

News

MS sufferer uses her poetry as an inspiration for others

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AT the age of 19 Julie Stevens was an athletic, outgoing music student at Cambridge University.

She should have been looking forward to attending her first May Ball with her classmates, as well as honing her skills as a talented pianist.

But instead she had all these experiences taken away when she began experiencing the symptoms of multiple sclerosis (MS).

However Julie, now 48, who lives in St Ives, has used her experiences to influence her poetry under the name Jumping Jules.

She has been penning inspiring and often funny poetry for around a year-and-a-half since her MS symptoms progressed enough for her to need a walking aid when getting around.

Julie studied education and music at Homerton College at the University of Cambridge, which is where she first started writing poems – and where she first started experiencing symptoms of MS.

She said: “I hadn’t a clue what was going on. I was 19 at Homerton and I was an athlete.

“I was also a pianist and the first thing that happened is my left hand stopped working. I couldn’t play the piano.

“I couldn’t coordinate, I couldn’t stretch the hand. It was devastating that I couldn’t play though it came back after a course of steroids, but they didn’t tell me it was MS at that stage. They just said it was a virus.

“I missed my first May Ball because I had to go home and rest. As a fresher student that was horrible.”

Julie said two years later she was cycling uphill on the railway bridge on Hills Road when she found her legs were feeling heavier and heavier.

“I just knew something was up. The hospital were working on it, but it was annoying because I didn’t get to do all the things that I wanted to do,” she said.

“It took five years for the hospital to diagnose it. I knew something wasn’t right.”

She started writing poetry around this time, but did not follow it through after graduation.

Julie instead became a teacher at Hatton Park Primary School in



Julie Stevens, also known as Jumping Jules, is a poet with multiple sclerosis

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Longstanton, but had to retire 12 years ago because her MS had progressed too much.

“It became a bit more serious. I started getting really tired really easily. It feels like my legs are turning to jelly,” she said.

“It became too hard and eventually it progressed so much that I gave up.

“I was very upset to leave teaching after 14 years. I missed the banter with the children, I loved that.

“It’s hard work teaching. They have an incredible job to do. You never get to the end of your list. You never finish what you were aiming to do.

“However, my problems resurfaced big time when I was pregnant. I had problems with my hip and was on crutches for seven months.

“This MS relapse improved to an extent but left me with lasting problems with my legs. I needed to use a walking stick from then.

“So my last day was one sat in the

school library resting my hip and leg. They gave me a leaving do once it was clear I wouldn’t be coming back.”

Julie’s favourite subject to teach – perhaps unsurprisingly – was English and she loved teaching children to write.

Last year, her MS progressed further, meaning she needed to start using an electric scooter or wheelchair if she had to walk longer distances, but it was around this time that her poetry took off.

“The good thing about the poems is I can sit down, take it easy, and go into my own zone,” she said.

Julie gets letters and messages of support from fellow MS patients who say her poems use the words they cannot find to describe their experiences.

“It’s quite therapeutic for me, knowing I’m helping other people,” she added.

But it is not all serious. Some of the poems are a bit more humorous.

Many of her poems are based on her day-to-day life, sometimes about

MS and some are about parenting.

Monster Mum is about herself looking at the mess her children had created in the house, and screaming and shouting through the house – a feeling many can relate to.

Another is called *I’m Fine*, which Julie said had resonated with a lot of people.

The poem describes the feeling of having to tell everyone you are fine when you are not.

Julie said: “It’s called that because this is what people say when people ask how are you.

“Since writing that poem lots of people have said to me ‘you’re not allowed to say ‘I’m fine’ now. You have to tell me exactly what you’re thinking’ and the same goes to them.

“It has become a real talking point. It has been such a good message to get out there.”

The inspiration for many of her poems are the symptoms of MS, which permeate every aspect of her life.

She added: “My legs never feel normal. They feel heavy. Imagine

you’ve got a sack of potatoes tied to each leg and you’re dragging those along.

“It’s like that and the more you walk, the worse it gets. It’s like I’ve got an elf following me around throwing in a potato every now and again.”

Her arms are also not as strong as they could be and her left hand shakes sometimes.

“Even when I’m doing nothing I feel like I’m walking in a fog sometimes,” Julie said.

“It makes your legs and body weaker and heavier. It also makes thinking harder to do. My short term memory is awful too.”

As well as writing, Julie is usually found reading poetry. Some of her favourite poets are Ted Hughes, Brian Moses and Ely-based Wendy Coates.

“I’m always reading poetry. People say if you read a lot of poetry you become a better poet and I think that’s absolutely true,” she added.

Julie’s poetry is available to read online at jumpingjulespoetry.com.