

HOLDING THE VISION - *One woman's journey to better eye-sight*

It fell.

“Thock!”

Then, “Slish!” across the small-holding of tropical grasses, liquid green they had been in the sun, clinging to life as we were 1,000 ft up on the vertical rock face – and then silence, but for the thudding of my racing heart.

“Ed, I think I’ve just dropped my contact lenses down the mountain...”

I was almost blind without them. I peered, shakily, into the hazy nothing, knowing that there was little chance of finding my little pink wash-bag into which I had just placed my hard contact lenses, alongside my spare pair. It had catapulted off the porta-ledge, my stretcher-like sky-bed, and flown down into the rainforest far below. Gone was my eyesight and my safety.

It was 1992, the time of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Ed Drummond (the legendary climber) and I (a not very good climber) were undertaking a protest climb on the SugarLoaf, the rock face which overlooks the great city where all the leaders of the world were gathered. Here the police had been cleaning up in readiness by shooting the street children. We had smuggled in a huge banner to expose this travesty to the world and were slowly raising it on the mountain face over the 11 days of the conference. We weren’t popular. Rocks were coming down at us from above...

I knew I had jeopardised the outcome of our mission and also put Ed’s life at risk for he would be the one to attempt to run the gauntlet and somehow go down and search... My wretchedness was complete. Oh, for good eyesight...

Then there had been the climb of the Old Man of Hoy, Britain’s tallest sea stack. We had hauled up a large banner to fly from the top to publicise the threat of mining in Antarctica. It had worked. We had been part of the awareness which created a 50 year moratorium. The cost to me had been a sleepless night wedged into a sleeping bag in a crack on the tiny summit, too scared to take out my contact lenses and not able to shut my eyes comfortably with them in.

It had been the same story in a tent on the top of the Eiger in Switzerland. I was part of a coming together, up all sides of the mountain, of representatives from every continent, symbolically bringing together flags from all nations of the world as hope for the future of humanity. Great vision for the planet, but my own eyes struggled with migraine tunnel vision.

Adventures sheltering in mountain huts were easier. On ski-mountaineering trips like the Haute Route or attempting to climb the Matterhorn I had been brave enough to take out my lenses in the jostling sardine bunks. Stealing time from the early morning starts in the dark, I would wash my hands and lenses with spit and place them crunching into bleary eyes. Though at the end of a day battered by mountain winds the eyes would be so dry that lenses sometimes jumped out all by themselves, like in the Britania hut after climbing Nord End when 6 climbers were on their hands and knees looking...

Even climbing walls are not without their hazards. I remember being perched 25 ft up on a little ledge putting up ropes by precariously throwing them over a top bar. The end of one rope flicked back into my face, dislodging a lens which went flying. I never did find that one...

And then there was the countless times I had flinched in pain at the dirt which feels like a brick, caught between the lens and the eye, seconding on a climb looking up at the leader, tears streaming, belaying hands busy holding life... Those that have been there will know the agony...

At last came the advent of the soft contact lens. Not only was it cheaper to carry spares, but I could sleep in them in wild places and they rarely collected grit. This is better, I thought, until journeying to the Magnetic North Pole where I slept in them one night too many. The eyes turned to beetroot and infection set in.

“Why don’t you wear glasses?” I was asked frequently.

Well, I’ve never been able to get on with glasses, and seeing in the Arctic was tough enough with goggles misting up most of the time with the puff and pant of pulling a heavy pulk behind. And anyway working with the stoves in the tent melting snow for water and cooking just created a steamed up mess. With no vision there is a danger of burning the tent down...

This year I headed off to the Antarctic on the South Pole Race. My biggest challenge yet. I wanted to hold the greater vision for the Earth... to make a difference. Our team asked people to send their vision for the Earth as Peace Messages for us to carry and express.

And my eyes? Well, three months before leaving I finally made the big decision. With the South Pole looming and so many



wild places left to explore... it was time. I decided to go for freedom from lenses and glasses. I had laser enhancement...

Temperatures down to -50°C ... no problem. Gale force blizzards... no problem. Intense 24 hour sun glare... no problem. Stressful tent life... no problem. Best of all, I can now see brilliantly!

South pole info-

www.teamsouthernlights.org Laser eye enhancement - www.accuvision.co.uk

