

## Wonder WOMEN

# 'It's amazing what you can do without sight'

From setting up an holistic therapy centre for people in need to becoming the world's first blind female karate black belt – Christine Deponio is an inspiration to all she meets

By Carole Richardson

Until the night her husband was left fighting for his life after a road accident, Christine

Deponio hadn't given God much thought.

But faced with losing Raymond and their toddler son being fatherless, she fell on her knees and began praying desperately.

On condition he lived, she promised: "I'll search for you and when I find you God I'll dedicate my life to you and do

anything you ask of me."

Today, many people are glad she did because she has turned her home into a free holistic therapy centre for cancer patients, the terminally ill and their families.

Against all odds, Christine's prayers were answered that night back in March 1983. Like his wife, Raymond was already blind before the accident and afterwards he was left brain damaged with multiple injuries.

Allowed home seven months later, Christine became his carer at 29 and almost forgot her promise. Battling to get Raymond back on his feet, her hands were full coping with his epilepsy, memory loss and physical problems while bringing up their eldest son Lee (now 32) as normally as possible.

"There were lots of horrendous times but you've got to put that aside. I never once thought of leaving Raymond; I love him. You marry for better or for worse and either you lie back with a blanket over your head or you



Christine hasn't let blindness stop her achieving her sporting goals





get on with life," she says.

Getting on with life was something Christine, now 60, was used to. After a childhood blighted by violent epileptic seizures, she lost her sight at 16 partly due to an inherited condition that blinded her gran, great gran and great aunt.

Sent to a rehabilitation centre at 18, she met and fell in love with Raymond (now 62). They married four years later. Christine worked in a mattress factory and Raymond was a cheesemaker.

Encouraged by the new husband she still describes as her backbone, she returned to the hobby she enjoyed before losing her sight – karate.

"I aimed to become the first blind female in the world to get a black belt and I did. I just had to practise harder than anybody else." Her success earned her the prestigious Wilkinson Sword award for outstanding sporting achievement.

"Everything I did in life gave me the confidence to conquer something else," she laughs, recalling how she went on to win medals as a blind athlete and play in an all-blind rugby team.

After the accident, all that stopped but slowly Raymond recovered – though not 100 per cent. "There wasn't much help around and no respite care but we made the best of things. There are certain parts of his life he doesn't remember but it doesn't matter. It's about the here and now. Life is what you make it. He was determined; I was determined. You push yourself that little bit extra."

A year after the accident Christine began going to church with Lee on Sunday mornings. In November 1986 their second son, Ryan (now 27), was born and two years later she became an evangelist.

By 1996 she felt God was making it clear he wanted her to take a different direction in life. "Something hits you; you just

know," she explains.

At 43, she'd qualified in massage, reflexology and aromatherapy at a nearby college and began working as a volunteer with cancer patients at local hospitals and hospices. But more and more, she had a vision of creating her own drop-in holistic therapy centre.

In January 2002 the funeral of Diane King – a patient and friend, who died in her late 20s of ovarian cancer – acted as a catalyst. "She was so young and had only been married six months. That really got to

**'I think we're all put on earth for a reason. I'm not bitter about my past because it has helped me understand how people feel when life changes for the worst'**

me," adds Christine. Taking out a second mortgage on her small, semi-detached Gateshead home, and using her life savings, she extended her home to provide treatment areas for massage, hair and beauty, music therapy, arts and crafts and counselling.

Emmanuel House opened in January 2003. And despite being only allowed to open twice weekly by local authorities, she has since helped hundreds of local people.

"I don't preach. I'm just here to provide support for quality of life here and now, whether it's for days, weeks or years. I cry with patients and families and laugh with them, too!"

By public speaking and organising balls and other events, she raised funds for three caravans used for respite care.

But with an even bigger vision of providing a retreat and

respite home to care for more people, she's just written and self published an autobiographical book, *Blind Courage Part 1*, to fund that work.

"I think we're all put on earth for a reason. I'm not bitter about my past because it has helped me understand how people feel when life changes for the worst. You can feel so alone.

"I've given my life to the community to help people in need and I love what I do. A lot of people underestimate what it's possible to achieve without sight, but it's amazing what you can do."



✦ Christine's book *Blind Courage Part 1*, priced £9.99, is published by Consilience Media Ltd and is available on Amazon and Kindle. For more details visit [www.emmanuel-house.co.uk](http://www.emmanuel-house.co.uk)

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Then and now: Christine and Raymond on their wedding day and below, still in love today

