

When the going gets TOUGH

■ Terri Cooper is a woman with two lives. By day she is a social butterfly and shrewd business owner with a passion for helping others. By night she is a tough security supervisor mixing it with the blokes and confidently controlling crises, safe guarding celebrities and directing drunks. They seem like polar opposites but in Terri these different worlds collide, as **Katie Miller** reports

It was a week before Terri Cooper cried. With a dead body on the road, her work partner in an ambulance and a sporting event with thousands of spectators under her control, the security supervisor didn't have time for tears at the accident site outside the Crowne Plaza Royal Pines Resort.

Instead there was strength and determination in Terri's eyes as she swallowed her emotions and did the job that had to be done on a 'difficult and traumatic' evening in January last year.

A 72-year-old woman had left the Australian Women's Hardcourt tennis championships and was crossing Ross Street with her husband when she was hit by a car and dragged about 70m.

Terri and her security partner were first at the scene.

"It was just a really horrible, horrible set of circumstances," she says. "They were Japanese, they came over every year for the tennis and were flying out the next day and two minutes before crossing the road he had a wife and then, he didn't."

"It was very difficult holding the husband back because she was lying there covered and he was trying to crawl over to her and I was having to hold him back and trying to calm him down."

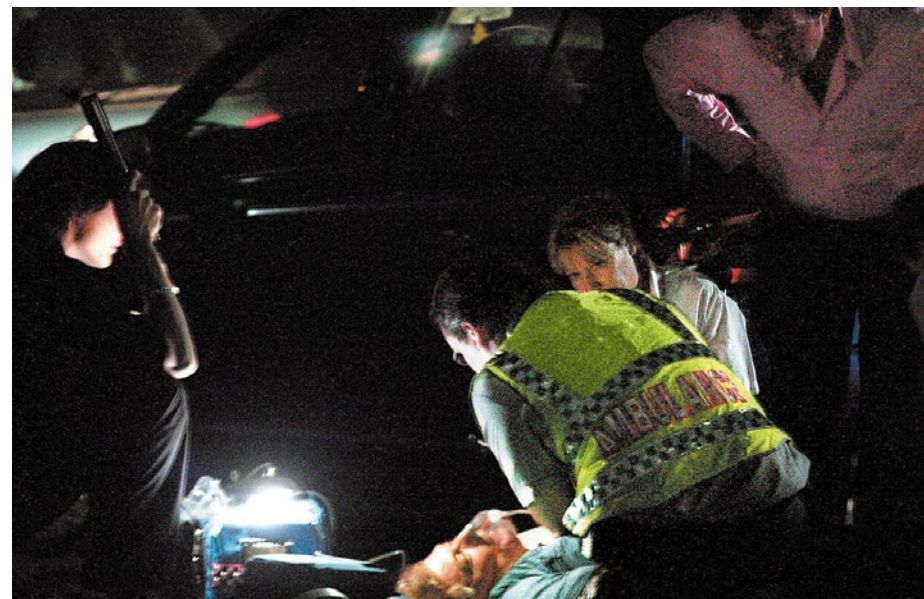
At the same time Terri's security partner collapsed with shock – although it was initially feared he was having a heart attack – and had to be taken to hospital.

Terri, who was in charge of event security, says she had no time to think about what had happened between looking after her partner, the accident scene and the tennis still going on inside the resort grounds.

"I think it probably took me about a week before I actually cried," she says.

This is the tough, resilient Terri who has handled whatever has been thrown at her – and on one occasion *being* thrown into a concrete pillar – during two decades in the security world.

With consummate professionalism she has watched over celebrities, talked down countless drunks, copped attitude from men as the only woman heading a Gold Coast Indy security sector and dealt with crises such as the Royal Pines fatality, although it will surprise many to learn this side of the single 48-year-old exists at all.



Terri assists a paramedic in treating her security partner, suffering from shock after a car accident outside the Crowne Plaza Royal Pines Resort

Security became an enduring part of Terri's life 20 years ago, when she was asked to join the first leather-clad female security contingent on the door of Brisbane's Transformers nightclub, but it has never been her day job.

