MARNI MYERS

Chancellor Dharker, members of the University, distinguished alumni, and honoured guests,

Do you know your tippets from your liripipes? Can you distinguish between a trencher cap and a Tudor bonnet, and could you tell me how and when they should be worn? I doubt many of us will have this information at our fingertips. However, Marni Myers, our magnificent mistress of the robes, whom we are honouring this evening, would, in Mastermind parlance, receive full marks and no passes on these and any other questions on the finer points of academic dress.

Marni is a local lass, born in the Bensham area of Gateshead in July 1958. I’m told that her lovely name, Marni, came about because her sister Barbara, who is only fifteen months older than her, couldn’t pronounce her given name of Marion when she was a little girl. She attended the local school, Heathfield Secondary Modern, leaving at sixteen, as most girls did then, and went on to have a series of general office jobs. Marni married young but was sadly widowed when she was only twenty-four. Her priority was bringing up her son, Christopher, but she had a part-time job in her local pub at Durham and it was here that she met Tony, who was to become both her second husband and her business partner.
Marni’s sister Barbara tells me that Tony was very debonair and reminded her of a young Terry Thomas, (you have to be of a certain age to appreciate that reference…) Marni’s first impression was that he was terribly posh, and she didn’t take to him. However, over time he became part of her wider friendship group. And it was as her friend that Tony offered to drive her to the airport when she was flying out to visit her then boyfriend Alan, a merchant seaman, to whom she was about to get engaged. Upon arriving at the airport, Tony suddenly turned to her and said, “Don’t marry him, marry me!” Marnie was initially stunned by his declaration and turned him down. She got engaged to Alan, but soon realised she’d made a huge mistake and broke it off. Marni and Tony were married in 1985 and had many happy years together with their three boys, Gus, Anthony, and Christopher, until Tony’s untimely death in 2014.

Marni and Tony bought the Gray & Son business in 1989. It wasn’t in great shape, so Tony asked her if she would work a few hours in the shop to help sort things out. Marni soon realised the scale of what she was taking on. The business records were virtually non-existent and some of the faded and threadbare gowns had clearly been made from wartime blackout material. They were definitely in need of a refresh! In the early days, when our congregations were much smaller, Marni and Tony transported the robes from shop to campus in the back of the car; now, everything is stored in a large warehouse and
delivered to campus by removal vans. It’s a slick, efficient, well-run service, of which Marni and her team can feel immensely proud.

In conversation with colleagues, it’s clear there are many qualities that make Marni such a joy to work with. She is the consummate professional, well-organised, reliable, and completely unflappable - whether it’s conjuring up a spare set of robes for the student who forgot to register, providing belts, ties, pins or even a needle and thread to deal with unexpected wardrobe malfunctions - Marni has it covered. On one memorable occasion when most of the platform party travelling to a London graduation ceremony were delayed by heavy storms, colleagues took great comfort from thinking that if the worst came to the worst, Marni was there, and she would sort it out!

Not only is Marni au fait with every possible permutation of Newcastle’s academic dress, she is also completely unfazed by requests to source international equivalents. One of her fondest memories is of sourcing robes for the late Professor Paul Younger, a distinguished and sadly missed colleague, who had been awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Oviedo in Spain. As befits a University founded in 1608, their academic dress is very traditional, and the crowning glory of the outfit was a hat that resembled a large lampshade. Needless to say, Marni found the correct hat, and Paul carried it off with great aplomb. In fact, he liked it so much, I’m told he wore it on more than one occasion.
I am indebted to our Emeritus Registrar, Dr John Hogan, for pointing out that Marni is the only person he knows who has a licence to hug the most senior members of the University. The heavy ceremonial robes of our Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor and other senior members of the University need to be safely secured when worn and the only way for Marnie to do this is by standing in front of the wearer and reaching round behind their backs to fasten the ties. Needless to say, she handles this up close and personal work with her customary tact and discretion. And who wouldn’t love a hug from Marnie?

When she isn’t working on our congregations, Marni relaxes by going on cruises with her sister Barbara. Venice is a favourite stopping-off place, and they love everything about it apart from the extortionate price of coffees in St Mark’s Square. She is also a discerning and dedicated shopper, especially when in pursuit of a classy handbag. And when the graduations are over, and all the robes and hoods have been safely stored away, Marnie likes to sit down at home and unwind with her two cats, Alice, and Lottie… until the whole thing starts over again.

Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of thirty-three years of dedicated and exemplary provision of robing services to the university, I present to you Marion Grace Myers, to be accepted into the Fellowship of Newcastle University.

Jill Taylor-Roe, Senior Public Orator, 12 July 2022