

Gill helps others live with stomas

When Gill Castle, 44, from Alnwick became the first solo woman to swim the English Channel in the dark with a stoma she wowed the nation. Now the incredible mum, who needed the surgery after traumatic childbirth complications, has arranged an empowering women-only trip to climb Africa's highest mountain.

'S'wimming the English Channel alone with a stoma was a once-in-a-lifetime experience and one that kick-started a whole new purpose in my life. Now I plan to climb Kilimanjaro with like-minded women.

My swimming story reached a lady in America who has a non-profit charity supporting women in Kenya with fistula – something I had after childbirth.

In Kenya, if you have a fistula you are considered "unclean" and husbands leave their wives, take their children and they can't work. Some end up with stomas. She contacted me and asked if I would chat with some of the women there.

STARTING A CHARITY

That Zoom conversation nearly three years ago changed my life. I discovered these African women – and children as young as eight – didn't have stoma bags because they can't afford them. They were using tin cans and crisp packets and were developing terrible infections.

In the UK we have a surplus of stoma bags – so I started sending these out. Something so simple allowed these women to go back to work and girls back to school. I knew I had to start my own charity.

In June 2022, I set up Chameleon Buddies and visited a hospital in Kenya the following month.

I was bringing 20 women together in one room. Conversations flowed from, "Can you still have sex?" to a young girl who hadn't showered for 10 years because she thought she shouldn't get her stoma wet. She had pot-washed for a decade!



Gill swam the channel



Kilimanjaro is her next challenge



She began sending stoma bags to Kenya



I feel like this is my calling in life. I was a police officer and through my injuries and mental health issues, I lost that job. I worried about what my new purpose would be but things happen for a reason.

That's why I'm planning another challenge, this time with women who have also been through trauma or injury – after all, that's what has pushed me.

It's a nine-day trip in October 2025, taking up to 16 women up Kilimanjaro – I'd like to raise at least £40,000.

It's not for the faint-hearted – but I'd love people to get involved who have never done

this kind of thing before. It's also a stigma-bashing trip. There's something powerful about being with a group of people who understand an experience that so many people feel ashamed about.

We've all been through trauma in some way. You don't get a stoma without a reason.

I'm really excited to see other people achieve something they never thought they could do, too. I'm proof that you can do whatever you want with a stoma – you just have to be a little more inventive sometimes.

'I feel like this is my calling in life'

If you fancy joining Gill on her next incredible journey, then check out chameleonbuddies.org.uk