

Old Riponians - Helen Mackenzie

The second part of this article, where Helen talks about her experience running with the Olympic Torch, appeared in the Summer 2012 issue of RGS News

Swimming was always part of my life. My sister and I showed some flair and mum helped out by counting lengths at the Spa Baths as we ticked off our bronze, silver and gold awards. She and dad then qualified as AA officials and that's how it all began.

I gained national and international recognition early in my career, and then I pursued the teaching side. I soon became an Advanced Swimming teacher, Coach and Course Tutor. as well teaching lifesaving, parent and baby, Aquafit and what I loved most, teaching people with special needs.

By the age of 18 I knew that I wanted to teach, not just swimming but all manner of sports. Having eventually passed my A Levels, I left Ripon for Liverpool and the I.M Marsh P.E. College, the place where aspiring P.E. teachers went, including some who taught me at RGS.

I loved Liverpool and all aspects of university life. It was here I met my husband, John, and I left in 1990 with a first class honours degree in Secondary Physical Education and English. John and I started our married life in Northumberland but I always had a hankering to return to Ripon, not least to be near mum when we lost dad.

When the Director of Sport job came up in Ripon, I knew I had to apply. It wasn't just a case of applying for a job I liked the look of, but of moving our daughters, Laura and Amy away from their friends, so it wasn't an easy decision to make.

I got the job and started work at RGS in September 2006. I work with all 19 primary schools in the Ripon Cluster and spend 3 days a week in RGS. To put it simply, I love my job.

In July 2009, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. The general consensus of opinion was that it had picked a fight with the wrong person, that if anyone could beat it, I could. I was buoyed up by everyone's faith in me, particularly my husband's. He never faltered in the belief that I would recover completely. He has now told me that it was the only way he could function through a living nightmare.

Chemotherapy is a hideous, poisonous substance that is so toxic that, even as it's dripping into you, is covered by a black bag, My G.P. said that chemo has only one thing going for it - it kills cancer. And so I took it, in eight gruelling sessions, three weeks apart. I lost all my hair, eyebrows, eyelashes and nasal hair. On the plus side I had underarms to die for.

The worst side effect was the pain. My joints ached, walking upstairs was like a marathon, and I was fatigued like in the worst form of flu. I who had been so fit and healthy was reduced to being carried to the bathroom by my husband.

One day during the 3rd cycle, at the start of a supposed good week, I started to shake uncontrollably and felt really ill. This was Rigors and I was in the throes of Febrile Neutropaenia, where the white blood cell count is so low, the body can no longer fight infection. A chemo patient's count is about 3 and they worry if it drops to 1. When I reached hospital, my count was 0.01. I was delirious, hallucinating, shaking, fitting and shivering with cold, despite a temperature of 41.2.

This was it- touch and go time. The nurses battled to find a vein that hadn't collapsed to administer emergency antibiotics. 'Will I have to stay in?' I asked. 'It's just that I've got an Old Riponians' netball match on Saturday.' 'You nearly die and you're worried about netball,' barked my doctor. 'It's all a question of priorities,' I replied.

That Sunday, our daughter, Laura, was to be the Sancta Lucia- the bringer of light- in Littlethorpe Church's Christmas celebrations. John and I took the decision to discharge me from hospital so we could see it. The words 'In case you never can again' hung in the air. The doctors knew this was something we had to do as a family and so armed with antibiotics we headed for Littlethorpe.

The service was ethereal- a little country church in darkness, a soprano singing the Sancta Lucia as the congregation hum the tune, little girls in long white robes, and Laura leading the procession, her head crowned with candles, bringing the light to the darkened church. My face was wet with tears, I was silently weeping. I am filling up now as I write this.

The next problem was that less than half way through the chemo, I had lost faith in my ability to tolerate the treatment. It wouldn't be the cancer that killed me but the treatment. I looked like a walking corpse, no hair, my face swollen with steroids, bereft of expression. As each session took its toll, I became

weaker and weaker, but my G.P came round regularly to boost my confidence in my ability to fight this disease.

I questioned my oncologist (a nice man but I hated him) as to why I had to have 8 sessions of chemo when everyone else only had to have 6. 'I studied for 7 years to be an oncologist.' he said. ' I don't take poisoning you lightly nor do I teach you how to play netball.' In other words, let me do my job.

I'm ashamed to write this bit, as I think most people think of me as a strong character, but for my last 3 chemo sessions, I had to be sedated, as I was in such a state. But, I made it, I got through the treatment, and thus began the road to recovery.

Helen Mackenzie