To those in business circles she is better known as a 'networking queen' thanks to her consultancy, through which she teaches networking skills and runs meet-and-greet events in Brisbane and on the Gold and Sunshine coasts.

Some may recognise the Auchenflower local as a former swimwear model, promotions specialist, entertainment manager or private investigation business director but outside the hours of all these jobs and several others she has slipped on her security uniform and earpiece.

Terri says she does the mostly night and weekend work as an Asset Protection Systems senior security supervisor because she enjoys the polarity of her different careers, rather than just for the extra cash.

"I love the yin and the yang of it because in my (networking) job I get to be feminine and then to do security caters to my masculine side," she says.

"I do have a lot of male interests, like V8 motorsports, and I just find it's a really nice balance and one stops me from taking the other too seriously."

Those masculine pastimes hark back to Terri's days growing up on four hectares at Rochedale, where her parents still live, which she says was the 'middle of nowhere' with no public transport and no town water when her family arrived.

Her passion for cars developed when as a youngster she began to follow her dad Tom into his work shed, where he would give her a carburettor to play with as he tinkered with his vehicles.

Today Terri drives a Holden Commodore V6 and dreams of owning a yellow Monaro but her first motoring experience, at age 11, took place alongside her father in the only manual set of wheels the family owned – a Bedford tipper truck.

"I didn't have the same sort of driving lessons other people have," she laughs.

"When I was older and had my licence I taught my aunt (Pat Shipsey, who was 40) to drive in the same tip truck and I can remember Mum and Dad sitting in the dining room being terrified of this tip truck

approaching the house thinking it was going to come through the front doors."

When Terri was about 15 her dad, a plumbing and drainage contractor, taught her to shoot tin cans with a .22 rifle and another hobby was born.

Terri has had many sessions at the shooting range since perfecting her marksmanship but it has always remained a recreational interest rather than a work skill.

"I did look at getting my pistol licence but if you get a gun licence you are pretty much going to be given jobs where you need to carry a gun and I'm not sure that I want to be placed in that position," she says.

"It's just a different category of security and I don't think that's what I want to do."

Terri has never been confronted with a weapon but her former partner had a gun pulled on him when in her early 30s they ran a private investigation and debt collection business together.

She did fear for her partner when he was out at night doing repossessions but says she was never afraid for her own safety because her dad brought her up to be streetwise – so much so an employer once told her that was the reason she was hired for a job over an otherwise equal contender.

"It's probably the wrong thing to teach kids but in our household everyone was guilty until they were proven innocent, so when you met someone for the first time you never just assumed they were an OK person – they had to prove that," she says.

"So I never put myself in a situation where I felt uncomfortable, uneasy or anxious because they're the times something happens."

"If I didn't feel comfortable with something I wouldn't do it."

Being a woman often worked in Terri's favour when she was serving summonses because people rarely expected the documents to be delivered by a female, particularly not a young, attractive one.

At the same time she was in debt collection she was expressing her feminine side by running a fashion parade and promotions business in nightclubs and had to develop methods to protect her swimwear girls from aggressive patrons and drunks.

It was in this environment Terri began to cultivate the mediation skills that were to become essential armour in her security work.

She believes this aptitude is one of the advantages of having women in security, adding that the number of females in the ranks has grown enormously in the past five years.

"If you've got a big beefy guy telling someone he can't come into a nightclub, particularly if he's in front of his mates, he will very rarely say 'oh OK' and walk off," she says.

"Whereas if you are female, pleasant and just have a different way about you . . . he doesn't feel he has to prove anything in front of his mates. So purely by the psychology of it, it just works better."

"Having said that, when push comes to shove and fists start flying it's not an ideal place for a girl to be."

Terri can usually use her gift of the gab to avoid anyone resorting to force but she has seen the level of violence on the streets rising in recent years.

She recalls watching six police officers trying to hold down a drug-affected person who fought back with frightening amounts of strength and aggression.

"When we were younger we probably all had alcohol before we should have but I have certainly noticed an increase in the level of intoxication in younger people," she says.

"There seems to be less of a care factor."

