

MADELEINE HOLT, 39, the culture correspondent on BBC's Newsnight, suffered with crippling back problems for 12 years. Here, Madeleine — who lives in London with her partner David Nicholson, 41, a media executive, and their two children, Rémy, two, and six-month old Raff — tells THEA JOURDAN how she finally beat the pain ...

SITTING opposite Pierce Brosnan and Rene Russo, I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable. Here I was, in a fantastic hotel suite in Edinburgh during the Film Festival, interviewing two of the world's most beautiful people as they promoted their movie, *The Thomas Crown Affair*.

But all I could think of was the body brace I'd just had to start wearing. The buckles were digging into my back and the fibreglass shell made me look like an American football player. I was boiling hot under the studio lights and the brace was so rigid that I couldn't even bend over to pick up a pen.

The brace was the latest attempt to treat my scoliosis, or curvature of the spine, that was diagnosed when I was 14. It was only discovered during a routine school medical examination.

I grew up in a rural corner of Devon with my parents, who had opted out of the rat race, and my brother, Lex, who is two years older than me. Dad used to be a headmaster of a big comprehensive school and my mother, Geraldene Holt, is a potter and cookery writer.

I had already noticed that my left shoulder was slightly higher than my right, but I just thought it was because my school bag was too heavy.

The doctors still don't know what causes scoliosis, but it is estimated that 2 per cent of girls aged 12 to 14 develop a spinal curve of around 10 degrees. The condition is less common in boys.

My medical showed I had a more serious curve, which was about 40 degrees out of alignment. But the specialist at my local orthopaedic hospital said I didn't need any treatment and it probably would not get any worse.

At first, my condition did not hold me back at all. I went to Cambridge University to read English and worked for a time in Louisiana for a U.S. senator for New Orleans.

Then I came back to Britain and started working as a journalist.

Everything was fine until I was 27, when I started to suffer agonising pain in my back. I know now that the curve in my upper spine had become so severe that all the joints were under enormous pressure. The muscles were in spasm trying to keep me upright, which caused the ache.

But my doctor didn't take the problem seriously and just gave me some paracetamol, which had little effect.

I did try ibuprofen, but that did not work either. The only thing that made any difference was a really hot bath and a stiff drink. I

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had hardly any energy and was pretty miserable.

I managed to soldier on, and in 1997 I went to London to start work for BBC News 24. It had just been launched and the work was extremely demanding. I would be doing live broadcasts at midnight from a film premiere at Leicester Square while gritting my teeth through the pain.

By the time I was 33, I was in such a bad way that I would lie for hours flat on my bed, groaning. I'd been to see various doctors, but I was told strong painkillers wouldn't help.

Although I didn't have a partner at the time, I was starting to think that, one day, I would like to have children. But I felt that there was no way I could ever be a mum. Carrying a child for nine months in this state would have been sheer torture.

I knew that scoliosis could get worse if ever I were to become pregnant, so I decided that I had to try to find a solution

before that happened. Researching on the internet one day in August 1999, I found out about the Scoliosis Treatment Recovery Centre in Louisiana.

I called them up and they told me about the custom-made body braces which they said could help straighten my spine. There was nothing like it in the UK. So, as I happened to have some holiday planned, I flew out the next week.

WHEN I arrived, I was fitted with a huge fibreglass Nasa-designed brace. It cost £2,000 and weighed 5lb, but it was so good at supporting my back that the relief was indescribable.

But as soon as I took it off, the pain came back. After a year of wearing it for 18 hours a day, I realised that it was just a temporary solution.

One option would have been surgery, in which doctors insert

steel rods to straighten the spine, — but I refused to consider it because I'd heard too many horror stories.

Then a friend read about a 'bionic hand' — in fact an intensive massage machine — which apparently had amazing results for chronic back problems, including scoliosis and slipped discs.

I was ready to try anything and went to see Irene Phillips at the Back Care Clinic in Surrey. She was the first osteopath to use the British-made bionic hand — called a pamm3 — which is designed to mimic the actions of human thumbs but works at 25 times the speed.

The pamm3 has four pistons which rapidly massage the joints of the spine. I lay down on a couch and she slowly passed the hand up and down my spine. The pistons moved endlessly and effortlessly to rock the individual joints and free up the stiffened segments.

You can have treatment at different levels and speeds accord-

ing to the nature and severity of your condition. After my first half-hour treatment, the pain eased immediately. After several treatments, it had almost gone. Now I have occasional treatments but am back to full health.

Best of all, I had met my partner David in 2002 and felt confident enough to try for a baby. My first pregnancy was so easy. When my second child, Raff, was born six months ago, I felt better than I had been for years.

Now I have so much energy and my posture has improved. I think the hand has allowed my spine to return to its correct position.

Apparently, the Chelsea Pensioners have a bionic hand as well as several Premiership football teams.



Back to health: Madeleine Holt with the bionic hand that has ended her years of suffering