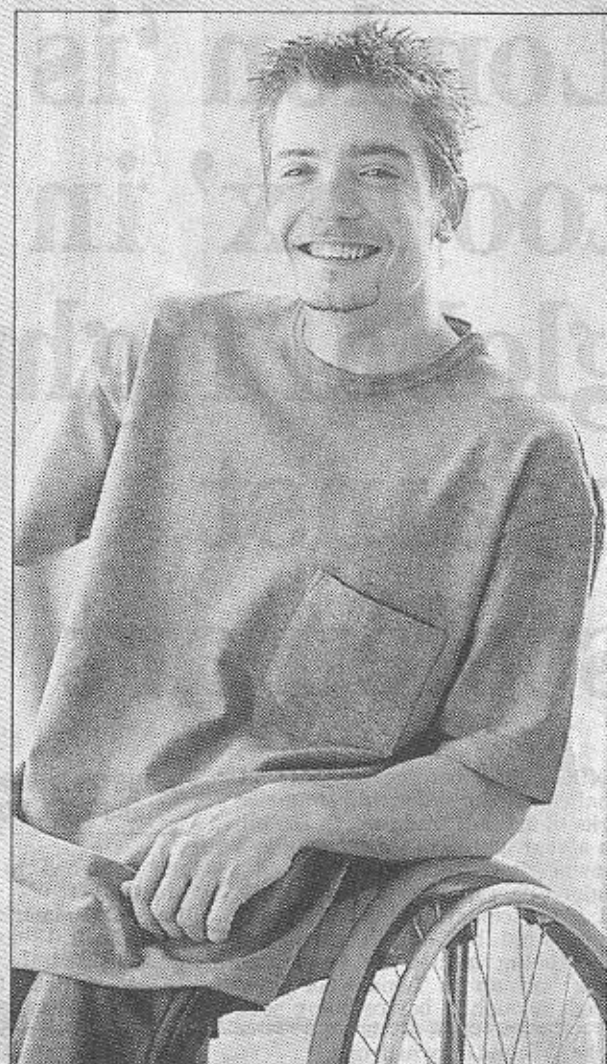


# We are stylish, sexy, and yes, we're disabled



Alice Friedl: "We can be as attractive as anyone else"



Ben Ashwell: "There is a sense that things can change"

BEN ASHWELL has modelled for Marks & Spencer and worn Red or Dead on the catwalk. Not surprisingly he is very good looking. He is also paralysed from the waist down.

Tonight, Ben and Alice Friedl will be taking part in a fashion show to mark the launch of VisABLE 2000, a modelling competition that aims to shatter stereotypes about disability and increase the representation of disabled people in television and advertising.

The idea is to act as a wake-up call to companies whose advertising ignores the fact that 15 per cent of the population is disabled, with a combined spending power of £40 billion a year.

According to Ben, who has spina bifida and was a joint winner in last year's competition which attracted more than 500 entrants, it is important to show that disabled people can be independent and look good. Both Ben and his co-winner, Natalie Doyle, have gone on to model clothing in this month's issue of M&S magazine.

Ben has also taken part in a Channel 4 documentary about ambition which will be shown in June, has appeared in From The Edge, a BBC lifestyle programme for disabled people, and has been the subject of articles in the financial trade press.

The 24-year-old former England swimmer and wheelchair basketball player already has a full time job as a shareholder analyst for Cazenove, a City stockbroking firm, but he would like to do more television presenting.

Earlier this month he took part in a Camden fashion show organised by Artsline, London's arts and entertainment information service for disabled people. "I'm really happy to be part of something that gets more disabled people in the limelight," he said.

"It takes a while to get your face known but there is a sense that things can change and we are moving away from the kind of instant labelling that lumps all disabled people together."

That's a view shared by 25-year-old

by JANE HUGHES

Alice, one of last year's finalists who has rheumatoid arthritis and uses a wheelchair.

"VisABLE is a really good opportunity to disprove misconceptions about disabled people and show that we can be just as attractive, stylish and sexy as anybody else," she said.

"I was in hospital having my knee replaced when I heard I had made it to the finals and it really boosted my confidence. The reaction has been really encouraging and I still get people in the street coming up and congratulating me."

Alice, 25, has had to put her history of design degree at Brighton University on hold as her arthritis has worsened, but she now plans to take an Open University course.

She has modelled for the Canopy clothing catalogue, appeared in the local press and been approached by a local modelling agency.

"It is about time that advertisers changed their tune. It shouldn't be important that someone in a photograph is disabled," she said.

The Leonard Cheshire charity for disabled people, which is organising tonight's event at The Crypt in St Paul's Cathedral, has invited along major advertisers.

It launched the competition, together with the VisABLE modelling agency for disabled people, after advertisers said that they found it difficult to find models with disabilities.

A number of leading companies, including BT, B&Q, One2One, The Co-operative Bank, Marks & Spencer and HSBC, have already signed up to the campaign and tonight's models will be dressed in Tesco clothes.

According to Rosemary Hargreaves of Leonard Cheshire: "VisABLE not only helps to raise the profile of disabled people, but it is also a great confidence booster for those taking part."