

Journeys of Inspiration



*Rolf Benirschke was the placekicker for the San Diego Chargers for 10 seasons, but his career nearly ended because of a difficult battle with ulcerative colitis. He would require ileostomy surgery but returned to play in the NFL and has been educating and encouraging ostomy patients and WOC nurses ever since. His illness led him to start his patient engagement company, Legacy Health Strategies, and author three books, including his autobiography, *Alive & Kicking*. He is married and the father of four children, three with special needs. www.rolfbenirschke.com.*

Remember when you were a kid and dreamed about what you wanted to be when you grew up? For many of us our list of dream jobs included doctor, a star athlete, policeman, fire fighter or maybe even a superhero. While only a few kids see their dream become a reality, Mark Woodcock of the UK, fulfilled his. He told his mum when he was a little boy that someday he wanted to drive a fast car with the flashing red lights on. He became a special constable (policeman) at just eighteen years of age!

Living the Dream

For the first ten years of his career, Mark lived out his dream of helping others by responding to everything from murders and thefts to assaults and terrorism. After ten years, he became a roads policing officer where his job was to target criminals using the roads. “The job comes with its own dangers and makes every day unique and interesting,” he explains, his face lighting up.

To say Mark’s life is unpredictable and a bit complicated would be an understatement. Mark’s wife is also a detective in the police force and they have two children, ages eight and five. But Mark knows how to keep everyone organized — through a massive kind of Excel spreadsheet, he explains. If you spend a few minutes with Mark, you get the sense that he is measured, disciplined and likes to control as much of his life as possible so everything goes according to plan. He is not a guy who likes surprises.

In 2015, however, about a year into his marriage while on holiday in Italy with his wife, he noticed blood in his stool. This was not part of any plan. Because Mark is not one of those people who thinks something will fix itself, he immediately had a colonoscopy once home. In the recovery room immediately after the procedure and while just coming out of anesthesia, his doctor told Mark that he had ulcerative colitis, but that it was “No big deal.”

Unplanned Education

With a grin and a chuckle Mark recalls, “They said it in a way like I should know exactly what they were talking about. Doesn’t everyone know what ulcerative colitis is?” he said with a wry smile shaking his head. So, with no family history and absolutely no knowledge of the disease, Mark began to educate himself. His practical, analytical mind researched the disease and he concluded that the disease was going to change his life. But, since his UC was in the initial stages, his doctor was optimistic it could be managed with medication and started Mark on a regimen of mesalamine: two tablets in the morning and two tablets in the evening.

For two years Mark felt fine and remembers, “I was eating and drinking pretty much like I always did, even alcohol, so it was easy to forget that the UC was even there.” Then he had his first major flare-up and he never forgot about his disease again. The bloody diarrhea and fatigue became constant. He was forced to step away from work for three months.

Miracle Drug

His skin became covered with spots and his legs and ankles started to swell, symptoms of a form of arthritis. With his disease progressing, his doctor changed his treatment and Mark started getting infusions of Remicade every eight weeks. During those eight weeks between infusions, he had no symptoms. “It felt like I was taking a miracle drug and I didn’t even think about my UC. It was amazing,” Mark explained. He went into full remission and life was good...for a year.

And then, in February of 2020, right before COVID hit, his symptoms came roaring back. The bloody diarrhea, aches, pains and the horrible spots on his face returned. Like many UC patients, Mark’s life became a roller coaster and got progressively worse. In March of 2020, he was admitted to the hospital for a week and treated with IV antibiotics and steroids

to try to calm everything down. Unfortunately, Mark did not respond well to the steroids and suffered dreadful side effects. On one occasion, he went to pick his kids up from school and by the time they had returned home his eyes had nearly swollen shut.

Covid Lockdown

Unfortunately, the timing of that hospitalization could not have been worse as it coincided with a COVID lockdown. As Mark watched the drama unfold on TV from his hospital bed, it all felt surreal and he wondered, "What is going on here?" He was labeled as "extremely clinically vulnerable" and became part of the "shielding program." Once he was discharged from the hospital, he had to remain confined in his house for 12 weeks. He was even restricted from going outside for a walk! It was a horrible time made more challenging because his wife was working from home, his kids were out of school and the mental challenges on top of his physical pain were almost too much to bear. Looking back, he says with a sad shake of his head, "I was just happy to escape that time period with my sanity."

But Mark got through that rough time and returned to work in June of 2020 despite his symptoms getting worse. He mapped out where every toilet was on his beat and tried his best to manage his UC and not let it affect his life. He slowly began to accept that the disease was going to win.

Hard Decision

In August of 2020, Mark had another bad flare-up and got terribly sick. He lost a lot of weight very quickly and found himself back in the hospital. After three weeks, his doctor finally gave him two choices. Try another medication with a 20% chance of success or get a j-pouch or permanent ileostomy. Mark had known that this day might come. He weighed the risks



Police constable Mark Woodcock with a Royal Humane Society Resuscitation Certificate.

before concluding, "Enough is enough. I need to get on with my life...just take it all out and give me a permanent stoma. I don't want to live like this any longer."

As the doctors prepared him for the surgery, Mark had time to learn more about what was coming and to have some difficult and emotional conversations with his wife. Unfortunately, those discussions were made even more challenging because they had to be done over FaceTime due to COVID restrictions not allowing him to have visitors.

