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A modern day odyssey one step at a time

If there is any truth in the saying that *'we live in deeds, not years'* then the other day I met two young men who must be nearly as old as their predecessor in adventure, Homer's Odysseus.

James Castrission a Greek-Australian and his partner in adventure **Justin Jones**, aged 29 and 28 respectively in 'human' years are not only kayakers but

first pair to travel unassisted the 2275 kilometres on foot - and sometimes skis - from the edge of the Antarctic to the South Pole and back again. Along the way, they raised almost \$60,000 for the Sony Foundation charitable campaign You Can that strives to improve services, support and care for adolescents and young adults with cancer.

and contagious enthusiasm reflecting their free-spirited and adventurous nature, the boys held the audience spellbound with a genuine optimism so profoundly moving that it could re-write Nike slogans.

James holds a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of Sydney, and has worked both as an Accountant and Management

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also expert mountaineers, rock climbers, bushwalkers, marathon runners and yachtsmen.

Better known as 'Cas and Jonesy' their travels tend to take them to off-the-beaten-path locations covering the globe's harshest landscapes. They made world headlines in 2008 after crossing the Tasman Sea from Australia to New Zealand in a kayak. In addition to their Trans-Tasman feat they have climbed Alaskan mountains, run ultra-marathons and deep-water solo rock-climbed in Thailand.

The boys who epitomise the human thirst for adventure and exploration again made history earlier this year by becoming the

On 27 April Randwick City Council hosted a civic reception to honour their history making achievement.

Randwick Mayor Councillor Scott Nash praised the pair for their courage and success.

"Theirs is an inspirational tale of adventure and mateship but their dedication to raising funds for You Can is just as impressive," he said.

"They are remarkable and worthy role models, particularly for young people in our community."

At the reception, Cas and Jonesy mesmerized the audience with their powerpoint presentation *"Crossing the Ice: To Hell and Back - A Journey Across a Frozen Wasteland."* With an unaffected

Consultant for Deloitte Touche Tomatsu, while Justin has completed a Bachelor of Advanced Science with Honours at the University of New South Wales. They have remained best friends since meeting at Knox Grammar School in Sydney. Jonesy proudly says that as a boarder at school, he spent every weekend at Cas' place.

"I was more or less adopted into Cas' family. You could almost call me Greek," he laughs.

For these childhood friends life is an adventure, a path of self-determination, self-motivation and often risk that forces them to have firsthand encounters with the world. While the rest of us are happy to know the world in sec-



onhand ways, Cas and Jonesy want to know the world the way it is, not the way they imagined it. And along the way, by taking themselves to the extremes of their physical and mental capacity for endurance, they learn what they themselves are capable of.

So where did their journey start?

According to John Castrission Cas' father, he encouraged his children from a young age to enjoy camping. He let them light their own fires and pitch their own tent. He says that by age five, James had developed impeccable navigation skills.

"I took them camping to the most remote places. By the time he was five, James could navigate by the stars." Mr Castrission said proudly.

Jonesy however, says it all began during their expedition of the Tasman Sea in 2008.

"We did two months and an extra 11kms; we had shark attacks against the kayak. We were paddling along, relatively nice and calm when James just stopped and put the paddle down. I said 'Mate, are you going to paddle any time soon?' To which James replied, 'Imagine this ocean was frozen and we were on skis, how lovely would it look? Should we do an Antarctica expedition?'"

In full storytelling mode, Jonesy continued.

"I said 'Mate we are still in the midst of this... not even close to finishing...let's talk about this on dry land.'" Later as Jonesy lay in an ambulance to be transported to hospital, Cas gave it another shot.

"Mate, we are back on land now.... what do you think about Antarctica?"

After a gruelling journey of 89 days with only two sets of skis, one spare pole and pulling 160kg each on the sleds in one of the world's most unpredictable and unforgiving landscapes, Cas and Jonesy completed their trek on Australia Day this year, just in time for the last flight out of Antarctica for the season.

