

It is an operation like no other – a foot goes on backwards to become

# Kylie's story

She's from a speck in the ocean so small it isn't on any map. That she was found at all was a miracle – let alone flown to Melbourne for surgery that would enable her to walk. GRANT McARTHUR has followed Kylie from her Pacific home, through her medical treatment and watched as she walked unaided for the very first time.

IT'S a tiny, wobbly and unconvincing step. She's concentrating but nothing will stop her big white smile.

The pure joy in the giggle as the new left leg takes her weight fully gives only the slightest clue just how huge these steps are.

When Kylie Cyrus finally talks, you'd never guess how long everyone has waited for this moment: "Look, I am standing on my prosthetic leg. It's better than my little leg," she says with a laugh.

It's October 18 this year and Kylie is in the middle of Melbourne's Fitzroy Gardens — a world away from the remotest of South Pacific jungles where she was born and where her journey to walk began more than five years ago.

With tears in her eyes, Kylie's mother Lissing knows just how far those tiny steps have taken her.

"When I see her walking on her new leg, it just feels like it is a new world," Lissing says.

That Kylie is able to take her first step aged nine is a medical and humanitarian marvel. But when you think about it the most amazing thing is that she was ever found and given the chance to walk at all.

The journey here is about 3100km. But, like most things in Kylie's life, it's impossible to be exact — her small island of Pascaris doesn't rate a mention on maps.

Her Vanuatu island is one of the most remote and poorest corners of one of the world's most remote and poorest nations.

The island has no electricity, although occasionally a jerry can of diesel arrives and a generator will spark into action. Otherwise, the days start and end by the sun's rise and set.

There are no roads, no cars, no motorbikes. Only a couple of bicycles.

The black volcanic earth is like ice as soon as it rains. No one hurries, so falling is not an issue.

People there live without money; they take fruit and vegetables from the jungle and fish from the sea.

Occasionally money is needed for schooling, so

families earn what they need by collecting coconuts, burning them and rendering them to make copra, which they sell to passing traders.

Some also sell fish and lobster, which is taken to Port Vila — a day's sail south — and sold in tourist resorts for at least 10 times more than the islanders ever see.

The island's head count is a wild guess that varies depending on who you ask, but general consensus is between 1000 and 1300.

A census is held every 10 years, so it was only in 2010 that Kylie's birth was registered and she existed officially.

Getting her a passport and visa to come to Australia was an achievement that took several years.

Victorian Sally Peet had been fighting for six years to get Kylie medical attention.

A former nurse, Sally and husband Martin had recently retired, bought a yacht and begun their dream of sailing around the world.

In Port Vila they met a humanitarian desperate to get medical supplies to the Masculin Islands.

Offering their help, the Peets landed on Pascaris in 2005 and Sally could barely believe her eyes when she first saw Kylie.

"Her mother came to me and said she had a sick baby," Sally said.

"Watching her walk my heart sank that a little girl, with such a strong dynamic personality, could actually push herself to that extent while in that much pain. She was amazing."

The Peets returned to the island regularly so Sally could run much-needed medical clinics.

Sally's biggest priority was getting help for Kylie. She instructed Lissing and her husband Tavock to make sure their daughter learned English, did physiotherapy and swimming exercises every day to prevent her becoming more crippled.

She then spent years knocking on the doors of hospitals across Australia and New Zealand, approaching surgeons and doctors directly.

Lissing and Tavock, the village chief, had sailed to

**Bright future:** Kylie recovering in Melbourne; and at home in Vanuatu (right) with mum Lissing and sister Qwen.

Main Picture: MANUELA CIFRA

