

What a difference a year makes

These four people reveal to Maxine Clayman why they have good reason to celebrate this Christmas



I've got the family I always wanted

Kelly Rodrigues, 38, from London, always longed for children. And this year she's got the ultimate Christmas present, her twins Izabella and Mikaila.

'My husband Oliver, 39, and I had been trying to have children for five years. So we were overjoyed to find out, in September 2007, that I was pregnant with twins. But in February of this year, a 20-week scan showed that complications were developing that were causing me to go into labour early.

'I needed surgery immediately in the hope that it would delay the twins' arrival for the remainder of my pregnancy. I was put on strict bed rest – I couldn't even go downstairs or stand in the shower. Still, each week was a godsend as it meant my babies were growing inside me.

'But in March I began to have contractions. I was taken to hospital and had a Caesarean, giving birth to twin girls Izabella and Mikaila. They were so premature that doctors only gave them a 50 per cent chance of survival. I was devastated. My babies weighed about 700g each and could fit in the palm of my hand. After everything we'd been through there was still a chance we could lose our precious daughters.

'Mikaila was born with a hole in her heart but luckily the valve closed of its own accord after two weeks. And at six weeks old she caught a stomach infection and had to be brought back to life. For the next two months everything was in turmoil. It was relentless, as we didn't know from one hour to the next whether our babies would survive.

'Finally on 30 May they were allowed to come home. We were so relieved, but scared at the same time. For the first time we had the responsibility of looking after our children. Nothing prepares you for being a parent. But even with all the hard work it's truly the most rewarding experience.

'This year we're making the effort to get all the family together to make sure the twins' first Christmas is extra special. The last year has been full of highs and lows, and it's a miracle we've made it through. I feel truly blessed.'



I've got a successful business

Sue Stone, 44, from Dorset was on the brink of financial ruin. She turned her life around and used the experience to set up as a life coach this time last year.

'Ten years ago I was desperately unhappy. My husband had walked out on me, leaving me with our three children, and a quarter of a million pounds' worth of debt. The bank was about to repossess our house, I got into arrears, and I was relying on family and friends to help me. I was terrified.

'Then I came across the self-help section in a bookshop. Out of pure curiosity I began reading about the power of positive thinking. I know it sounds crazy but I'm living proof it works. It transformed my life.

'I learned that we attract whatever we focus on. If we

think negative thoughts we draw them to us. So the secret is to visualise what you want, and go for it.

'You have to reprogramme your thinking. It didn't happen overnight, but I made it my mission to make myself happy. I set myself goals, looking at what I wanted to achieve and I felt more confident within myself.

'Last Christmas I took the plunge and decided to make a career from life coaching. I wanted to teach people the techniques I'd learned, and give them the tools so they could be positive and happy too.

'Since then everything has been a whirlwind. I've been giving one-to-one coaching sessions to people, speaking at public and corporate events, and in schools, plus I've had a book published.

'My dreams have been achieved beyond my wildest expectations this year. And I even have celebrity clients who want to help themselves to turn their lives around.

'Knowing I've helped others have the confidence to fulfil their goals is a tremendous feeling.'

Sue Stone's book is Love Life, Live Life. For info see www.suestone.com.



reallives



Jo Baker-Watson, 50, from Herefordshire, explains how winning our award has transformed the clinic she founded, Megan Baker House, dedicated to helping children with cerebral palsy. 'This time last year I couldn't have imagined we'd be trying to raise the capital for a new centre in Leominster. Since winning the award we've had three times the amount of referrals we were previously getting. That's why

In 2008 I won Tesco magazine's Inspirational mum of the year

we've started an appeal to raise £1.5million – to accommodate more children and cope with the increased demand.

'As a result of the publicity generated from appearing in *Tesco magazine*, we've been able to create new services, such as a group for children who have had strokes, a UK first, and another group for children who have been affected by head injuries. We're also setting up a pilot project for adults with

Parkinson's disease. And we've taken on two new staff.

'Without *Tesco magazine* lots of parents would never have known Megan Baker House existed. They now have hope that their children can make progress that they had not previously thought possible. It shows the capacity is there and it's about giving children the right tools to develop.'

To make a donation log on to www.meganbakerhouse.org.uk

I got past my stammer and now I can speak

Daniel Bell, 33, from Cirencester, had a crippling, life-long stammer. This time last year he undertook the McGuire programme, which changed his life.

'At the age of four I started stammering but was told that I'd grow out of it. By 30 I'd accepted the thought of living with it for the rest of my life.

'It filled me with self-loathing that I'd mess up every time I went to speak. I'd shy away from

situations as I was too frightened to talk and worked in the financial sector so I didn't have to talk much. Even when my wife Claire and I got married, four years ago, it was on the Greek island of Skiathos, and an interpreter read out the vows so I didn't have to speak.

'We also wanted children, but I was petrified that somehow they'd pick up my stammer.

'Then I heard Gareth Gates talking about the McGuire

Programme, and I enrolled on a course in November 2007.

'It taught costal breathing, a technique opera singers use, to enable you to speak on a full breath of air. The change in my speech was phenomenal. And now I'm hoping to become a McGuire coach this Christmas.

'Best of all my wife and I are trying for a baby. Now I really feel I can achieve anything.'

For details of local courses see www.mcguireprogramme.com.



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