

Sky *high*

Louise Alexander-O'Loughlin talks to Charlotte Hawkins, Sky News TV presenter, about being starstruck, happy feet and mischievous antics behind the scenes at Sky.

Have you always wanted to be a TV presenter?

I remember when I was a teenager rigging up a video camera in my front room and recording myself reading the news. I wrote a whole news bulletin and had even written an 'and finally...' endpiece. I sent it to ITV Meridian, which was ironic really, because I ended up working for them. I think I thought they would 'spot' me at an early stage.

Did you enjoy watching the news when you were younger?

Yes, I always watched the news; it was always on in the background when I was growing up. News presenters fascinated me: I thought they were superior beings [she laughs] and that they knew everything.

How did your journey to becoming a TV presenter start?

I knew I wanted to be a journalist, but was worried about just how competitive it would

be, so I went into advertising initially. I soon realised I wasn't going to be happy until I tried the journalism route. I did a Postgraduate Diploma in Broadcast Journalism and that was it. I loved it, and worked in radio for a year before getting a job as a trainee at ITV Meridian. I worked really hard and became a producer, reporter and, finally, main presenter. After seven years I got my dream job at Sky.

How do you get on with the rest of the team at Sky?

We all get on really well. I have been with Sky and worked with the team for the last seven years. It's lovely because it's not just a working relationship – we go to each other's houses, go to social functions together and we have all become good friends. It's the relationship with the team that keeps you sane when you work the hours that we do. Getting up at 3.15am every day is a challenge, but knowing that everyone there is going through the same thing definitely helps.





Lauz Photography -
www.lauzphotography.co.uk

Your colleague Jacquie Beltrao was recently diagnosed with breast cancer. That must have been a terrible shock?

Absolutely, it was a huge shock. She found out just before Christmas and underwent treatment immediately. It all happened so quickly and she was so brave and told viewers on the show about what had happened. I know she has been an inspiration to many other women going through this horrific ordeal, and she has had an overwhelming amount of support from viewers of the show. I know she is really touched by everyone's concern. Jacquie is strong and I am proud of her for being so positive, she is incredible.

How is she doing now?

She has undergone an operation and the results have come back all clear so far – which is amazing. She is due to come back to work soon, where she belongs – on the sofa with us!

Eamonn Holmes, the anchor on Sky Sunrise, is a bit of a legend. Has he helped you develop in your career?

Yes, I have learnt so much from him. He is a true professional, and he has given me loads of advice and support over the years – I am very grateful. Saying that, you need to be on your toes with him, as he can be unpredictable and throw anything at you at a moment's notice. He can also be very mischievous.

How do you mean?

One time, I was in the dressing room just a few moments before we were going on air, and when I went to open the door it wouldn't budge. It was only when I heard a snigger, I realised Eamonn was on the other side pulling the door shut. I was panicking because I could hear them counting down on my earpiece.

Did the viewers get wind of what Eamonn had just done?

Not at all. So much goes on behind the scenes that people don't know about – if they only knew the half of it. I should write a book!



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What's the most embarrassing moment you have had on Sky?

I had done one bulletin and popped back into the dressing room before I was next due on air. The door slammed shut behind me and somehow jammed. I was stuck in there for ages before anyone realised what had happened. You'd think they would have missed me! Eventually they heard me shouting and sent security with a crowbar to break in, and I went back on set.

You were obviously AWOL at this time; the viewers must have wondered where you were?

Well Eamonn was helpfully giving them regular 'breaking news' updates, and he told viewers I was trapped in the dressing room with no food or water. I could hear what Eamonn was saying through my earpiece – and he even told me to step away from the door at one point as he said they were going to use plastic explosives to blow the door open! Meanwhile, they sent a camera to film the moment I was freed. I was cross after being locked in a room for so long with no windows and no other way of getting out, but I had to look relieved and grateful for the sake of the camera when they finally let me out.

What's your life like outside work?

I live in Surrey with my husband Mark and our lovely rescue dog Bailey. After a busy day, coming back home to the peace and tranquillity of the countryside is really important to me.

How did you find Bailey?

