

Club President JULIA BRADBURY put herself to the test by sleeping rough on the streets of London for a BBC documentary in aid of Sport Relief

# First lady



**I'M GOING** to use this month's First Lady column to talk about something a little more serious than I would normally.

This month's magazine focuses on technology, yet as campers there are certain comforts we're willing to do without for brief periods.

Maybe it's going without phone signal for a few days or missing your favourite TV show (Best Walks With A View?).

When I took part in a two-part documentary called Famous, Rich and Homeless for Sport Relief (the first episode was shown on BBC1 on 9 March), I found myself having to give up everything I take for granted on a daily basis, to experience what it's like to live on the streets of London for a week.

Homelessness is on the rise across the country – rough sleeping in England has skyrocketed in England by 30 per cent in just one year. People can find themselves homeless for all sorts of reasons: drug or alcohol problems, mental health issues, domestic abuse, financial troubles, divorce.

I was dropped in Camden at 11pm on a Sunday night with nothing but a sleeping bag, a bin liner containing a few spare clothes, and a toothbrush. Like many people living on the streets I had no money, no

phone, no watch and no ID. A camera crew followed me 24 hours a day, often filming at a distance so they didn't attract too much attention.

My gut instinct was to try to get off the streets and find a bed for the night, so I immediately started thinking about how to get money together for a hostel and some food for the next morning.

What I learned in those first 24 hours was unless you are deemed a 'priority' – that's someone who is pregnant, has mental health issues, a mother with a child or someone who's medically ill – you won't get a bed. There is no safety net just because you're vulnerable.

If you find yourself on the streets, those first few nights and weeks are when you're at your most vulnerable. You don't know your way around, you have to work out how to get food, where to get shelter and how to stay safe – you're a target.

People can be subjected to all sorts of horrors on the streets. Some of the people I befriended had been abused, assaulted and stolen from. I found I deteriorated very quickly both mentally and physically. You don't really sleep on a concrete pavement – you lie with your eyes closed hoping the night will pass without incident, hoping those footsteps aren't coming towards you. The incremental impact of sleep deprivation and constantly being on the move is incredibly draining. After only a few days I was mentally exhausted and my confidence was blown. It's incredibly hard to get out of that cycle. It's called the homelessness trap. You don't ever have enough money to get beyond day to day living, it's hard to stay clean, and your diet takes a nosedive, which of course impacts your health. Life expectancy on the streets is 47 for men, 40

for women.

I was moved by the many acts of compassion I experienced. A young lady approached my sleeping bag one morning with a cup of coffee and a sausage roll. She gently told me I could freshen

up in their work bathroom if I needed to. Thank you to the young man by the pub in Camden who gave me his last £2 for a cuppa. Thank you to the young woman who took the scarf off her neck and gave it to my homeless friend Graham. I gave back all the money to the homeless and have since made donations to several homeless charities, while staying in touch with and helping some of my new friends.

I'd urge people to give some time and engage with homeless people – try to find out their story. They are human beings. But bear in mind alcoholism and drug addiction is a huge problem among the homeless community so exercise caution if you do interact with anyone – certain situations are prone to volatility.

The experience has made me appreciate things all the more. I'm very lucky to have an amazing network of family and friends.

It's without doubt the hardest thing I've done and it was a huge privilege to spend time with people with such amazing resolve in the face of adversity.

It also reminds me of my pride to be the President of a Club whose members make a point of looking out for each other and upholding our spirit of friendliness.

To learn more, check out [www.sportrelief.com](http://www.sportrelief.com) and do whatever you feel you can to help people overcome the challenges of homelessness.



Julia lived on the streets for Sport Relief for a week

