

**real life** people jump to

Over the years Kerry Bull, 29, had got used to people thinking she'd had one too many. But it was far from the truth...

Me with Shannon at five months



Tearing down the street, I suddenly saw the pavement coming towards me. 'Aargh!' I yelled, putting out my hands to stop my fall. 'Oh, Kerry, not again,' said my mum Sue.

I was 11 years old and Mum said I was too clumsy. She wasn't being mean — she was worried. Her two older siblings, my Auntie Jean and Uncle Alan, both had ataxia, a condition that affected their co-ordination. From the day I was born she feared I'd be affected too.

I loved running around, though, and was a proper tomboy. With my brother Steve, now 32, I loved climbing trees and racing around in fields near our home in Belper, Derbyshire.

My favourite hobby was helping out at Dad's sister Jane's pig farm. I loved mucking out the huts and driving around on a quad bike. Working outdoors was my dream, and I planned on being a farmer.

Mum was really worried about my movements, though. She thought I walked off balance. 'She's just growing up and is a bit gangly,' doctors said.

But Mum had watched her sister become wheelchair-bound at 18 and her brother in his 20s, so it was always on her mind. At 16 I won a place at Broomfield Agricultural College in Ilkeston, Derbyshire. I had learnt a lot from the pig farm, such as how to cut the piglets' teeth when they were suckling and help them to wean.

Then, aged 17, Mum's fears came true. Blood tests revealed I did have ataxia. All I could think of was poor Auntie Jean.

'You should forget a career in agriculture and get a desk job,' the doctor at Derby City General Hospital said.

'No way,' I replied. As we went home in silence, Mum squeezed my hand. 'It'll be OK,' I said.

There was no treatment for ataxia,

Right: I loved working on my aunt's farm  
Far right: Mum always kept an eye on me

**I'm not DRUNK!**

just tests to monitor its progression. I decided to ignore it and carry on as normal.

Soon afterwards I met Jim, now 30, a fellow student. Tall and blond with green eyes, he was keen to pursue me.

'I've got ataxia,' I told him on our first date.

He just grinned. 'Nothing will stop me being with you,' he said. Jim loved going out to pubs. I, however, never drank much, only a couple of halves or a glass of wine. One night I was heading towards



the toilet when I heard sniggers. 'Had a few, have we?' said a man. I looked at his friends, laughing as I tried to walk in a straight line.

I hadn't even noticed how bad my co-ordination had become.

A few weeks later, at a nightclub with friends, the bouncer told me to put my glass down.

'You've had enough,' he said. 'But it's just a Coke!' I protested. 'Pull the other one,' he scoffed. I wanted to explain my condition,



**the wrong conclusion**

Take A Break  
27/8/09

but instead I just left, feeling embarrassed.

Around the same time I stopped wearing high heels as I struggled to walk in them. I'd hit tin in trainers instead. Another bouncer looked disdainfully at my feet.

'Sorry, no entry,' he said. 'I have ataxia,' I explained. 'It means I fall over easily.' 'Ataxia?' he laughed. 'Never heard of it. Next!'

I stared at my trainers, feeling so angry.

'Don't worry,' comforted Jim. 'Let's find somewhere else.'

I left college at 18, but my condition meant employers were reluctant to take me on. I was turned down by two pig farms.

Then I found a job on a miniature farm at The Midland Railway Centre in Butterley, Derbyshire. I loved it. It was outdoors, working with animals.

When I was 20, Jim proposed and we bought our first house, a two-bedroom cottage in Belper.

Despite my movements getting steadily worse, I tried to lead a normal life. The problem was other people. One Valentine's Day I popped into a card shop.

As I left, I dropped my keys on the pavement. Straightening up, I wobbled like a jelly. I felt the shop assistant watching me.

What's she looking at? I thought as I climbed in my car. I shrugged it off. People often stared at me.

But when I was almost home, I spotted blue flashing lights in my rear-view mirror.

Goodness! I thought. What have I done?

I had my seat belt on and wasn't speeding.

'We've had reports of an accident and need to breathalyse you,' the officer said.

'But I'm disabled,' I said. 'I haven't been in any accident.'

I puffed into the bag, which revealed I was completely sober.

'There seems to be some mistake,' said the officer. I dashed off, my cheeks burning. It seemed that while I could ignore my ataxia, other people couldn't.

Eventually I left my job and Jim and I decided to have a baby. Doctors told us there was a chance our child could inherit ataxia.

'Whatever will be, will be,' said Jim.

I felt the same and was delighted when I fell pregnant, giving birth to Shannon on 1 December 2003.

Being a mum was the best job in the world, but it wasn't easy. I was constantly falling over and had to be careful not to fall on Shannon.

One day I opened the front door when Shannon, just two at the time, came near my feet.

In a split second I lost my balance, slipped and fell on to the



Above left: Jim and me when we met. Left: I was determined to walk down the aisle on Dad's arm. Above: me, Jim and Shannon



of him, and of my little family. It does get me down sometimes, though. My speech has become slurred and it's harder to get around. I sometimes wonder, *Why me?* Then I look at Shannon and realise I have a lot to be thankful for.

Recently I did a skydive to raise money for Ataxia Awareness.

As I sat on the edge of the plane, strapped to my instructor, I felt such a rush of adrenaline.

When we launched into the sky I felt free. My wheelchair didn't exist as the parachute filled the sky and we floated gently to Earth.

We don't know what the future holds. But as long as I can still do things like skydive and look after Shannon, well, I'll be happy.

● Ataxia Awareness Day is on 25 September every year. For more information call 0845 644 0606 or visit [www.ataxia.org.uk](http://www.ataxia.org.uk)

side of my car, arm outstretched. 'Help!' I cried.

Jim drove me to hospital. I had broken my shoulder and ripped a tendon in my thumb.

After that we decided to move to a bungalow at Windmill Rise in Belper. I needed help getting around and started using a wheelchair. It was safer than knocking into things and it stopped people staring at me so much. The drunk comments ceased as well.

I concentrated on planning our wedding at St Lawrence's Church at Warslow in the Peak District on 21 July 2007.

It took all my determination, but I managed to walk down the aisle without falling over.

Instead of a first dance, Jim sang a karaoke song, *A Million Love Songs* by Take That. I felt so proud

My new trike means I can take our puppy Bertie for a walk

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