

FEATURE

MARY ANNE

N O S K Y A C J

By Diane Bracuk

Photo by David Kerr

With her determination, creativity, and never-say-never attitude, **MARY ANNE JACKSON** is single-handedly living her **BEST LIFE**.

After a long day at work as a project manager at BMO, you can often find Mary Anne Jackson making creams and soaps for her product line, Jackson's Body Essentials. Beautifully designed and packaged, they look like any other high-end cosmetic product, except for the tiny tagline – Single Handedly Made in Ontario, Canada.

"People don't often catch the significance of this pun when I'm selling my products at various markets," Mary Anne says. "It's only when they pick up the product and look at my missing lower arm, that they say, 'Oh, now I get it!'"

The happily married, 56-year-old mother of three grown children wasn't always so matter-of-fact about her missing limb. A congenital amputee, she grew up in Toronto during the 60s and 70s, a time when inclusion wasn't part of the conversation.

As an infant, Mary Anne went to the Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital which, back then, was called the Ontario Crippled Children's Centre. "I have a photo of my mother holding me as a baby in front of that sign at the hospital," she recalls. "The word 'crippled' still sends a chill up my back."

Like many amputees, Mary Anne grew up wearing a succession of artificial limbs. When she was ten she was fitted with a body-powered

upper-extremity prosthesis, with the figure-8 harness, which came with a hook that was usually covered by a glove. Made by Ottobock, the gloves were not only expensive, but difficult to keep clean. Even something like reading the newspaper would stain it right away, so Mary Anne consistently needed replacement gloves.

It helped that her father was a schoolteacher working for the Board of Education, and had a good insurance policy. But that didn't help with her self-esteem as a teenager when she got the ignominious nickname, Captain Hook. "I put on a strong face, but inside I felt differently. There were a lot of tears from being excluded from social activities because I only had one hand."

Blending in with others became especially important when Mary Anne started her career. That's when she discovered the Pillet Hand.

THE LIFELIKE HAND

Designed and developed by Parisian doctor Jean Pillet, the cosmetic hand is as similar as possible to her opposite hand, in both shape, skin texture and colour. For Mary Anne, it was a game changer in terms of how it improved her self-image.

Her Pillet Hand replicated her fair Scottish skin to an amazing level of detail, even down to her freckles! It wasn't a one-step process. After Mary Anne was fitted with her new hand, the company flew in an artist from Paris to hand paint it, a painstaking process that took over two days to capture nuances of changing light on her skin tones.

When Mary Anne received her finished hand, she burst into tears of happiness. "It was just so beautiful. It was a work of art. Getting this type of prosthetic hand at this time of my life really helped my confidence. Sometimes I'm amazed at how often it's missed by colleagues or acquaintances because it's so lifelike."

Although the Pillet Hand is known as a passive hand, Mary Anne uses it for driving and holding light objects. She is still a client of Dr. Pillet, and over the years has developed a personal relationship with his prosthetic makers, inviting them for dinner when they come to Toronto for clinic appointments.

THE UNLIFELIKE HAND (AND ARMS)

Amazing advances in technology have changed perceptions of disability. But so has fashion. Thanks to the popularity of tattoos, more prosthesis wearers are forgoing conventional flesh-coloured ones that blend in for ones that stand out, expressing their personality.

For Mary Anne, the need to blend in changed in her late 40s when she had to have multiple surgeries related to the pain of overusing her sound hand. "Not being able to wear my prosthesis during recovery was sort of liberating," she recalls. "I even got a little tattoo above my stump."

When the time came for a new prosthetic arm, she wanted one that expressed her creative side, realism not a priority anymore. Custom-made at Sunnybrook, her artificial limb is laminated with one of her favourite materials, a beautiful Liberty London

silk fabric. It also came with a few interchangeable attachments from TRS Prosthetics, including a Shroom Tumbler, a unique mushroom-shaped prosthetic accessory designed for floor exercises and other mat-type activities like yoga.

"I'm not trying to hide anything. People ask about it, but they're not asking about what happened to me. They're asking about the arm which is cool."

Indeed, as Mary Anne has grown older, she's changed the way she views her disability. She's stopped wearing her prosthesis as much, mostly only to the office. Her attitude? "Embrace your disability and be proud that you're different. It's a huge part of who you are."

We had a phone interview with Mary Anne to talk about her life in general.

thrive: Tell us a bit about Jackson's Body Essentials. Are your creams and lotions geared to prosthesis-wearers?



MARY ANNE: The products are for everybody. I started this creative journey by taking a soap class with my daughter and the hobby just grew from there. I was always looking for the perfect hand lotion, because when you have a prosthetic hand like the Pillet Hand, using a lotion that's too greasy can leave a shine when you touch it. Over time, I've developed a lotion that works perfectly for me, moisturizing my hands without leaving them too greasy.

thrive: Sounds great. Where can we get your products?