"Drugs certainly bring out violent behaviour in people and in a lot of instances they have no recollection afterwards either and I guess that's the disturbing thing about doing security – you never really know what substance someone could have taken and how they might react until you're actually there."

It was only last year that one of those volatile situations went badly for Terri for the first time since she earned her security licence – which includes the same training police receive in defensive tactics – and took on her first official security position at the Gold Coast's IndyCar Grand Prix in 1992.

She was evicting a man from a Brisbane venue when she was thrown back head-first into a concrete pillar and hospitalised with whiplash and neck and shoulder injuries, although luckily there was no bleeding to her brain.

Terri needed a month off work to recover from the attack, which came as a shock.

"I've been yelled at and threatened and all those sorts of things but this was the first time I'd actually been hurt," she says.

"It probably just made me that little bit more aware of how quickly things can go wrong."

Terri says the incident didn't affect her confidence and she headed straight back into security work without fear as soon as she was back on her feet.

She scratches her head with manicured, siren-red nails and says if it happened again she could switch to different sorts of events, but if she was forced into a 'sedate, conservative, safe, security job', she would probably give it away.

"That's why I do security . . . it's because I love the challenge," she says.

"I love being busy and I love being in the middle of everything that is happening."

Terri never imagined where her life path would lead when, finding she was an A-grade student in English and hopeless at the rest, she left the Loreto Convent at Coorparoo at the end of Year 10 – scraping through to graduate junior school by just one point.

She went to business college and scored her first job at 16 with office-equipment company Roneo Vickers, working her way from the switchboard to become one of the youngest female sales representatives on the road at the time.

However, within 18 months Terri and her managers realised selling was simply not her forte and a couple of months before she was to be married



"I knew it probably wasn't the right thing to do but in those days there was just so much expectation on you."

Terri and John, a construction worker, parted ways when Terri was 25 and it was then she began to forge her independence.

She started going out with 'the girls' for the first time in her life, hitting Surfers Paradise nightclubs including The Penthouse, The Avenue and Twains, where she was a door girl for about six months.

A few years later the blue-eyed beauty was given the security gig on the door of Transformers, one of the first Brisbane nightclubs to use female security, and through that role she heard about jobs going at Indy.

She started by monitoring the Golden Gate building at the second Gold Coast event and has worked every Indy since, climbing to second-in-command and then supervisor of one of the seven sectors seven years ago.

"I love Indy," she says with a grin. "I love the V8s, the F111s, the helicopters, the overseas visitors, the race drivers, the cars . . . I just love the whole experience."

"After four or five days of 12, 14, 16 hours I always come home and say I'm not doing it again and every year as soon as Indy comes around I've got my hand up to go."

Terri's role includes attending briefings on possible terrorist threats, dealing with fights, searching bags, keeping an eye on tomfoolery on the balconies and protecting the Indy cars when they crash, warding off the opportunists trying to pilfer expensive souvenirs to sell on eBay.

She's tight-lipped about security incidents that have happened over the years out of respect for her employer but does reveal there has been one death in her sector, when one of the marshals had a heart attack.

"Every year his wife and kids come back and they bring some flowers to place where he passed away and have kind of a little memorial, so I make sure whoever the staff member is at that place knows they're coming," she says.

"We just make sure they don't have to argue their way in and give them the time they need."

Terri oversees about 20 security personnel in Delta sector and is treated by most colleagues like a sister, but she has come across some men who don't take well to having a female as their boss.

She handles them with the same diplomacy she employs with the patrons, asking if she's done anything to cause offence and explaining that she's been doing the job for years and her instructions are only to make their lives easier.

It's strange to think someone with such a verbal talent in the security arena would be afraid of speaking in public, but that was the case with Terri even after she started Terri Cooper Networking in 2001.

She used to have someone else emcee her events but one day he turned around and challenged her to be the face of her own consultancy and with discipline and her characteristic strength she worked through her fears. ▶

“She was lying there covered and (her husband) was trying to crawl over to her and I was having to hold him back”

"I would be physically sick before I spoke, I would shake so much I couldn't hold the piece of paper because you'd see it shaking. I went through all of that but each time it got a little bit easier and now you've really got to stop me from talking," she says.

