

“I had ...”

Boys never talked to me. They were

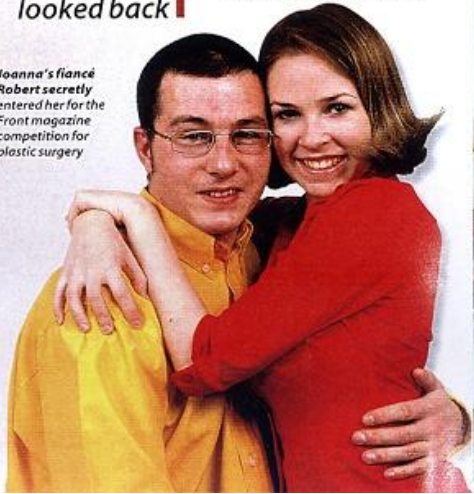
only interested in one thing and it was something I didn't have



I had breast implants at 19

After suffering constant bullying at school because of her flat chest, Joanna Bennett thought she'd never regain her confidence. Then she won a chance to have plastic surgery and hasn't looked back

Joanna's fiancé Robert secretly entered her for the Front magazine competition for plastic surgery



After

'Most women hate having their boobs ogled, but for me it's a novelty when I see men have noticed me,' says Joanna of

Last year my fiancé Robert entered me for a competition to win breast implants and they've changed my life. I'm sure there are those who will think that, at 19, I was too young to have cosmetic surgery, but they don't realise how my new breasts have made me feel complete. I'd been through a lot: my parents' divorce, I'd suffered a brain tumour and was bullied at school. But hardest to bear was being flat-chested while all my schoolfriends sprouted breasts. Looking back, I can see the path leading to implants began when I was little. My dad was always on business trips and, because they barely saw each other, my parents divorced when I was seven. My younger sister and I haven't seen my father since. Now I think of him as someone who never cared for us at all. But we've been

lucky to have a wonderful mum – she's always given us so much love and support. When I was 12, she met a lovely man who became my stepdad. We'd finally found some stability. Just as life was getting better, I discovered I was seriously ill. Mum and I had gone to a DIY superstore. I wandered off alone, then Mum saw a crowd around a figure lying on the floor. It was me. I'd been having an epileptic fit. The seizure turned out to be the first of many. Pretty soon, I was having up to 15 a day. I'd experience a tingling down my body, then everything would go blank and I'd stare vacantly. My face would be numb and the expression I'd had before the fit would stick for several minutes.

At 13, the last thing you want to be is different. I had some great friends – and they're still there for me – but some kids thought I was weird. I tried to be brave, but inside I felt deeply embarrassed. I went on my first date to the cinema at the age of 14 and had a seizure during the film. I was mortified, but I couldn't tell the boy I was epileptic – that would have put him off totally. At the same time, my breasts refused to grow. Other girls had them, but I stayed flat-chested. I started my periods, got spots and thought about boys, but I looked like a little girl and felt like an alien. I'd do anything to skive PE because everyone stared at me. I admit that I stared back – I'd gaze at other girls' boobs and wish they were mine. Then the bullying started. One girl would chant: 'Jo can't get a boyfriend 'cos she's got no tits.' It sounds childish now but, at the time, I was devastated. Mum was understanding, telling me to ignore them. I tried not to let the taunts bother me, but I focussed all my self-doubt



Photo: Peter Robinson/Corbis

on my lack of breasts and my confidence ebbed away. I underwent two years of tests to find a cause for my epilepsy. At 15, I was sent to Great Ormond Street Hospital and the reason was discovered – I had a golf ball-sized tumour in my brain. At that age, you don't think about dying, but now I know there would have been serious consequences if the tumour hadn't been removed. The operation took seven hours. Afterwards my speech and memory were affected, but they returned and my seizures stopped. I should've got on with enjoying life, but my flat chest made it impossible. By now I was 16 and could no longer put it down to being a late-developer – even a double-A bra looked empty and would ride up over my nipples. I refused to try on clothes when I went shopping and most things would have to be taken back because they looked so awful when I got them home. Boys never wanted to talk to me. They were only interested in one thing – and it was something I didn't have. I began to believe I was really unattractive. When I went out with friends, I'd fill my bra with padding, but when I danced I was paranoid it'd fall out. Besides, faking it made me feel like a

fraud. I told Mum I wanted breast implants. She wasn't shocked because she knew how miserable I was, but when I brought up the subject, she'd say I should wait a few years. When I was 17, I started going out with my first boyfriend. We spent hours cuddling, but my top half stayed covered. I wasn't ready for a sexual relationship. My life couldn't move forward until I had breasts like everyone else. A year later, I met Robert Lee, the 25-year-old builder whose now my fiancé. We went on a date and he asked me back to his place, but I couldn't understand the route he was taking me. It turned out he lived next door. I'd started work as a hotel receptionist and was renting a house in Warmminster, Wiltshire. I'd only lived there a short time and had never seen Robert before. Right from the start it was like talking to an old friend. I can discuss anything with him. I told him how I felt about my boobs and he assured me that it didn't worry him. When we finally made love, it was the first time I'd taken my top off in front of anyone. He made me feel sexy despite my lack of boobs, but I still

Before

'My friends were supportive, but they were also worried for me,' says Joanna. 'They thought I might go over the top and end up looking like Pamela Anderson. But I never had a doubt'

didn't feel like a real woman. I told Robert that my dearest wish was to have breast implants by the time I was 21 and he said he'd help. We didn't have much money, but he started putting a bit by each month for my surgery. Then he secretly entered me for a competition to win breast implants in Front, a men's magazine. Entrants had to write a letter saying why their girlfriend deserved them and he wrote about my illness, the bullying and lack of confidence. I couldn't believe it when a letter arrived telling me I was one of six finalists. We had our photos taken in bikinis, then readers voted for the most deserving entrant. When I won, I was ecstatic. Mum was delighted, too – she knew that it wasn't just a whim. The magazine offered a choice of surgeons and I chose Dr Jaya Prakash at Highgate Hospital – a private clinic in north London – because he had lots of experience. I had three consultations where he explained the procedure. He also took my medical history, stressing how vital that was to avoid future problems, and we talked about what size implants would be best. I'm petite, so I didn't want to go overboard. I'm a 34 and we chose a size between a B and C cup, which looks natural for my build. I didn't have a single doubt and discomfort from the surgery was forgotten when I lifted the sheets and looked down at my new boobs. Wow! There they were, looking like two mountains compared to what I'd had before. That was three months ago and my life transformed. Clothes shopping is now a pleasure – I've bought lots of tight-fitting tops. Robert and I now live together and he loves my new look. Everyone says my confidence has improved. I feel as if people treat me differently, too. I just ignore anyone who reckons the surgery looks artificial. I don't think young girls should have implants just to boost their careers. For me, it wasn't about vanity. I needed breasts to feel like a woman – and having implants did just that. As told to Helen Renshaw