Sleep deprived and surviving only on rations for the latter part of the trip, the boys described the horror of hallucinations, fatigue and injuries.

They agree that the first months and the last week of the journey were the most challenging. Losing 55 kilograms of weight between them, at times they only managed to travel a kilometre an hour. Nightmare winds, heavy snowfall and days of total white-out turned what was already a monumental

challenge into a Homeric epic battle of their wills against the weather.

"It was horrible. How I imagine hell is like. We had an array of skin infections, we were mentally low, we were on half rations on the way back and our bodies were falling apart."

And, just as 100 years ago, from the other side of Antarctica, there was a famous race between small teams led by Robert Scott of England and Norway's Roald Amundsen to be the first to get to the South Pole - won by Amundsen and his men by 34 days - Cas and Jonesy became aware that they were sharing the polar wilderness with a young Norwegian Aleksander Gamme who was attempting the same feat as themselves. His presence out there trying to achieve that same almost impossible feat added a new twist to an already fascinating story.

Gamme in fact made it to the South Pole a few days before the young Australians, however in an extreme spirit of mateship the Norwegian waited for them and they triumphantly finished the journey together.

"We didn't like the feeling of being in a race. In a way we were kind of racing talking on satellite phone every few weeks... there was camaraderie. He beat us to the South Pole and waited for us a few days and we skied the last few miles together. The funniest sight ever was a Norwegian waving an Australian flag in total elation and joy. It was incredible." Cas explained.

Just as our Antarctic explorers conquered great distances in the pursuit of knowledge, Cass and Jonesy in embarking on their own journey reached out to a very special community along the way revealing that the trek involved much more than just getting there before Gamme.

As well as a physical and mental challenge, the trek also raised much-needed funds for the charity You Can which provides critical assistance including age-appropriate treatment and facilities for young Australians living with cancer.



Cancer is the leading cause of disease related death amongst Australia's teen population. One in 100 Australians will be diagnosed with cancer before the age of 30. Learning that in the past few decades there has been little improvement in survival outcomes for 15 to 30 year olds, Cas and Jonesy responded to the urgent need for action pledging to raise funds for You Can through their trip.

"We went through some harsh moments and we did it for the You Can patients, not just for ourselves", Jonesy said. Messages written from the You Can kids at home and displayed on the inside of our tent got us through the trip. It was really inspiring looking up at their notes and helped us put everything in perspective."

Jones said that messages of support from home, posted on their website and a Facebook page with more than 2000 followers also helped boost their morale during some of the toughest times.

Despite the obstacles encountered along the way, like Odysseus Cas and Jonesy through physical stoicism ultimately found their way to the South Pole and back again. What makes them

every bit as appealing as Odysseus is that even when constantly blown (literally) from their course they had to use their resourceful and strategic minds to get back on track.

For example, they did all of the filming and photography themselves.

"The camera batteries had to be warmed on our bodies. We had to wait until it was warm enough and then set up the shot. There was no tripod...we cut snow blocks to put the camera on top of. One person skied to set up the shot then we both skied through and took half an hour to take one photo or do a bit of filming." Jonesy explained.

The boys are currently working on a book and documentary about their Antarctic expedition, due for release in July.

The two young and intrepid explorers with a thirst for adventure that most of us can only imagine are probably at the edge of the best part of their story - planning the next challenge which no doubt is beckoning just like the mysteries of the stars in the night sky beckoned in their childhood.

"James and I just can't sit still. We do feel a belonging, both here in civilization and in the adventurous environment of cold and water and the wild terrain, or whatever you want to call it", Cas explains.

Clearly this duality of belonging encapsulates their lives as epic ancient travellers - respectful of new places, curious and intrepid - extending imaginations to places far beyond the horizon.

Homer would be so proud.

All of us at ALFA magazine congratulate Cas and Jonesy on their extraordinary achievement.

All photos of expedition by James Castrission and Justin Jones