I'd decided I absolutely had to have a dog, and it was really important to me that it was a rescue dog. When I spotted Bailey's picture on a website I fell in love with her straightaway. We got her when she was four months old and she was really quiet and timid. She's changed so much since then and is lively and full of character now. I can't imagine life without her.

You used to live in London – why did you move out to Surrey?

We wanted more space in a rural country setting. We fell in love with the house we are in and have had our hands full renovating it over the last couple of years – it has been a labour of love. We've done quite a lot of the work ourselves so it has kept us busy. When we first moved in I would get back home after reading the news, change out of my dress and heels into overalls and paint the house for the rest of the day. It was exhausting!

Are your family nearby?

Yes, my parents are in Sussex, one of my brothers is in Berkshire and the other lives in London. I also have my sister-in-law nearby in Surrey. I am really close to my family, and at the moment I spend as much time as I can visiting my father as he is not very well.

What's wrong with your father?

He was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease in 2011 and has sadly deteriorated ever since. It's a devastating disease, and my family and I do all we can to support the Motor Neurone Disease Association.

So, given your celebrity status, you must be able to support the Motor Neurone Disease Association and help raise funds?

Yes, it is a charity I do a lot of work with. I recently hosted the Ultratravel Awards and they asked me to pick a charity that could benefit from the money raised at their auction. We raised nearly £40,000, which was brilliant. The saddest part is that with this disease, there is no cure. That's why raising funds for research is vital.

Your day starts at Sky Sunrise at 3.15am and you get off air at 10am. What do you do with the rest of your day?

Quite often I'm involved with other filming – either pre-recording interviews or working on other programmes for Sky Entertainment and Sky Arts. I also get asked to go along to quite a lot of events and awards during the day. I'm a member at Foxhills Country Club, so making sure I have the time to go there a few times each week is important to me.

You worked with Andre Rieu, the classical conductor and violinist. How was that?

Yes, he is amazing. He's one of the world's most successful touring artists and I have worked with him several times – as a presenter, not a musician! I host a live performance of his concert every year in cinemas, and also filmed a documentary about him. He is such a personality and it is great working with him and seeing him perform.

Are you enjoying being a presenter on Sky?

I love what I am doing on Sky. As far as I am concerned, it is an honour to be working on the best news channel on TV. The other great thing about this job is that my day finishes at 10am so it gives me the chance to do other things – if I can stay awake!

Who is the most exciting person you have interviewed?

Most recently I interviewed David Beckham, Oprah Winfrey and Sir Paul McCartney – but clearly not all together.

Do you ever get star-struck or tongue-tied when you interview people?

Yes, when you are staring into the eyes of someone like Johnny Depp, Matt Damon or David Beckham you sometimes feel like you are dreaming and it's important to focus and stick to your questions – otherwise you end up gushing about how much you love them! Which is exactly what I did with Matt Damon – I almost said, "I love you" instead of "I love your films".

How was the charity event 'Dancing With Sky's Stars'?

It was fantastic. I jumped at the chance to do that charity dancing competition. I missed the first few training sessions as I was away, and I had to work ridiculously hard to get up to speed with the others.



How physically challenging was it for you?

Very. I was training for hours every day – I was definitely the fittest I have ever been. I was really proud of myself during that period and surprised how fit I became so quickly. I had never done ballroom dancing before, and to learn the steps and get to the standard I did in such a short period of time was good going.

Did you ever watch back recordings of yourself dancing?

Ha ha – not until you just made me watch it again, Louise!

How do you feel watching yourself dancing?

In my head I thought I looked like one of Brendan Cole's dancers from his show 'Licence to Thrill', but in fact I seemed to be flinging my arms and legs all over the place. That would be why I don't watch myself.

Charlotte, when you and I went to see 'Licence to Thrill', you were really irritating to sit next to, as your feet were tapping away, mirroring the moves on stage. You obviously have it in your blood – do you think you will ever dance again?

I certainly hope so. I used to dance as a child, and had always dreamed of being on stage and dancing, so when I did that charity show I felt like it was a dream come true. If only I could dance like Brendan Cole and his incredible dancers, but I think I might have left it a bit late.

I bet Mark was proud of you?

Yes, he was! However, saying that, after I told him I thought it was the most amazing experience of my life, he reminded me that was supposed to be my wedding day. Oops!