Mark went online and "tracked down" @colitiscop, a fellow UK police officer with an ostomy. He gave Mark hope that he would be able to return to the life he loved as a police officer. Mark was like a sponge, learning everything he could about the surgery and felt he was as prepared as he could be but, he admits with a knowing grin and a wink, "Nothing can really prepare you for the first time you look down at your own stoma."

Dramatic Turnaround

It wasn't long after the surgical pain began to resolve, that Mark experienced a dramatic turnaround. The pain he had been experiencing for years was gone completely. He was no longer tired, the spots on his skin disappeared and his whole attitude about life changed. He quickly realized how compromised his life had been for so long; lying on the sofa with no energy and unable to even pick up his kids was no kind of life for someone in their early 30s. But now, he felt as if his stoma had given him a new lease on life.

Even before his surgery Mark was already wondering about the practicality of returning to work. After more research and another call with @colitiscop, he learned about Ostomy Armor, a company that makes stoma protectors for individuals in physically demanding,

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she got into a rhythm with it discovered it was not as daunting as it seemed. "I had a great ostomy nurse. She was really super helpful in giving the tricks of the trade to help me get used to it."

Though she put modeling on hold, Cherry did not let the ostomy keep her from public appearances. "I remember going back to Miss Texas that September. I put on a sparkly dress, got hair and make-up done and just went and owned it. It was great once I figured out what I could wear," Cherry recalls. "It does not matter if I have an ileostomy right now, people are just happy that I am healthy."

J-Pouch Surgery

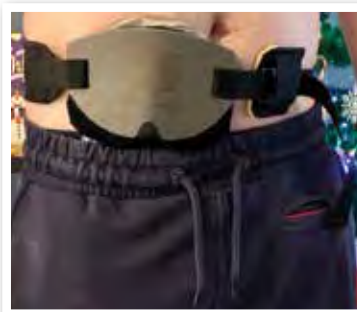
Thankful to feel better she looked forward to the ostomy reversal and completion of the j-pouch surgery. "One of my regrets is I did not keep my ileostomy a few months longer because I don't think my body had enough time to heal from the inflammation." She has had to contend with some bouts of pouchitis and some remaining IBD symptoms of the pouch, but all-in-all, surgery gave her life back.

Cherry graduated with honors in broadcast journalism from the University of Houston in 2010. However, her eight-week hospital stay left her with a new perspective on possible careers and a renewed desire to help others. She took a public relations position at Shriners Hospital in Galveston, which is known for its pediatric burn unit. She also started working with the local chapter of the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation. "I just wanted to use my voice and experiences to be a positive influence on others." As she went public with her experience, people reached out to connect. "It's a small world... it really starts a conversation."

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high-risk occupations like law enforcement and the military. He learned they make a special type of stoma cover out of titanium which could really help in Mark's line of work. Today, Mark wears the protector under his "stab vest" and is prepared for anything, even life-threatening situations.

While Mark adapted to work with his pouch pretty well, he does remember one embarrassing moment with a chuckle. "I was riding as the passenger in the squad car in the middle of the night when I looked over at my partner and said, "What's that smell?" It never dawned on him that the smell was coming from a leaky bag! Mark was able to turn that situation into a funny



Mark wears a stoma protector from *Ostomy Armor*.

Cherry's husband Brad has type 1 diabetes and while attending a training for his insulin pump, it sparked an interest in her to pursue a career path in diabetes medical sales. During a company presentation for an insulin patch, she was taught that the adhesive was hypoallergenic and similar to those used for ostomy pouches. "Yeah, okay, I know about that," she thought.

Starting a Family

When the couple started planning to start a family, she was aware that fertility may be affected by her health history and the j-pouch meant a C-section would be required. To their surprise, the couple conceived quickly and had a son in 2013. Their attempts to have a second child in the years that followed however were not successful. Then, after trying a variety of treatments and moving on, the couple were surprised to find out they were expecting in November of 2020. "It was so exciting but scary to be pregnant during a pandemic," Cherry says. Also, a second C-section can be more difficult than the first.

Working in healthcare and as a patient herself, Cherry encourages others to self-advocate whenever possible. "What a difference it can make in your care because you know your body best, the more information you can give your doctor the better," she says.

Cherry suggests you give yourself some grace and only focus on things you can control. She emphasizes, "Surgery is not giving up."

"I realized at a very young age that your health is everything. If you don't have your health, you don't have anything. It does not matter if you are on top of the world because you just won Miss Texas. If you're not healthy and you don't feel well, it can really hold you back." 🌂

moment with his partner and learned that humor is a good coping mechanism that can help put others at ease.

When asked what advice he would have for someone facing ostomy surgery, Mark thought for a moment before saying, "You only get one chance at life, and you want to live that life and make it the best you can. My surgery gave me my life back. I have more energy than ever now. I feel stronger and look healthier. Instead of being an old man lying on the sofa I can now run and play with my children and really enjoy life. I could not ask for anything more." A great reminder for all of us who have undergone ostomy surgery or any other life-altering circumstance.

If you'd like to connect with Mark, his twitter handle is: @stomacopWMP. 🌂