MARY ANNE: You can purchase them through my website www.jacksonsbodyessentials.com. Or if you're in Ontario's cottage country, a little shop called Tin House Woodworking and Espresso Bar in the hamlet of Coe Hill.

thrive: Raising a family, what kind of challenges did you have to overcome with upper limb loss?

MARY ANNE: Raising a family has challenges whether you're missing a limb or not! Velcro shoes were just coming onto the market when I had my first son, and I would attempt to tie his shoes and make a bow using my teeth. There were a lot of kicks to the face with that! I also changed diapers on the floor so as not to worry about having a child fall from the changing table.

Dressing myself was difficult back then as well, contending with awkward clasps and buttons. Today's styles are so much easier with adaptive clothing readily available. I've recently been purchasing things from IZ Adaptive (www.izadaptive.com). They have very stylish pull-up pants and jackets and blouses with magnets down the front.



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thrive: *What other kinds of adaptations have made your life easier?*

MARY ANNE: I’ve had some customizations in the kitchen such as drawers that spring open when I kick them with my feet. Plus, I have a large stove that I can keep pots stacked on so I’m not lifting them. Little things like this make for less wear and tear on my hand.

thrive: *Has your workplace made any accommodations for you?*

MARY ANNE: Yes. During my initial interview I disclosed my disability. Even though my prosthetic arm wasn’t obvious to everyone, I still felt that it was important to bring it up in the conversation. I wanted to assure them that I qualified for the job with just one arm.

I’ve been with BMO for 15 years, and during that time, they have assisted in making my office life and position more accessible. Both the accommodation office and management have played a huge role in changing the way I complete daily tasks. For instance, I now use voice dictation because typing with one hand can be incredibly strenuous. I also have an iPad and an adaptive mouse that reduces additional pressure on my hand.

thrive: *You have a full life with your work, family and hobbies. Any advice on how to conserve energy?*

MARY ANNE: Use your one hand in moderation and remember to ask for help when needed. Don’t overdo it. I’ve overused my hand in the past,

and have had many surgeries to keep it functioning.

thrive: *You have custom-designed prostheses. How did you fund these?*

MARY ANNE: Funding is such a sore spot for me. It can be a challenge as ADP (Assistive Devices Program) has limitations on their list of suppliers, and I really think the Canadian government needs to revamp that system. If you’re lucky to have insurance to cover the prosthetic device, my advice is to never take ‘no’ for an answer. I fought with insurance companies every time I submitted for a new prosthetic arm over the years. But I’m tenacious, which is why I’ve been able to get my submissions approved.



Photo by David Kerr

thrive: Give us an example of a particularly challenging case.

MARY ANNE: Two years ago I ran into a huge struggle with my last submission. After multiple escalations, it was finally approved. In the end, I received an apology letter from the VP of the insurance company agreeing that my claim was poorly handled, and that in the future it would be easier to process these kinds of claims. They also updated the policy so that I was able to put through a claim for a new prosthetic arm every two years, versus the current longer-term submission, so that was a victory for me.

thrive: What if your insurance doesn't cover it?

MARY ANNE: I'd recommend getting creative with your funding if you don't have insurance available. Local charities and War Amps, etc., may be avenues to go down for funding.

thrive: As a Certified Amputee Peer Support provider, what kind of advice would you give a person who has lost a limb?

MARY ANNE: I'm very careful on what I recommend for other amputees. On social media sites like Facebook for example, people say "oh, I've got this, I've got that", but you have to be

sensitive to what kind of funding people have. I wouldn't take the first thing that has been offered to you. Research what's available. With the cost of prosthetic devices today, you'll want to make the right choice for your lifestyle and needs.

thrive: As you said, you were very self-conscious when you were young, and did your best to blend in. Can you talk a bit about self-image issues particularly as they pertain to women and young girls with disabilities?

MARY ANNE: That's a tough one. Children and young adults can be very unkind. Dating was always interesting and I remember being at a party with my husband, who was then my date, and overhearing one of his childhood female friends say, "She's so pretty but why is he dating someone who only has one hand?" These are times when you become stronger and it's these strengths that make you who you are. Just remember, it gets easier as you get older.

thrive: Are there any advantages to being an amputee?

MARY ANNE: I get my manicures half price. And I'm really good at shaping bagel holes around my stump!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Diane Bracuk is a Toronto health-care writer who became interested in the world of prosthetics and orthotics while freelancing for Boundless Biomechanical Bracing. She has written for *ParaSport* magazine, and this is her first feature story for *thrive*. In her spare time Diane writes short stories, many which focus on women and their self-esteem issues.