"I still get nervous before I speak but I think that's a good thing.

"I once asked John Farnham if he got nervous still before he went on stage and he said 'the day I stop getting nervous, I quit'."

'The Voice' is among a host of celebrities Terri has watched over through her security work in Brisbane and on the Gold Coast, but although she is a great admirer of Farnham's boundless energy she's not one to get starry-eyed.

Whether she is body-guarding tennis player Martina Hingis or ensuring things run smoothly for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Dalai Lama, Ian Thorpe or Queensland Premier Anna Bligh, Terri says her focus is the job, not the person.

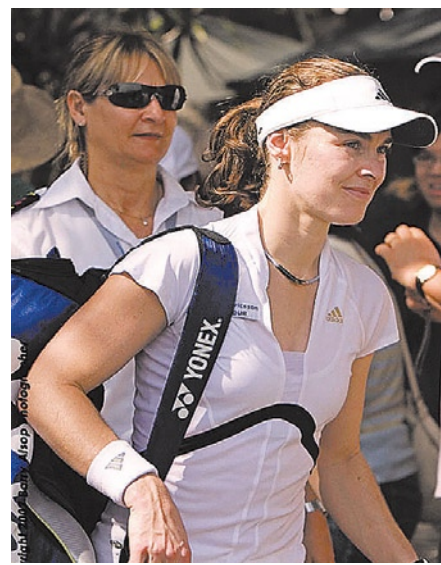
"They're human . . . and sometimes I think I wouldn't want to be them just observing how people react when they walk into a room, particularly with Richard Branson," she says.

"I've seen people shove others out of the way to get to him and he literally cannot have five minutes to himself when he's in public. That sort of a life must be very difficult."

Ever the networker, Terri has coaxed some of her high-profile charges to speak at her breakfast events, including racing car champion Craig Lowndes - who she says is so generous with his time she has to pull him away from signing autographs.

She gets a buzz out of putting people together and seeing business come out of the meeting, especially when the result helps charity.

Terri has run events for the Leukaemia Foundation and Make-A-Wish and even gone to jail - for the benefit of the Spinal Injuries Association, of course. She was



Minding their business . . . Terri Cooper has ensured the safety of tennis ace Martina Hingis (left) and John Farnham, and (right) with Austin Powers as an organiser of the Racecourse Road Festival, Ascot

locked up with TV host and former AFL player Richard Champion plus a cluster of others at the old Boggo Road Gaol and had to draw on her contacts to raise money to 'break out'.

The cause perhaps closest to Terri's heart, however, is abuse prevention and education charity Bravehearts, having joined its board last year at the invitation of founder Hetty Johnston.

Terri has no children of her own because 'the circumstances have never been right' but she says her philosophy is to look after the ones here already who aren't being cared for.

At times all of her roles have come together to achieve this, such as when she made friends with a Taskforce Argus detective through Bravehearts and was able to organise police briefings about how to spot pedophiles for staff at a Brisbane venue ahead of a children's concert.

She's not sure where her compassion comes from and puts it down to something

learned from mum Carol but when it comes to strength in a crisis and business sense there's no doubt it was her father who led the way.

Terri and younger brother Peter, a software company marketer living in South Carolina, used to pay out Tom for having 'moths in his wallet' but looking back she reckons it was his level-headed advice that put her in good stead for what was to come.

"Dad always had this saying, whenever we said 'can we go here or have that or do this' he'd always say 'there's a recession you know'," says Terri with a smile.

"Dad's been saying there's a recession coming for the last 30 years and it's a bit of a joke in our family, but one thing he did teach me was you buy something when you have the money."

Terri says her father is the 'life and soul' of her close-knit clan and concedes the thought of losing family or friends is one thing she does find frightening.

Spending time with those close to her is one of the ways Terri likes to relax but when she returns to her apartment after a long day, or night, at work she is perfectly content to enjoy only her own company - and that of her two goldfish.

