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Photo: MIKE DUGDALE

# A selfless act

A famous face will be visiting Geelong this year in an attempt to break a world record and fulfil a promise to a sick sibling. MIRANDA LUBY speaks to actor Samuel Johnson about his journey

**S**AMUEL Johnson is putting his “balls on the line” in the name of cancer.

The well-known Aussie actor and former Deakin student, who’s known for his rough sense of humour, is setting off next Friday on a year-long unicycle ride around Australia to raise awareness for breast cancer.

But although Samuel is quick to make jokes about his circus-inspired record attempt, the Melbourne-based TV star has a very sobering reason for his ride.

His much-loved sister, Connie, has been diagnosed with terminal breast cancer.

Visiting Geelong last week in preparation for his journey, stopping here for four days later in the year, Samuel admitted he’s “terrified”.

“It’s half pure terror and half pure excitement,” says the 35-year-old, who is best-known for his roles in *The Secret Life of Us* and *Rush* and as a radio presenter and voiceover artist.

“It’s going to be an enormously difficult challenge both physically and emotionally. I’m scared.”

No stranger to the unicycle, Samuel, who dreamed of joining the circus as a kid, completed a fundraising trek from Sydney to Melbourne in 2004 following Connie’s second bout with cancer. His sister survived, but was diagnosed again in 2010 and now may have less than a year to live.

So this time it’s a 15,000km ride, an attempt to break the Guinness world record and also raise \$1 million for the Garvan Institute of Medical Research to find a cure for breast cancer.

He’ll be riding eight to 10 hours each day for 365 days through desert, in rain and hail, on highways and on dirt tracks.

As if that wasn’t enough, Samuel will be stopping in Geelong for four days with his theatre company in September for *The Haunting of Daniel Gartrell* at GPAC.

The streets of Geelong are familiar to Samuel who studied arts at the Deakin Waurn Ponds campus and has family in St Leonards.

He’ll be riding around town during the day and performing at night.

“That’s going to be tough so I’ll need a lot of support then,” he says.

The ride Samuel has set himself is such a huge challenge, which the actor is worried he may not even make it.

But that, he says, is the point.

“The idea is to do something so hard that I can match the courage and determination my sister is showing in her fight with cancer. I want to be feeling it the whole way with her,” he says, with the air of a man on a mission.

Samuel Johnson with his sister Connie, who has been diagnosed with terminal breast cancer.



“When things get too hard or I fall, and I know I will, and it hurts me, I’ll just imagine my sister on chemo and my pain will seem so small in comparison.”

Learning how to deal with pain is something familiar to Samuel.

The actor has suffered through much well-publicised heartache.

His mother committed suicide when he was a toddler growing up in Daylesford, and Samuel was just 11 when Connie, his sister and best friend, was diagnosed with cancer for the first time. Later in life, his close friend as well as his long-term girlfriend also took their lives.

He went through years of turmoil before his love of acting and involvement with Open Family Australia, a charity that helps vulnerable young people, turned his life around.

These trials, Samuel says, have helped him prepare for what he’s now facing.

“I’ve had to teach myself how to cope with these things and handle the cards that have been dealt to me,” he says.

Speaking about his life and his sister’s latest diagnosis, Samuel’s expressive face is filled with emotion.

His commanding presence, enough to fill a theatre stage, adds weight to his words.

“I’ve buried more people than most at my age but everyone goes through

their own trauma and I don’t want to play the victim,” the powerful actor says. “I don’t want to be one of those guys who can’t cope because, with what’s coming, I need to be strong to survive.”

For Samuel, humour has been one of the best coping strategies for both him and his sister.

“Riding around Australia on a unicycle is a perfect example. It’s just an absurd thing to do really, which makes it so funny,” he says about his quest, which started out as a joke with Connie.

“The situation is grim but we’re determined to make the most out of the time she has left and what better way than to laugh.

“Just because she’s sick it doesn’t mean we can’t have a bit of fun with it.”

And although his journey will be perilous — Samuel says the chances of injuring himself badly are “beyond certain” — there will be plenty of laughs.

For one, there’ll be a team following him around in a huge, pink “boob-shaped car”.

But despite the duo’s best intentions at laughing their way through Connie’s illness, the journey hasn’t been easy.

It’s taken two years to get the go-ahead for the ride.

“It’s been on and off again so many times that I’ve often found myself just sitting on the floor crying,” Samuel

says. “Connie’s prognosis was only two years so I was terrified it would be too late. But she’s still here and now it’s time to keep my promise to her.”

Samuel’s hoping for a few visits from his sister along his year-long journey, including one here in Geelong. But her health will dictate if she’ll support him in person or from home.

“The most important thing is for her to spend time with her kids so if she starts going downhill then she won’t come and see me,” Samuel says.

“But I know I’ll be giving her lots of strength along the way.”

And although Samuel knows Connie might not be alive to see him finish his ride, it won’t stop him visualising that moment during his isolating journey.

“I can picture myself crossing the line at the end and she’s alive and she’s crying with pride and we fall into each other’s arms and just say, ‘We did it, we did it,’” Samuel says.

“She’s stubborn and I think she’ll make it but if she’s not there I know it won’t be from a lack of trying.”

■ To donate to Samuel’s cause, visit [loveyoursisterorg.tumblr.com](http://loveyoursisterorg.tumblr.com) or visit any Bendigo Bank.

To book tickets to *The Haunting of Daniel Gartrell*, visit [gpac.org.au](http://gpac.org.au)

■ People experiencing personal problems can call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Victorian SuicideLine 1300 651 251.