

The Fashion Show

By Mick Mason 'ia' Journal 171 March 2001

Who in their right mind at the age of 57 would even think of prancing along a catwalk as a male model? I think it would take a special reason and a certain amount of confidence and a lot of support from my wife, friends and family. A few years ago I probably had little of either, but times change and funny things, even pleasant things can happen. Let's start at the beginning quite a few years ago.

I used to smile when my father-in-law gave me instructions on getting to Devon from Oakham in Rutland by car. Every change of road was coupled with phrases like. "At the King's Head. turn left" or "Straight on at the Black Swan roundabout". Looking back it was an easy way of remembering the route. A few years later I had a different reason for remembering the locations of pubs, inns or hotels when I was diagnosed with a funny sounding illness called ulcerative colitis. It didn't mean much at the time just an inconvenience. I remember as a youngster in the early 50's getting out of the after dinner washing up by dashing to the toilet, it became a family joke.

After putting up with colitis for where although I had no major flare ups it was always there at a steady level as I called it a kindly doctor thought I should have a better quality of life and I spent the next twelve months on varying doses of steroids and other medication. When only on the higher doses was any slight improvement shown and at Christmas 1997 things did change for the worse.

One check-up was quickly followed by another and laying on a hospital bed my kindly doctor showed my wife Ann, and myself a photo of my colon that looked like something from outer space. I think we had both been expecting the worst with the change in symptoms and were rather relieved in a way that an operation was the only way to improve my waste system.

We knew very little of the various alternatives in surgery, but were guided due to the added complication of multiple polyps. Looking back I am relieved I didn't really have any choice because for those who do, even with help support of doctors and stoma nurses, it must, at times, be a very difficult decision to make.

Before my operation, my stoma nurse gave advice and help and also a friend put me in touch with her friend, whose stoma was seventeen years old! This conversation someone I didn't know lasted around two hours and answered many questions without really asking them.

My operation, shortly afterwards was complicated by the finding of a tumour and so followed thirty weeks chemotherapy, but that's another story.

Over the next year, I managed to reach little targets I set myself (under a wife's watchful eye) the highlight, driving 40 miles to see, for the first time, my telephone visitor.

When I read in the ia Journal of a training course for visitors, it seemed a natural thing to see if I would be acceptable and my application was forwarded by my friendly stoma nurse. I saw it as a way of giving something back for the help I had received. I considered myself rather fortunate to be selected for the course, as I thought having only a baby stoma might mean I was not experienced enough. In a way the course was what eventually led me on to the catwalk. I realised I had actually taken part on the course with role play which, whilst employed, any mention of I would miss by using my colitis as an excuse to disappear to the toilet until it was over. I am sure this covered my lack of self-confidence.

So after dropping some books off (for a charity stall) at the home of Mary Bell, the chairperson of the Leicestershire ia. she asked if I would consider being a model at a fashion show. In the past I would have run a mile. However as I mentioned, funny things can happen and without hesitation I found myself saying yes. Luckily, I found out later that although it was being held on a Saturday afternoon. Leicester City were playing away.

The fashion show was held at the Leicester Royal Infirmary and run by Helen Ghandi and her stoma department staff and I was quite confident and at ease on my two visits to pick items from 'Chums' catalogue and then to try them on later that week. The night before, I actually slept like a baby and, despite the heavy rain on the Saturday, arrived in a fairly decent state (with Ann for support and as a photographer).

Helen had organised quite a couple of hours. Besides the fashion show there were displays by around seven stoma care suppliers and the 'ia' and British Colostomy Association. Also, I am told, a very informative chat from the Red Cross on make up. There wasn't a lot of time for me to see those, as duty called. I resisted being made-up and about ten of us sorted out our clothes.

For my first walk, I had chosen a pair of grey high-waisted trousers with a casual four-pocket shirt - unfortunately I never noticed it was a size too large - which I wore outside the trousers. By this time, I think we were all hoping not to be first, but not too terrified.

The music struck up and a member of the Hospital Radio Leicester Fox set the scene and off we went. Well, Eric did and the rest of us watched and tried to pick up a few useful tricks of the trade. The reception from around seventy people was fantastic. The cameras were flashing and even the *Leicester Mercury* newspaper cameraman was there. However he did seem to get side-tracked and wanted to photograph a rather stunning young lady who followed Eric (not that I can blame him).

My shirt was a little large, but the compere passed it off with the comment that I was a growing lad. Down the catwalk I strutted at a rather leisurely pace, turned at the end and did my best impression of a Chris Eubank pose before retreating to the start line only to be told to do another trip. All seemed to go well and I actually managed a hit of a smile and a few nods to the audience.

Then it was back into our little den (a rather large lecture theatre) to change into a pair of blue denim casual trouser with an elasticated waist and also a fleecy blue jacket. This time I really enjoyed it and walked along with the coat draped over my shoulder and struggled a bit getting it for the second walk but the compere managed to pull it over my arm and that was that.

I felt the ten of us had helped Helen to put on quite a reasonable display and when we all did a grand finale all together the applause was something special. Then it was time for mince pies, biscuits, wine, raffle tickets and a look at the various displays. Several people passed comments about the clothes all of which were complimentary and after saying a 'Thank you' to all the organisers I was stunned to be given a flower arrangement, which Ann described as the largest she had seen, for my time and trouble.

So that's how it all happened. I had quite a tingle when leaving and felt as if I had given something back which, without the course might not have been possible for me.