

9 TIMES ROUND THE TRACK!

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The Paralympic Ceremonies Performer's Story

Peggian Chevaller

My journey started with what I thought was a junk text message on my phone! ...

Thank you for completing your online registration for a chance to become a Ceremonies Volunteer Performer in the London 2012 Olympic Games Ceremonies. We are pleased to confirm your audition time as follows:

Date: Sun 26 February 2012

Time: 10:30

Reading this I thought this had come through to the wrong person so I deleted it.

Next I got a call from my daughter Chantal, 'hey mom did you get a text about an audition for the Paralympics?' "Yes, I've deleted it!" No, mum I put your name down! Hah very funny I say, the last time I was on a running track I was in my 20s but of course I wasn't wanted for my running (although I was quite fast in my time having run for the Hurlingham Harriers!)

It turned out that my daughter had put us both forward to be ceremony volunteer performers in the Paralympics!

Our first audition was held on Sunday 26 February 2012, at 3 Mills Studios. When we arrived we were ushered into booths to be questioned, measured and photographed.

The audition took the form of being taught three dances; one was quite lyrical, one was more movement and hands and the other was really pretty much a recap of both dances put into one. Chantal and I were in different groups but at the end of the four hours we were thanked and told... "we will be in touch!"

After some 6 weeks Chantal received a text message informing her she had got through to the Paralympics opening ceremony. I, however, had not received a text. Chantal was a little upset that I had not got through but I explained they always leave the best till last and I was sure it was just a matter of time before I received my call-back! Hey ho and low and behold two weeks later I received my call... yippee or maybe not! Not only had I got through to the Opening

Ceremony but they were desperate enough to ask me to do the CLOSING ceremony as well!

I was somewhat dumbstruck - either everyone else had declined the offer or they were very desperate!

Then it was a case of annoying Christine Creese with all the half days/full day's holidays I needed to request. These dates changed periodically because the Para peoples had to keep making amendments but in the end the dates were finalised and rehearsals commenced. Chantal had been put into a section called "Gravity" which was all to do with Sir Isaac Newton's "apple". She wore the most amazing costume and better still she was allowed to keep it.

I on the other hand had been allocated volunteer performer. This consisted of learning various moves such as: Roller basket, Mo-Bolt, Carnival to name but a few. Each and every one of us was wired up to a radio contact with the choreographers and over the course of the rehearsals we were put through our paces. Some days we didn't finish rehearsing until after 11 pm and so it was a long day but everyone was in good spirits and we all encouraged each other.

There were to be three rehearsals sites at The Three Mills Studios, a seriously potholed car park in Dagenham and of course the Olympic Stadium.

As the opening ceremony approached rehearsals were moved to the Olympic Stadium. It was all systems go. Rehearsals had been stepped up, there were costumes to be handed out and with some 3,250 volunteers it must have been a logistical nightmare!

The organisers had to anticipate the time it would take the athletes of the 164 countries taking part to move around the stadium and get to their designated areas for the opening and closing ceremonies. One way they did this was to use some of the volunteers to represent the countries/athletes by giving us a placard with the name of a country on - in my case Kazakhstan, Montenegro and finally Switzerland - and walk around the stadium. So off I went proudly carrying the placard of Kazakhstan high above my head getting into the spirit of the occasion when all of a sudden I heard one of the organisers say through the speakers "Ms

Kazakhstan please lower the placard, you have a long walk ahead of you! He was right I think I must have walked the stadium at least 9 times... my arms would never have lasted!

29 August 2012 – Opening Ceremony

The buzz around the stadium was electric. As we made our way to our designated "Vol" (entry point) there were many words of encouragement such as 'break a leg' you never say good luck on opening night! As we entered the stadium the noise was unbelievable. I was allocated a place directly in front of the Royal Box so no pressure there... just hoped I didn't get the routines I had learnt wrong!

Then the opening ceremony commenced.

Royal Marine Joe Townsend, who lost both legs after stepping on a mine whilst serving in Afghanistan, appeared at the summit of the much talked about Arcelor Mittal Orbit only to descend the 115m on a zip wire to help light the Thomas Heatherwick-designed cauldron. The crowds were ecstatic and the roar was unbelievable - what an opening!

It was felt by many that the Paralympics Opening Ceremony had a lot to live up to following the Olympics Opening Ceremony. Well it did, in fact it surpassed it. How could anyone but admire the fortitude and determination of the 4,000 plus paralympians as they entered the arena proud to be presenting their countries. The support they received from the great British public and from around the World was phenomenal and quite rightly so.

I had the most amazing experience of my life. I met some wonderful people. Everyone was made to feel very special but one of the many highlights for me was when one of the athletes asked me if I would be going to Rio to which I replied that I would love to go to Rio and he said good - I will look out for you because you have made my games! Can't get much more of a compliment than that, can you!

Well done to Jackie and Christine and many thanks must go to the Partners, Virginia and of course Christine Creese who kindly sorted out all our holiday requests... another logistical nightmare.... Hey, who knows Christine maybe they could use you in Rio!

Peggiann Chevallier