

'I'm a pageant queen at 55!'

As I zipped up the back of my daughter Heidi's dress, I smiled. Aged 14, she was about to enter her first pageant, Miss Teen GB. I'd competed myself when I was younger, and it had become a big part of my life. It's how I'd met some of my best friends and it had even inspired my business – a prom dress shop in my hometown of Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire.

After watching pageants with me, Heidi caught the bug. Now helping her get ready reminded me just how much I loved and missed it. Clapping as she took to the stage, I decided that being a pageant mum wasn't a bad way to enjoy the glitz and glamour of the event I used to love being a part of.

But during the COVID lockdowns, I had a change of heart. Realising life was short, I began to think that maybe, even at 52, I could compete in pageants again...

When the restrictions were lifted, I decided to get myself back out there. Fortunately for me, there was now

also an over-45s category in the Ms Classic GB contest. So, for two years in a row, I entered and, while I didn't win, I did place. And most importantly, I got back the buzz of having my hair and make-up done, and strutting on stage.

But then the menopause hit. I struggled so much with my symptoms, such as brain fog and intense hot flushes, that I was hospitalised. It was a very difficult time. That year I watched the pageant at home with Heidi. During the interval there was an ad for the following year's contest. 'Mum, you should enter again!' Heidi said. I wasn't sure, but when Heidi said she'd enter Miss Great Britain too, that gave me the push I needed.

Fortunately for me, I was now on HRT and my menopausal symptoms were easing, so we put in our applications and were delighted to be offered places in the final.

On the day itself, we were whisked off to rehearsals where we learnt a dance routine. We also practised for the fashion, swimwear, and evening rounds. After two hectic days of rehearsals, the competition finally began and we were both buzzing with excitement. At 55, I was the oldest in my category, but that didn't worry me. By now, thanks to the HRT, I was coping much better with the menopause.

Debbie Hughes refused to let debilitating menopausal symptoms stop her glamming up

'Mum, you should enter again!'

Heidi went up first and I watched her from the side of the stage, brimming with pride. Before I knew it, my turn came to join her. I held my head high and walked out on stage and, knowing my beautiful daughter was already there gave me an extra lift.

Heidi came 15th in her category and I was delighted. Then it was time to announce the winner in my category. When I heard my name being read out I thought there must have been some kind of mistake! But there wasn't!

In a daze I was handed a sash, crown, and flowers and announced Ms Great Britain Classic. 'I want women to know, no matter what their age, they can do anything they set their minds to,' I told the audience as I held back tears.

I've now become a menopause advocate for other working women and have started my own platform, Talking Taboo. I really hope that my story inspires other women not to let the menopause get in the way of anything.

A delighted Debbie was announced the winner



Debbie and her daughter Heidi