilities.

Anja has spoken out globally to get greater recognition for the 1 in 5 Australians with a disability, who are continuously underrepresented in society - especially in the modelling and pageant world.

"A wheelchair is the global symbol of disability, marked on every disabled toilet and parking space. In these circumstances there is no surprise that most people are conditioned to believe disability is something obvious and visible... I feel the recognition for other people with just as debilitating disabilities that are internal - mental or physical - is coming. I want to be a strong voice in this conversation, as 80 percent of disabilities are in fact invisible. So many people in the world are facing the same silent battle."

Anja has become a global ambassador for VACTERL Association, bringing this condition into the public spotlight. Her message to others with this condition, incontinence and chronic illness is clear.

"You have the ability to transform what you perceive to hold you back, as an opportunity and platform to help others who are on similar journeys to yours," Anja says to The Daily Mail Australia.

"Never be defined by your illness or circumstances, you are born for a reason. You are never given more than you can handle."



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