

## Nellie — She told me she admired my strength

Alopecia is a deeply personal condition, something we will eventually come to terms with and, hopefully, accept within ourselves. But alopecia has also taught me so much about other people, and the joy I've found in others' thoughts, words and actions is equalled only in discovering that new, baby-hair growth upon my shiny head.

When I first experienced a bad bout of alopecia, I was working in the beauty industry, where appearance was the prime focus. Armed with some makeup know-how, I could work with my lack of eyebrows, but disguising my thinning hair was a trickier affair. My best friend surprised me, though, when she told me she admired my strength to continue working in an industry so focused on outward appearance while I was inwardly despairing about my own. This mention of strength surprised me, as I had never viewed myself, or my relationship with alopecia, in that light. But by acknowledging this previously unnoticed fortitude, my friend's comments solidified my resolve that I could handle whatever alopecia threw at me. Until the next time, when it threw me another, lengthier bout.

This time, it was a neighbour who brightened my spirits and let me see the silver lining in losing my hair again. Previous meetings were marked with just a wave and friendly hello, but when I had to crop my hair, my neighbour surprised me. Cheerfully, heartfully, she told me that my new pixie cut suited me perfectly. Letting me know she was a hairdresser, she told me she would be happy to trim my hair whenever I fancied a freshen up. This simple interaction, which happened almost 10 years ago, is something I'll always remember, and my feeling of gratitude towards my neighbour's kindness is evoked instantly, and just as powerfully, whenever I think of the event.

## **Nellie — I'm coping with it ok and am still finding the little gems that keep my spirits up.**

As I get older, my alopecia has become more severe, and I've been without any eyebrows or lashes for some years now. Fearing I look like an albino possum without them, and conscious that an errant hand to the face could remove my carefully pencilled arches, I researched having my eyebrows tattooed. Such a commitment required finding the most suitable beautician and unsurprisingly, the best-looking brows came with the highest-looking price tag. But that's where the alopecia karma kicked in. My dad, who's not at all known for showing affection but is renowned for still believing everything should cost as much as it did in the 60s, offered to pay for my tattooing. Despite my protestations, he insisted on it, never baulking at the somewhat exorbitant cost. In fact, he marvelled at the beautician's handiwork and declared the tattooed eyebrows the best decision ever made!

My latest episode of alopecia has been the worst yet, but I'm coping with it ok and am still finding the little gems that keep my spirits up. Working in schools, I've been amazed at the respectful, inquisitive and accepting nature of children with regards to my alopecia. Notoriously disruptive and unfocused students are often the first to realise my eyebrows aren't real and gently ask why they look different. Upon my explanation, the students are immediately and gracefully accepting of the condition, then quickly move along, unknowing that they've given me the gift of self-acceptance and a shining light to remind me that though alopecia can bring disappointment, sadness and frustration, it can also provide hope, gratitude, inspiration and strength.

