

KEEP ON MOVING

*Shropshire's **Kelda Wood** MBE will be the subject of a new outdoor adventure docu-film for the Banff Mountain Film Festival. Becoming the first para-rower to row solo across the Atlantic is only part of her incredible story, as **Katy Rink** found out on a ramble in the Shropshire Hills.*

When Kelda Wood found out she'd been made an MBE, the news was bitter sweet.

On the same day she received the email from the Cabinet Office, she was also diagnosed with breast cancer.

"At least it gave me something sweeten the news to my Mum," she said. "I'll always be grateful for the MBE for that," she says.

This is very a typical Kelda reaction – she does not do self-pity. Resilience is her middle name, but she hasn't always been that way.

She tells me it is the challenges she has taken on, such as her record-breaking Atlantic crossing in 2018/9, as well as the knocks along the way, that have helped her arrive her stubbornly positive outlook.

Growing up in Northumberland, horse riding was Kelda's life. Her parents, who

were keen for her to concentrate on her studies, would probably have preferred her do something else, but sports-mad Kelda followed her passions, carving out a promising career in eventing. She had also played netball at national level as a teenager.

A freak accident in 2002 robbed her of her chance to represent Great Britain at the Olympics.

Although Kelda continued riding, her



equestrian dream ended under a square bale of haylage, which fell from the top of a stack, crushing Kelda underneath. Surgeons managed to save her limb, but her left ankle is now fused with arthritis.

She might have left all hope of a life in sport under that hay bale.

Instead, Kelda decided to climb Kilimanjaro, to prove to herself that she could still set herself physical goals and achieve them.

“A whole world of outdoor adventure opened up to me and I began to get some of the old me back,” she said.

The pattern was set for the future – get a knock, stand up, brush yourself off and throw yourself at the next challenge.

Kelda got involved with para-canoeing after spotting an advert for a talent scout day with the GB team.

She represented Great Britain at the 2015 World Cup and the 2016 World Championships, but narrowly missed out on the chance to go to Rio.

“I got beaten,” Kelda says. “I was competing against the world champion and I was 1.5 seconds behind her. As soon as she passed the line in front of me, she was the boat that was going.

“After that, I suddenly didn’t have a goal to aim for and was struggling with motivation. It was like being stuck on red

at the traffic lights.” Again, a mountain challenge came to her rescue and in 2017, Kelda became the first adaptive woman to reach the summit of the 6,961m Mount Aconcagua on the Chilean border, as part of the Adaptive Grand Slam team with founder Martin Hewitt.

It is a punishing, high altitude trek, often used by climbers training for Everest. Altitude sickness, frostbite and falls are common.

Kelda’s leg did not cope well with the

‘It’s not about saying I can’t, it’s about saying how can I?’

training expeditions in the French Alps: “That was when I started with my whole motto ‘it’s not about saying I can’t, it’s about saying how can I?’”

Kelda’s solution was to come up with ‘super funky crutches’ to help her to the summit: “Stepping on the summit was a very definite moment for me,” she recalls. “I found peace and contentment in the person am with my leg injury, instead of chasing after who I used to be.

“The Adaptive Grand Slam team were

all ex-military, all injured, and the most phenomenal bunch of guys you could meet. One guy had lost his arm in a blast. One guy had lost a leg in a helicopter crash. They just get on. I was the only girl and only non-military. I didn’t want to be the weak link.

“I made a deal with myself that I wasn’t going to whinge or moan. I wasn’t going to let anything stop me other than things outside my control, such as the altitude or weather. It was that attitude that got me to the summit.

“I spent all those years thinking I needed medals to define success, I realised it was about me, my attitude and becoming the person I wanted to be. Since that moment I have never had a bitter day about my leg.

“I have to be eternally grateful to Martin for giving me that opportunity.”

Kelda’s is proof that nothing is out of reach if you set your mind to it. Through her charity Climbing Out, which she set up in 2010, she helps people rebuild confidence after traumatic events, or illnesses.

Her outdoor adventure programmes have helped young victims of the Manchester bombings, cancer survivors and abuse victims, as well as members of the Armed Forces and she is now

supporting workers on the Covid frontline.

Crossing the Atlantic solo in her 7m boat Storm Petrel in 2018, with only a tiny cabin for protection, was Kelda’s ‘crazy idea’ to inspire and motivate others as well as raise awareness and over £50,000 for Climbing Out.

But it was also to prove to the young people on her programmes that if she could do it with only one working leg, then anything was possible.

She says: “I am bog standard normal. My mum was a schoolteacher, dad worked for the county council.

“There’s lots of privileged people rowing the Atlantic, I started without a single penny. I’ve been broke all my life. I couldn’t have even bought the chuffing waterproof.

“I set fire to the boat, got the front and back mixed up, fell on my feet – I was such numpty. I would like to think that’s more relatable than someone who smashes it and wins medals.”

Every day, Kelda rowed for a different person, including Shrewsbury’s Darren Edwards, who was paralysed in a rock climbing incident in 2016 and British para-canoeist Nick Beighton.

Looking back it’s a bit surreal, Kelda says, almost as if she is watching someone else go through it.

