

Newfound talent helps Mary cope with ME

BY FIONA AUDLEY

THERE IS a definite energy surrounding Mary Courtney.

It's in the wit of her wisdom, the passion fuelling her words and the strength of her engaging personality.

But what the 46-year-old craves the most is the physical energy robbed from her when diagnosed with ME more than a year ago.

Known as the tiredness disease, Myalgic Encephalopathy is a neurological disorder also referred to as chronic fatigue syndrome.

It leaves sufferers unexplainably exhausted, experiencing severe muscle pain and often unable to walk, talk or perform even the smallest of everyday actions.

Mary — whose parents hail from counties Kerry and Cork — has suffered from the condition at her home in Coventry since being diagnosed in 2007.

She can no longer work, travel or cook for herself and even leaving the bed is frequently not an option.

She said: "ME seems to be different for everyone but the predominant thing for me is that it's like living in a sludgy fog of tiredness. It's like the worst hangover of your life combined with a really bad dose of flu where just moving yourself around or doing anything is a huge effort."

But while life is now largely contained within the four walls of her living room, Mary has uncovered a talent through

her illness which she never knew she held.

Following a relapse last year which left Mary bedridden and unable to speak, the lecturer found poetry.

"At that point I lost the ability to do anything for a long, long time," she said.

"Climbing the stairs was like climbing Mount Everest. I lost my fluency and it took a long time to get to the point where I could chop an onion.

"But one morning I woke up and there was a poem in my head just knocking on the door waiting to come out."

Mary had not written a poem since she was an 11-year-old schoolgirl but has since produced hundreds of them — one of which won her a National Poetry Award in March.

"The funny thing was I wasn't able to speak in sentences or write an e-mail at that stage," she said.

"But this poem about friendship came fully formed in my head which I called Tea And Chat and they have just continued to come since then."

While she clearly laments the loss of her former lifestyle where an enjoyable post at the University of Northampton filled her daily life, Mary is surprisingly philosophical about the path she now takes.

"Having ME and losing the independence of your former lifestyle has been hard," she admitted.

"I miss hiking, visiting my relatives in Ireland and having a job I love but the poetry has been a delight."

"I have loved the magic of it — that it's beyond your control and the poems decide themselves.

"They decide when they are ready what they are and what form they will take."

"I have written poems on everything under the sun, moon and stars.

"A lot of my life is now lived in a very physically confined space but in my head I am not confined at all.

"For somebody who was very social it's good — I want to feel like I am making some links with the world and writing a poem is evidence of being alive."

Mary's award-winning poem *Feeling Trapped, A True Story* put her among the 13 poets picked from 7,500 entries who received national recognition at the National Poetry Society Awards in March.

■ For further information about Mary Courtney and her work e-mail mary@marycourtneypoetry.co.uk

Feeling Trapped, A True Story

Jonathan Trappe had a dream, sitting in his office swivel chair, gazing vacantly out of the window. He imagined taking to the air.

Just taking off; buying fifty-five huge helium balloons; a fantasia of reds, whites, greens, yellows and blues.

And he saw himself in slow motion frames, inflating each one, tying each with string, hefting a huge

clod of a stone to put on the swivel seat, so that the balloons wouldn't lift it away,

not yet, at any rate; not until all fifty-five were tied in place.

A cacophony on the arms of his chair, a bored filing cabinet grey. And then he imagined easing the

stone off, right down to the date. He could see it now. Raleigh, North Carolina, June 7th, 2008.

Early morning, commute time to work, half past eight. And that was it. He decided this dream could not be late.

And so he left for a coffee break and walked at brisk pace

to a shop in the town centre, staring at his reflection facing him in the window, beyond to the bright glare of party games;

striding in, he picked fifty-five huge helium balloons; matter of factly paying for them, with no fuss, like it was an everyday activity.

The next day, he left work, and took to the air, in his office chair.