

'Sailing gave me hope'

When Vicky Stobart was paralysed by a rare condition and spiralled into depression, it was taking up sailing as a hobby that helped her find hope

By Katharine Wootton

Watching Vicky Stobart take charge of a boat, she's clearly in her element. As she puts up the sails and works the helm, getting the boat successfully cruising along on the wide open water, she looks calm, confident and content.

Apart from the fact she scoots along the boat on her bottom, you'd also never know this happy, proficient sailor is totally paralysed from the waist down, nor that for eight years she struggled with overwhelming depression brought on by a moment that changed her life.

Vicky had been doing a late shift in her job driving coaches when she felt a numbness in her lower left leg. Thinking nothing of it, she put it down to stiffness from sitting down driving all day and went to bed.

The next day, however, the whole of her left leg was numb. She went to hospital where they carried out all

kinds of tests but in the meantime, the numbness started to take over everything below her waist.

At last the doctors discovered she'd had a vascular spinal stroke, a rare condition that occurs when a blood clot builds up over time on the spinal cord and then bursts. The stroke damaged 2-3 inches of her spinal cord which in turn left her paralysed in both legs.

Overnight Vicky's life changed as she lost her job, had to move home and her relationship broke down. She was left in a very dark place.

"I felt like I was just surviving from day to day. There was no real living involved," says Vicky (51).

This continued for eight years



Vicky in her kit ready to board the sailing boat that gives her so much joy

until one day she was in Ipswich town centre and happened to get talking to a member of the East Anglian Sailing Trust - a charity that provides adults and children with disabilities with regular opportunities to enjoy sailing - and they asked if she'd consider joining them.

As she'd done sports in the past - although she'd never sailed - Vicky decided to give it a go and went down to meet the team.

"Everyone was so welcoming and even without experience, the instructors made me feel relaxed and that sailing could be possible, despite my disability," says Vicky.

Since that moment, Vicky's been hooked and now goes sailing every week. Thanks to the Trust's specialist

equipment, she's able to easily get from her wheelchair into the boat. As well as general sailing, Vicky's been working her way through a number of sailing exam qualifications which involve learning how to make manoeuvres, pick up a person overboard and work as sailing crew.

"I've made so many good friends from doing this and now my partner also volunteers at the Trust which is a lovely thing for us to do together as a couple," says Vicky.

Best of all, though, is the difference sailing has made to how Vicky feels. "Without sailing, I'm not sure I'd still be here today. Sailing has had such a huge impact on my mental health and really helped me get out of depression and turn a new corner. I'm so grateful for what it's given me."

■ To find out more about the East Anglian Sailing Trust call 0333 088 3278 or visit www.east-anglian-sailing-trust.org.uk