Colin Thackery

Love Changes Everything
Colin Thackery is the 89 year old Chelsea Pensioner who won the nation’s hearts when he sang on Britain’s Got Talent. But he wasn’t just a novelty act – Colin won the show, taking home £250,000. While this might seem an unlikely feat for a grandfather who’s survived two heart attacks, it might be said that Colin’s entire life has led to that performance.

As a member of the Royal Artillery band, Colin performed all over the world, from Malta to Malaysia and Hong Kong to Korea. He sang on the USA forces radio network and, as a support act, he shared a stage with stars such as Danny Kaye, and Dixon of Dock Green actor Jack Warner OBE, who were brought in to entertain the troops.

Since leaving the army, Colin has sung with his local opera group, and in the dementia ward at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, where he’s lived since the loss of his wife Joan. His autobiography, My Story: How Love Changed Everything is dedicated to Joan, whose picture he talks to every night. Sorted caught up with him, to find out more...

In your autobiography, you said: ‘I can’t imagine how I will feel if I do perform for Her Majesty, but I’m sure I will feel humbled and honoured, as I never have before.’ How did it feel?

I performed for the Queen in the Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall and it was marvellous, and a great honour to do something I’ve always wanted to do.

You wrote that you hoped going on Britain’s Got Talent would raise the profile of the Royal Hospital Chelsea, and give the viewers an insight into all the good work that’s done there. What would you like people to know?

It’s a unique organisation that exists for old soldiers, for men and women who are ex-army. I always describe it as the best old folks’ home in the world. We live a good life. We’re well fed, we’ve got nice quarters, and we have uniforms to wear if we want to. There’s so many lovely things to do – we’re invited to football matches, rugby matches, dinners and events. We also do fundraising, which is great – you feel good doing it!

You hoped BGT viewers would see what Chelsea Pensioners are made of. What are you made of?

We’re made of stern stuff! The average age is about 80, and we have a centenarian, and a couple of 99 year olds. There’s an infirmary, which is marvellous if anything happens to you in later life, and the staff are extraordinary. That’s important for people of my age, especially if you get the dreaded dementia. Some people unfortunately do suffer, but they’re well looked after here.

You’ve had a lifetime of performing. What’s been the key experience in preparing you to win BGT?

The love of music – I’ve always loved music. My late wife loved it too and she was a good singer. We were in an organisation called the Norfolk Opera Players for over 25 years, and it was lots of fun. I love to sing, and now I sing at the drop of a hat.

Was the army the first time you sang?

No, I was a choir boy when I was 11. I spent part of my childhood with my grandparents – my grandmother was a staunch Catholic and I went to church with her every Sunday. Eventually that meant I joined the choir – that’s where I started singing!

How did the Chelsea Pensioners react to your win?

They were absolutely delighted, especially the guys who’d been with me on stage. We’re all chums, and people here are extremely complimentary. They’ll come up and say how much they enjoyed things. We have guides here, who show people round, and they often point me out. It’s very gratifying!

Did you choose which Chelsea Pensioners joined you on stage for backing vocals?

No, we’re all members of the Hospital singing group. There are lots of cables and lights, and steps around the stage, so they picked people from the singing group who were mobile enough to get up there.

You did your first audition by yourself, and the other Chelsea Pensioners were brought in to join you after that. What advice did you give them?

None! We have a marvellous captain of singing, called Major Philip Shannon, who was director of music for the Irish Guards and the Welsh Guards. He’s been instrumental in mentoring us, along with Lady Elaine who leads our singing group.

One of the other Chelsea Pensioners inspired you to go on the show – how did he react when you won?

He’s very pleased he inspired me to do it. Lots of people have asked who he is, and I’ve been pestering him to let me identify him, but he won’t let me! He’s quite shy about it.

Have you had an extra set of Scarlets [Royal Hospital Chelsea’s uniform] made for you, for all your performances?

We’ve got new lightweight Scarlets coming, but it’s a huge job. It’s cost £300,000 to kit the whole Hospital out in Scarlets. The money’s come from a fundraising effort called the Scarlet Appeal. We’ve all been →
measured for them – I just hope they come soon, because the ones we’ve got get very hot under the lights on stage!

**How do you feel about people approaching you for autographs and selfies since your BGT win?**

I feel extremely humble that they should ask me. It happens outside theatres and radio stations. People shout my name and say: ‘Can you sign this? Could I have a picture?’ I never refuse anybody – who am I to deny people? One chap waited all day – he must have been frozen!