She loves to curl up with a good detective novel to escape and delves into business books to give her 'a kick up the bum' every morning to keep motivated.

When she's not reading Terri is working on her own two books - one, a networking advice volume, the other a work entitled *Stop Acting Your Age* inspired by the words 'don't you think you are too old to be . . .' that she has heard so often in the past 20 years.

You might also catch her unwinding between meetings with a coffee or glass of wine by the water at Marina Mirage, which is one of her favourite places, somewhere she'll be visiting a lot more often as she seeks to grow her consultancy's Gold Coast profile.



In a premier position . . . Terri and elected Queensland boss Anna Bligh

It has not always been smooth sailing for Terri in the networking business. In fact for the first 18 months she struggled to pay the rent from week to week and had to use her security job for support.

She says that period taught her the difference between 'want' and 'need' but creating the business was worth it because she found her true calling.

"I have realised I was put here to help people," she says.

"It's what my passion is and I finally realised that and got myself into a business and a position where people wanted to be helped, and that makes my life a whole lot easier and a whole lot more warm and fuzzy."

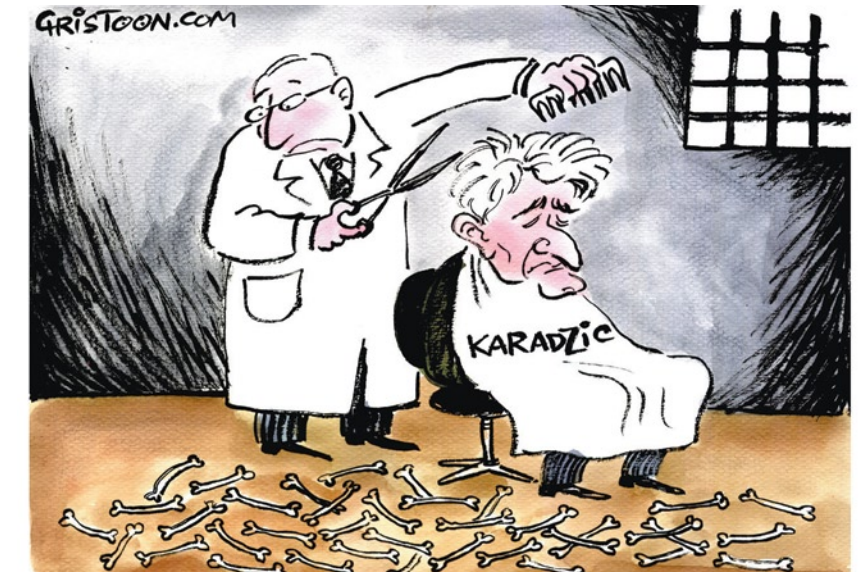
Terri wants to expand her activities on the Gold and Sunshine coasts and reckons while business or social networking websites like Facebook certainly have a place, there will always be value in meeting people face to face.

She is also itching to finish the counsell-

ing diploma she started eight years ago and would love to find the time to do trauma counselling for the emergency services.

"It's something I've always been interested in and just having been at that accident scene (at Royal Pines) that night and knowing that these guys see that and worse on a regular basis and some of them resign from their work because of what they have seen . . . maybe there is an opening for it," she says.

"I think what I saw was fairly mild compared to what these guys would see but it probably took me about a week to get over that and for my mentality to come back to who I was



I've seen people shove others out of the way to get to him (Branson) and he literally cannot have five minutes to himself when he's in public

before, because you do get a lot of flashbacks and wonder if you should have done anything differently.

"You can just imagine what it must be like if you are there saving lives and you lose one."

Terri would ideally like to fit in the counselling alongside her other work, but with such a busy schedule she knows she won't be able to keep up the same pace indefinitely.

She says she might eventually reduce her security work to only major events if the two jobs become too much, but you get the feeling it will take a lot of pressure for her to give it up entirely.

"I would keep doing it providing I can physically handle it and can combine my business and my security," she says.

"Obviously my business has to be the priority but for the time being I'm coping and enjoying it so when I stop enjoying it, that's when I'll stop doing it.

"I'm extremely happy with my life." ■



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