

'Magic let me in,' says performer who beat cancer and gave up job

Neil Edwards, 39, tells Tom Pyman how magic helped him overcome testicular cancer and why the "introverted show-off" is giving up his TV career to follow his dream of becoming a professional

ACHISLEHURST magician has told the story of how his love of magic has driven him to beat testicular cancer and now pack in his career to perform full time.

Neil Edwards, 39, worked in a media archive for a business news channel, but has now taken the bold step of leaving a secure job to follow his dream of becoming a professional.

He told KoS: "Giving up my job scares the hell out of me but I want to follow my dream and it's something I would always regret if I didn't do it.

"I have my own weekly magic night in a cocktail bar in central London, which brings in some money but going full-time was a big step.

"I was mulling it over and everyone said 'why don't you just go for it?'

"I've had a lot of hobbies over the years, like astronomy and DJing, but magic is the one thing that has stuck. It defines me.

"Even when I worked in TV when someone asked what I do, I'd say I'm a magician.

"Apparently only one in 70 people have truly seen magic close up, and therefore I see it as a responsibility to show them how good it can be.

"Everyone has been extremely supportive of my decision - not a single person has said 'you shouldn't do this,' if anything they've said 'it's about time.'"

Mr Edwards' passion for magic didn't stem from childhood, but rather the way it kept him occupied when he was diagnosed with testicular cancer aged 19, during a university course in Ashington, just north of Newcastle.

"The illness lasted nine or ten months," he said.

"I noticed a lump and ignored it, before eventually going to my GP who immediately sent me to the hospital and within a day and a half I was in surgery to have it removed.

"Some tests came back as inconclusive and the cancer could have spread so I underwent courses of chemotherapy.

"I was lucky because my survival chances were 98 per cent but it was still a really difficult time.

"I wasn't able to work for nine months and my hair fell out - although I'm nearly 40 now so I'm back where I started.

"It was pretty scary - there's going to be fear when people shout 'the big C' at you, and it's eye-opening going to cancer day centres where people are in a bad way.

"For me, though, the overriding emotion was probably boredom. At 19, you just want to go out and do things but with the cancer you can't go very far and have to be careful.

"While in the hospital, a friend bought me a cheap, plastic magic set,



MAGIC: Neil Edwards is following his dream of being a professional performer

which consisted of three little egg cups and three sponge balls and I just became obsessed playing with them.

"Within three or four months I had mastered everything and my passion continued to grow from there.

"A joke present has essentially brought me to where I am now.

"I had all this time and magic was my escape, and if it wasn't for this whole situation I wouldn't be doing what I am today."

As well as helping him overcome illness, magic has been invaluable to Mr Edwards in social circles, and it was through his performances that he met his partner of 10 years, Michelle.

"I've always been an introverted show-off," he said.

"At a party I would sit quietly in the corner but would do things and slowly begin to attract attention. Magic let me in.

"I met Michelle because I was performing for friends in a pub and that helped break the ice a little bit because otherwise I would have been quite shy.

"On a night out I'll have pockets full of cards, rope and forks that I can bend.

"I'm always happy to perform and with just a few props like that you can get hours of material."



RECOVERY: His love of magic helped him overcome testicular cancer

While family and friends have always been supportive of his magic, Mr Edwards admits his obsession can grate at times for those around him.

He said: "It can be an annoyance to people around me when I am practicing - I'll be in the room but I'm not in the room, because I'm so engrossed in the magic.

"It drives Michelle mad because I'm always looking at stuff, if I see a salt shaker I'll be wondering what I can do with it, my mind is always whirring.

"Also some of my best ideas come to me about five minutes before I go to sleep, so I annoy her by having to get out of bed to find a notepad and pen to write it down.

"I'm definitely a perfectionist and my own harshest critic but you have to be in this business.

"Every trick I do I take it away and

change it slightly because I think it can always be improved - I could do it 10,000 times and it still wouldn't be right.

"I've tried tricks before and some people just don't get it, much like when a comedian tests out a few jokes before a gig.

"I don't see that as frustrating, it's just part of the process, and it's never a total loss because I've learned a skill, and rather than bin the idea altogether I just think of how I can alter it slightly and present it in a better way."

While Mr Edwards says he admires the glamorous show-stopping acts performed by the likes of David Blaine, Dynamo and Derren Brown,

he says he's more comfortable performing up close and personal.

"The buzz is from the reaction - the look in the person's eye where they don't believe what they've just seen is an incredible feeling.

"I never get bored of seeing someone's jaw drop, or their eyes pop out.

"It's about the aesthetic exploration of mystery, and while all art forms explore mystery, magic is the only one solely about mystery.

"Most people don't realise how powerful it is until they see it up close, and that's why I do it.

"The stunts are not my cup of tea - there are certainly no plans for me to be swinging from the QEII bridge any time soon."