

Nothing can *BRING US DOWN*

Two women with Down's syndrome tell Woman how they live life to the fullest

'I'LL BE THE VOICE FOR THOSE WHO CAN'T SPEAK'

Heidi Crowter, 27, is a campaigner for Down's syndrome rights, including the right to life. She lives in Coventry with her husband James, 29.

The night I was born my mum Liz told me she was afraid. Not because I had Down's syndrome, but because she was worried I'd never get married, or live a 'normal' life. But even as a baby, I was determined to prove that I was a fighter.

Born with a hole in my heart, I had to have open-heart surgery. I was diagnosed with leukaemia, pneumonia and kidney failure, and I even stopped breathing, but as I recovered, I kept smiling.

I started mainstream school, just like my three siblings, and having Down's syndrome never stopped me making friends. I was a born chatterbox - I loved to talk, dance and be silly. After I finished school, I started working at a hair salon, and I dyed my hair all different colours - never afraid to stand out.

Aged 20, I moved to my own flat in a supported-living centre, and when I met a young man called James, who also had Down's syndrome, over Facebook, we became firm friends.

After a year of messaging each other online, in October 2017 we met in person at a bowling alley in Basingstoke.

James, then 24, arrived with flowers and chocolates and, after an amazing date, we shared a kiss. Later, I found out that James had gone home that day and written his wedding speech!

We both knew we'd found the one. A year later, when James proposed, my mum admitted how she'd felt on the night I was born. 'What a ridiculous thing to think,' I told her, waving the ring on my finger.

I'd spent my whole life proving that Down's syndrome couldn't hold me back. So when I found out the UK law states that babies with Down's syndrome, or a 'serious handicap', can

be aborted right up until birth, I was stunned. All other pregnancies can only be terminated up until 24 weeks. It was heart-breaking to think of people not being given a chance, just because of an extra chromosome.

Fighting for change

In February 2020, I started a campaign called Downright Discrimination, fighting to change the law. I wanted to be the voice for those who couldn't speak, to show we have a right to exist and nothing could stop us living life to the full.

In July 2020, when lockdown restrictions allowed, James and I married in a ceremony with just 30 people, and we live-streamed our wedding to 200 guests.

Both me and my husband have Down's syndrome, but that doesn't make us any less entitled to life.

Now, James has moved into my assisted-living flat; we cook, watch football and we love each other just the way we are.

I won't stop fighting until the law is amended. My life is worth living, and I wouldn't change a thing.

* mencap.org.uk



With James on their wedding day



At a signing of her book *I'm Just Heidi!*

'I'M LIVING MY DREAM'

Ellen Goodey-Campbell, 40, works for Mencap as a Lived Experience Advisor and is also a part-time actor. She lives in east London, with her husband Allan, 37.

Twirling around, wrapped up in a white bed sheet with a pillowcase draped over my head, I clutched some flowers, pretending I was a beautiful bride. I was born with Down's syndrome, but my mum Linda and dad Chris raised me to believe I could achieve anything, and as a little girl, I dreamed of getting married.

From an early age, my parents encouraged me to be independent. I attended mainstream schools, made my own friends, even met my first boyfriend aged 16. Although some subjects at school were difficult, I fell in love with drama. On stage, I could be anyone or anything - I once played a teddy bear! Stratford Circus, my local theatre, became a home for me.

Aged 25, in 2007, I moved into a flat with my brother Michael, then 25, and later carried on living independently with a friend as a flatmate. But as an adult, I became more aware of the stigmas surrounding disabilities, and I wanted to do something to change people's perceptions.

Helping others

In 2010, I started working for Mencap. I became co-chair of a sex and relationships group, creating accessible resources for people with learning disabilities, to help them understand things like consent, and that people with disabilities can have healthy relationships. I'd had several boyfriends myself, but what I really wanted was a husband!

By the age of 33, I'd been a



Ellen and Allan are excited for their future together

bridesmaid for friends and family four times, and I never forgot my childhood dream of wanting to get married. In August 2015, I joined a dating agency called Stars in the Sky, for people with disabilities, and they matched me with Allan, then 30.

Mum came to the restaurant with me and sat at a different table, and as Allan and I chatted over our burgers

and chips, we shared a love of musicals, the theatre and going to the pub! He was kind, handsome and funny - the perfect gentleman, and I knew he was the one.

We continued dating, met each other's friends and families and loved spending Friday nights together at our local pub - me

with a glass of wine and Allan with a pint of cider. And in March 2019, Allan proposed to me on the platform at Stratford railway station. Finally, my dream was coming true!

'Getting married was a new beginning'

Throughout the COVID pandemic, we kept in touch with video calls, and when restrictions were lifted, Allan came to stay every weekend.

In July 2022, I slipped into a beautiful satin gown with a sweetheart neckline and sparkling, diamanté belt, and with a starlit curtain behind us, we said our vows, swearing to love each other for the rest of our lives.

The day was everything I'd hoped it would be, and for me and Allan it was a new beginning.

Now, Allan has moved into my flat. He also has learning difficulties, so we have support, but we live independently. I love children, and I'd like to work in childcare - who knows, perhaps one day we will have a baby of our own.

I've never known a life without Down's syndrome, but I wouldn't change a thing about myself. I've got a good job, friends, family and a husband who adores me. What more could I want?



WORDS: FRANCESCA WOODSTOCK. PHOTOS: ANDREW KING PHOTOGRAPHY, SHIRALEE SWAN PHOTOGRAPHY