



For the past six years Bruce “Hopppo” Hopkins has kept a watchful eye on swimmers at Bondi Beach and become a television star along the way. Now, he confesses...

“I’M AN UGLY DRAG QUEEN.”

DNA: Lifeguards are Aussie icons. Do you feel pride in your job?

Hoppo: Definitely! You see people in distress and fear, but when we bring them back to the shore we also see how relieved they are. There's definitely satisfaction and pride. When you resuscitate someone it gets the adrenaline rushing and you're on a high for the next couple of days.

Do people show their appreciation?

Yes, often after they are revived and they've gone to hospital and recovered, they'll come back down to the beach a couple of weeks later to say thank you. It's a really good feeling when you've saved someone's life.

What's the difference between lifeguards and lifesavers?

Lifesavers in the red and yellow are the volunteers who come down to help on the weekends, whereas we're in the blue and employed by the Waverley Council seven days a week, 12 months of the year. Lifeguards are also professionally paid.

You won the Australian Lifeguard Of The Year award in 2006 – that must have been special?

It was pretty good to be in front of my peers. To win when I was in my late 30s was also a really good achievement.

Being the head lifeguard at Waverley must be a big responsibility?

Yeah, it's a massive responsibility, as we look after three beaches. Bondi gets up to 50,000 people a day, so we get really busy

a uniform to put on and we filmed a whole lot of stuff for the show with him. I grew up watching him on *Baywatch* and never thought I'd be working as a lifeguard and he'd come walking into the tower. It was amazing to see him joking around with us in real life.

If one of the lifeguards in the group turned out to be gay, how do you think the guys would deal with it?

I think if any of the guys came out, or we employed anyone who was gay, we'd follow the same process as anyone else, with the proper ethical conduct and treat them equally. But it wouldn't be a problem at all if any of the guys came out. In fact, they'd probably get the usual ribbing and bagging that everyone else gets – but in a fun way, not a bad way.

You get plenty of attention from the ladies, but how do you feel about some of the guys checking you out?

I guess there are guys out there who check us out as well, but as long as we can put a smile on a face – male or female. We're here to do a job and we don't mind who's looking at us.

If you were gay, who would you go for?

I body-doubled for Christopher Atkins on the film *Exchange Lifeguards*. I remember he was a good-looking bloke and a pin-up boy back then. I'd say him.

What other body-double work did you do?

I also doubled for the South African guy in *Muriel's Wedding* (Daniel Lapaine). I've

things to do, but it's all part of the job.

What have been some of the most rewarding experiences?

The father of a mate of mine, who I grew up with, had a massive heart attack in the car park. He was dead and we revived him. A few weeks later he came back to thank us. You could really see how happy and appreciative they were.

Have you ever come across a shark?

Yeah, they come through a bit. Once I was paddling back from Clovelly to Bondi and one came up and cruised alongside for about 100 metres. You often see them around, but they don't normally come for you. I'm more concerned about crossing the road at Campbell Parade than going out in the ocean!

What's the best piece of advice you could give to people swimming in the ocean?

Float if you're in any sort of trouble in a rip and save your energy. Ninety per cent of the time you will drift onto the sandbank and be able to stand up. It's only 10 per cent of the time that the rip takes you right out to the back and then you could swim back across anyway. Just don't panic, because when you panic the lactic acid builds up in the arms and that's like putting 50-kilogram weights on your arms. It's very difficult to stay afloat when that happens.

Who is your diva?

Pink. She's got that sexy look and I like the way she performs. I love *So What*.

What has been one of your funniest experiences on the beach?

There was a guy on the beach who had a remote control put into a lounge chair, and he had a ghetto blaster built into it as well. He was cruising along the promenade at Bondi with his music blaring in this remote-control chair!

Has Bondi Rescue given you any aspirations for a career in the media?

It's opened a lot of doors already and if opportunities come along, I'd love to do more. After school I worked at radio station 2GB for four years and I've always had a bit of a passion for doing things in the media.

Even Dancing With The Stars?

Yeah, I'd even give Dancing With The Stars a go. But they'd want to give me a talented partner because I pretty much dance like a Thunderbird. I'd be out in the first round!

Have you ever skinny-dipped?

Yeah, growing up as a kid we used to do it. It's a bit of Aussie culture there, doing nudie runs or skinny-dipping in the ocean at night. I think most people growing up on the beaches have done that.

When push comes to shove, are you a speedos or boardies guy?

I sway towards boardies. Occasionally I'll wear the speedos if I'm swimming in the pool, but out and about in public I'd have to say boardies.

And what's under the boardies?

[Laughing] Freeballs!

Bondi Rescue returns to Network Ten this summer. Keep up with Hoppo by following him on Twitter @lifeguardhoppo

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in summer. There's a lot of pressure.

Does making a reality TV show make you self-conscious or are you used to it now?

I'm pretty much used to it now. The first year was different, with cameras coming in and all, but now we have up to 24 cameras a day and they're all in the background, so we don't really notice them as much. We kind of forget they're there and the crew has been the same crew since we started. They know exactly how we work and vice versa. In fact, they've become part of the lifeguard team now.

Do you get recognised in the street?

Yeah, especially when we travel interstate or overseas. I do the Europe trip to countries like Sweden, Spain, Wales, England and Ireland and the show is popular all over the world now. When I was in Dubai we got noticed everywhere we went and the show has gone number one in Asia. A lot of people at Bondi now come and get photos or something to sign. We do have a wide range of characters and personalities on the show. They relate to people all around the world and I think that's why it works so well. Everyone has their favourites.

And you met David Hasselhoff!

He came down last summer. We gave him

done *Water Rats* and a few other things involving water stunts the actors can't do.

Footy players have their Mad Monday antics. Do you guys have anything similar?

Even though we go 12 months of the year, once the summer has finished all of the guys get together for a bit of a team bonding thing and have a bit of a dress-up in different outfits. Some might be Spiderman or have army gear, or some might even do cross-dressing. It's all fun.

We believe you did drag in Melbourne.

[Laughing] Yeah! We did a thing for Starry Starry Night [The Alannah And Madeline Foundation] in Melbourne, where three of us dressed up and did a *Priscilla* act, singing *I Will Survive*. I didn't get any hits that night, so I don't think I'm a very attractive drag queen!

Putting the sun, surf and sand aside, you have a very serious job. What are some dramatic rescues you've experienced?

We get a lot of suicides, which means you are dealing with dead bodies, and that's pretty traumatic. There are also a lot of resuscitations from heart attacks or drowning. So there are people with no heartbeat or sign of breathing and we are trying to get them back to life with defibrillators and oxygen. They are tough