**Had you ever done a selfie before BGT?**

When any of us from the Hospital go out in our Scarlets, we’re stopped and asked for pictures. There’s a fixed grin you maintain because the photographs go on and on!

**What’s been the biggest impact of your win?**

Winning the money was a marvellous windfall that’s allowed me to help my grandchildren. My two senior granddaughters are making their first step on the property ladder, and the younger two are studying, so there’s always a need for cash. My wife would be delighted – well I know she is, because she knows everything that’s going on!

**When you got back to the Hospital on the night of your win, what did you say to Joan?**

I told her all about it – the four yeses, the standing ovation, people cheering – it was extraordinary, and I got a sneaky feeling she already knew! I didn’t actually realise I’d won – I was confused, because I’m slightly deaf and I have hearing aids, but they just amplify sound, and there was that much sound in the theatre, with people shouting, stamping and calling my name, I couldn’t hear a thing – it was Ant and Dec who told me I’d won.

**You were with Joan for 66 years: what’s the secret to a happy marriage?**

Tolerance – that’s always in the back of my mind. Tolerance that you’re married to a lady who’s completely different from you. She thinks, acts and dresses differently. I say, vive la difference! I treated my wife as a lady. She was great – she always looked good and acted well. She was the wind beneath my wings.

**How did you choose the songs you sang on BGT?**

The first one was ‘Wind Beneath My Wings’ – that was easy because it was Joan’s favourite. Joan always joked that Bette Midler was a naughty lady, but she loved her, and she loved her rendering of that song. ‘Love Changes Everything’ was a favourite of mine – I’ve admired Michael Ball for many years. ‘We’ll Meet Again’ was chosen for me – I’d been singing it for years because it’s a song people know and they join in. It was meaningful to guys leaving their families, and it was significant because a week later it was the 75th anniversary of D Day.

**What advice would you give to someone who wants to follow their dreams, like you did, but they’re struggling with confidence?**

You’ve got to overcome that first little problem of pushing yourself forward. There are people who retire and do nothing. They say, ‘I can’t!’ but nothing’s impossible. You’ve just got to overcome that fear. Go to somebody who can help – somebody who has the same interest, or join clubs. Drum up that first bit of courage, then it becomes surprisingly easy.

**The army gave you great opportunities to perform – and wasn’t it your military experience that first led you to performing outside the army?**

Yes, I was sitting next to a chap at a regimental association dinner, talking about how I enjoyed music. He turned out to be the treasurer of the Norfolk Opera Players and he said they were doing Carmen, at the Theatre Royal in Norwich. They needed somebody to teach these guys how to march and use swords. He asked if I’d be interested, and I said: ‘Yes I would’!

**What are you most looking forward to in the future?**

It’s all exciting! The book is out already – it was lovely to see the display and do the signings. Then there’s the album, which includes the songs I got through BGT with. There are 14 songs on the album, including one by Ed Sheeran, which is beautiful. It’s called ‘Supermarket Flowers’ and it meant something to me, because he’d written it for his grandmother who’d just died. The sentiment resonated with me and I really enjoyed singing it. So there’s ancient and modern, and a couple of war time songs as well.

**You seem so much younger than 89 – what are your secrets?**

I’m in fairly good nick for an 89 year old. One doesn’t know how long one’s got at my age, but I try not to walk around like an old man. You can succumb to being elderly, or not – that’s my view. Don’t let it get you down!

**You actually sound a lot younger, and in the book you said that if you don’t use your voice, you lose it. Is that why you keep singing?**

Yes, and that’s how I came to be challenged by this chap to go on BGT. We were at the monthly curry supper at the Hospital, and I said I was worried, because I hadn’t sung for some time. He said: ‘Do something about it then!’ He told me BGT were looking for people. I said: ‘Don’t be silly, what would they want an old man like me for?’ He said: ‘Go on, I dare you!’ The rest is history!

**How can we all stay young as we’re getting older?**

Think positively and keep the brain active. Your body wears down, but your brain doesn’t have to – that can stay sharp. Crossword puzzles are good, and Scrabble! I play that online. I have no idea who I’m playing against, but they sometimes play me in the middle of the night! I used to love listening to audiobooks when I was driving, but I don’t drive much these days, so I read on my Kindle. My sight’s not brilliant, but I can enhance the font size – I’ve got all sorts of books on it! And I love sport – rugby’s my game. I don’t support a particular team, except England, of course! [3]

**THEY SAY, ‘I CAN’T!’ BUT NOTHING’S IMPOSSIBLE**

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