It wasn’t the moments of extreme stress that really got her down, such as losing her Satnav communications and the feeling of being completely alone with no prospect of rescue, or worrying about getting towed to the bottom of the ocean by a frisky whale.

She didn’t have catastrophic storms to deal with like adventurer Sarah Outen MBE who suffered post-traumatic

‘All I had to do was endure.’ Kelda on her solo row across the Atlantic

stress following her Atlantic and Pacific crossings.

It was rather the utter relentlessness of it, rowing up to 16 hours a day.

And the total loss of control, being at the mercy of the wind and the waves.

That meant sitting on a sea anchor for days on end when the wind was against her, knowing that she was adding days and possibly even weeks to her finishing time.

In the end, it took 76 days to finish the 3,000 mile crossing, landing in Antigua on February 27, 2019.

“All I had to do was endure,” Kelda says

modestly. She admits to screaming at the sea, when things weren’t going her way.

“It’s lucky it was a solo row – I was so grumpy. There were the most spectacular skies out there, but all I could think at the time was ‘I’ve seen better sunsets in Shropshire!’”

It was important to Kelda that she shouldn’t enjoy the trip. She looked at other challenges – the 12 highest peaks in Morocco, pulling dog sleds in Antarctica, but the Atlantic appealed ‘mostly because it wouldn’t be fun’ she says.

She wanted to demonstrate, by putting herself through it, that we can all find strength to endure whatever life throws at us.

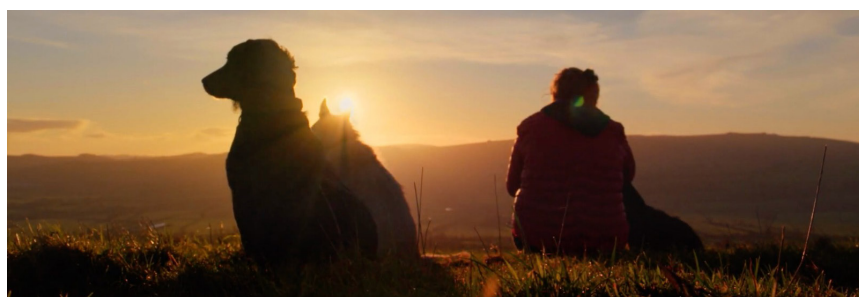
“Now I look back and think ‘wow’, did I really do that?”

I ask her if resilience can be taught: “Absolutely – if you’re a car heading out of control downhill with the handbrake off, how can you avoid a crash if no-one has shown you how to put it back on?

“It’s a two minute job, but if no-one has shown you then how are you supposed to know?

“People are often stuck in the past, we show them how to move that dial so they can move forwards.”

That means learning to leave the ‘bad stuff’ behind.



We talked a lot about life's knocks as we hiked up into the Shropshire Hills, near Kelda's home in Aston Pigott, accompanied by her three dogs.

She was sporting a shiner on her eye, having passed out from pain when her pelvis shifted, trapping a nerve.

A black eye is nothing, Kelda says.

On top of her cancer diagnosis and mastectomy, she recently lost her dad after a long battle with Parkinson's Disease.

He was a preacher in Northumberland, a man with true values who Kelda firmly believes taught her to be a good person.

"Watching him and my mother suffer was so cruel," Kelda said.

He never got to hear that his daughter had won an MBE.

There is no such thing as 'just desserts' in Kelda's world – you have to go out and get what you want. And there's no point moaning about the cards you have been dealt.

"Bad stuff is part of life. You either use it as an excuse or you use it to grow and develop. It's down to you.

"When I got my cancer diagnosis, I realised that whether I spent the next few weeks worrying or not, the outcome would be the same.

"Instead of worrying, I chose to focus on being grateful for what I do have – like this amazing countryside on our doorstep. I can't change the outcome, but I can change how I feel."

Kelda is already planning to complete her first ever triathlon under the banner of her new venture 'Creating Momentum' @Momentum4Life, on April 25, just a few weeks after her mastectomy – even though she can't run, or swim, due to her disability.

She'll do the 10K run in a wheelchair, supplied by Spokz and she's already got an adaptive bike made by DURATEC from Bicycles by Design in Ironbridge.

Creating Momentum will be a vehicle for people to share stories and information, with the aim of encouraging individuals to adapt and overcome physical and mental challenges and to achieve things they thought impossible.

The Atlantic taught Kelda an important lesson: "I could spend two whole days worrying about whether the whale that was circling me was going to get caught up in my sea anchor and drag me to the bottom of the ocean, or I could just save that energy for rowing," she said.

Obviously, a whale getting caught in our sea anchor is not an immediately relatable scenario for most of us – but we can all actively decide to reject negative thinking.

Kelda said in 2016, then with her sights on the Paralympics: "I just keep going, keep working hard and keep striving to be the best I can possibly be."

That's not a bad mantra for life. And as for the MBE – well of course she's going to use it to inspire others, because that's what she does.

● Are you looking to overcome obstacles and set yourself a challenge?

Join a like-minded community online at **@Momentum4Life** to share information and find answers to support you going forwards.