

## Press release Julie McDonnell

### **'Leukaemia warrior' Julie strikes back against cancer in a big way**

War veteran Julie McDonnell is making both bell ringing and fundraising history. A leading and high ranking expert in Middle Eastern affairs within the British Military Intelligence, Julie braved various uprisings including that in Egypt – but her real battle has been against Chronic Myeloid Leukaemia, brain cancer and cervical cancer. Julie was diagnosed terminally ill when hit by a third leukaemia in 2015, but was given a life-saving stem cell transplant in the nick of time. She was advised to marry hubbie Andrew immediately because she did not have much longer to live, but was determined to fight whatever her illness threw at her. And to ensure other people get the same access to treatment that she did (her transplant was privately funded, as second stem cell transplants are sadly no longer available on the NHS in England), Julie started an awareness campaign in support of the Anthony Nolan Trust and Bloodwise, moving on to raise funds to help save the lives of children in desperate need of the procedure.

Julie has a great sense of fun and, having taken up change bell ringing 2 1/2 years ago (after some initial lessons as a teenager), she decided to use bell ringing to 'strike back' against cancer (in bell ringing a piece of metal called the clapper is what 'strikes' the bell to make it sound). In fact, she was on the end of a rope, ringing for 3 hours non-stop, 5 days after her transplant! Julie organised a walk, with ringing along the way, to Canterbury last June, and bell ringers joined in support across the world, ringing wherever they could – including the Dalai Lama and the Vatican.

Julie says: "People really got behind the idea of 'striking back', and I found some wonderful and extremely generous sponsors along the way, including some very well-known celebrities, businessmen from the UK and Ireland, and a bank. A few individuals whom I had never met wrote new pieces of ringing with my name on them, and then the real challenge started – first of all to ring 100 quarter peals (40-45 minutes non-stop each) for £35k, which then increased to 200 and on and on as we kept exceeding targets (the ringers were just amazing in the way they took this up!). In 2016 we rang about 500 in the end, with all kinds of extra challenges set by the sponsors. I rang 153 quarter peals myself last year."

Julie's amazing initiative had raised over £7million by the end of 2016. A friend and fellow ringer says: "Julie is very humble, and always says it's about her supporters and everyone around her. But we all know this would not have happened without her sheer determination. She is an inspiration. Julie recently had treatment for a brain tumour, and then cervical cancer – and on New Year's Eve she wanted to raise even more funds before the year was out, and invited us to ring two quarter peals with her. When we arrived at the church she told us she had been in too much pain from a recent procedure when she sat or lay down, so preferred to stand up, - and then thought she might as well ring some bells to raise money. Typical Julie!"

In January Julie will ring with the oldest active ringer, 98-year-old Dennis Brock from Sunbury-on-Thames, another army veteran but this time from World War 2. She has also been invited to join the St Paul's Cathedral ringers in the bell tower on January 22<sup>nd</sup> as they perform a piece specially written for Julie on all 12 bells. Julie is thrilled, saying "this really is a lifetime dream for a ringer – and they are going to let me have a go on one of the bells too!" Most people might be a bit daunted, as the St Paul's bells are heavy and a challenge even for experienced ringers – but Julie is absolutely fearless, as ever, and will be looked after well by the team.

Westminster Abbey, another highly prestigious ring of bells, was approached by Julie to see if they can support her with a special ring in 2017, so hopefully they will be ringing later in the year – and the wonderful sponsors are not giving up yet either, as they come back with new challenges every time a target is met.

Chris Mew, President of the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers, made the following statement: “We are all so proud of Julie and what she has inspired across the bell ringing community. The various challenges set (eg ringing in all counties, cathedrals etc) have brought together ringers around the world who may never have met before, and encouraged people to do things very much out of their comfort zone. Whilst it is lovely to hear Julie talk so graciously about the amazing bond between ringers, and the way they have united across the world behind this cause, coming together often at a moment’s notice, the ringers themselves would all want to acknowledge and celebrate Julie as the force behind this amazing movement. Julie is an incredible woman, who has only been ringing two years, but has never asked anyone to do anything she was not prepared to do herself. And she has done it all with a smile – and sometimes a giggle or two as the painkillers took effect.”



Julie in the bell chamber

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### **The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers**

The Council is the representative body for all who ring bells in the English tradition with rope and wheel, the majority of whom practise the art of change ringing. Founded in 1891, the Council today represents 65 affiliated societies, which cover all parts of the British Isles as well as centres of ringing in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the USA, South Africa and Italy. These societies in turn comprise the members of the local companies of ringers in their areas.

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