

Coastal hero

RNLI helm Daniel Gurr's childhood trip to Brighton Lifeboat Station led to a life of volunteering on the seas and a modern-day love story, finds Simone Hellyer

As residents of a coastal county, we in Sussex are well aware of the invaluable work that the RNLI does to protect our shores and the people who use them. What's even more impressive is that the service is totally voluntary, meaning that the men and women who risk their lives and give up social lives do so with no expectation of reward.

It was a family friend who first inspired Daniel Gurr, a helm at Brighton Lifeboat Station, to volunteer after taking him to visit the station as a 12-year-old. "He took me down there one Tuesday evening and let me start the engine and meet the crew. As soon as I left, I thought: 'Whoa, I like this!' It was probably only a 15-minute visit, but it didn't leave my mind for the next five years," Daniel explains, adding: "I was straight through the door as soon as I turned 18 in 2008. It's been 12 years now, and seven as a helm. You join as crew first and work your way up the ladder like most places, gaining in experience as you go."

As helm Daniel is responsible for both the boat and the crew when out at sea and is part of a volunteer crew of 26. "We all have our own jobs. I'm a builder by day and as long as I'm local (within a

RIGHT: Daniel Gurr has been volunteering with the RNLI for 12 years

10-minute response time of the Marina) I am classed as on call. As soon as the pager goes off I stop everything, drop everything and go. Even if I'm in the shower, I'm out the door with soap in my hair. We don't know what it is until we get to the station, but we do know that something has happened and we need to get there as quickly and safely as we can," Daniel explains.

Daniel says he spends 50 to 60 per cent of his year on call, with calls coming at the most inconvenient times: "It's when I sit down to eat dinner that I worry most that the pager will go off – I definitely can't get a takeaway."

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With the potential for his RNLI work to railroad his social life, it is important to have an understanding family. Luckily, Daniel's fiancée Jade Cohen is well aware of the rigours of the job, having been a crew member herself. "I've got it so easy because she understands the role and that I have to run out at a moment's notice," Daniel says.

Since giving birth to their son Noah in 2018, Jade has been volunteering as a press officer for the RNLI, but had been a crew member since the age of 17. "One day we both went fundraising outside Asda and had a competition about how much money we could raise. She was getting all the old boys coming up and having a good chat with her and then there was me just getting loads of money from everyone else. And it all started from there," Daniel happily explains.

Daniel says that his Brighton RNLI team are like a family too (quite literally in the case of the

station caption who is his soon-to-be father-in-law) and that's one of the things that has kept him volunteering for the past 12 years. In that time the role of the RNLI in Brighton has changed a lot, and not always for the better, as Daniel explains: "When I first started out all our call-outs were for broken-down boats, but sadly these days we see a lot of attempted suicides and people entering the sea to swim and getting into trouble. We get roughly 80 shouts a year and 60-70 per cent of them are people-related, whereas it used to be mostly boat-related."

When asked about his most memorable jobs Daniel recalls the time they were called out to rescue a man playing the ukulele in an inflatable dingy at 2.30 in the morning off Brighton Marina. "He had a four-pack of beers and floated about a mile and a half off the coast with no way of getting back."

Inflatables have become an increasing problem in recent years, according to Daniel who says that people need to be aware of the risks. "The shops love to sell them, but they don't come with any advice to check the forecast – if there's a northerly wind there's no chance you're coming back to the beach without assistance. Not even some of the best swimmers or rowers could go against some of the winds we get off here," he explains.

Winter is generally much quieter than the 'silly season' of May to September, but Daniel can never entirely relax: "You try to forget about it, but there's always something at the back of your mind." Here's hoping that Daniel and Jade get a full day off for their upcoming nuptials. ♦

rnli.org/find-my-nearest/lifeboat-stations/brighton-lifeboat-station



BELOW: Daniel with fiancée Jade Cohen, who also volunteers for the RNLI, and their son Noah

