

THE TOASTMISTRESS

WE CAN'T BE 100% SURE, BUT DENISE WARD MAY WELL BE THE WORLD'S ONLY BLACK, BISEXUAL, BRITISH, 40-SOMETHING FEMALE TOASTMASTER. SHE'S ALSO FAMOUS IN ISRAEL – FOR PROMOTING YOGURT.

"I've never met a toastmaster who's under 60 and isn't a white male," Denise Ward proudly proclaims, though she adds that there are some out there. Denise used to run the lesbian and gay club Akwaba in New Cross in the 80s, but last year became inspired to learn more about a man in a red jacket at a friend's Jewish wedding: "I did some research on Masters of Ceremonies and thought, 'I could do that.'"

The toastmaster, as she is first to point out, has long been the preserve of white, middle-class men. An obscure career option, there are only around 100-200 toastmasters in the UK, facilitating everything from weddings and civil partnership ceremonies, to Masonic festivals and bah mitzvahs.

"I really enjoy doing civil partnerships. I was with a woman for seven years and I'd have loved to have been married but that wasn't an option at the time."

As she notes, marriage is a celebration, but etiquette can become complicated between families. "I ask the couple what they want from the day and work around the script. They are the main stars, with me there to direct them, help decide how they want their families introduced, whether they want a receiving line and so on."

"I've got a strong voice, but it's still gentle and authoritative." Indeed, with her background in acting, Denise has the stage presence required when commanding the attention of a whole room of people: "I make sure everything runs smoothly, like the first dance, the cutting of the cake and speeches, when I'll say something like, 'Ladies and gentlemen, pray silence for the best man.'"

She draws upon her stage presence and theatrical skills when performing the role: "I stand out a lot, I wear the Executive Guild of the Toastmasters medal and the red jacket, so with the gloves and the gavel, I look at it as a costume."

Denise tells DIVA that toastmasters traditionally sip from a special glass: "It looks like it's half full but it actually only takes a small amount of alcohol. I don't drink a lot anyway, but I won't refuse one. It would look rude!"

Couple this with her Mary Poppins-esque bag and the charismatic character is pretty much your dream friend on a night out: "My bag? It has lots of useful things like bow ties, scissors, needle and cotton – spare tights. If anything goes wrong, my bag, hopefully, will be able to help..."

Well-known on the lesbian scene after working in event manage-

ment, Denise already had two years' experience running weddings and other occasions. She remarks: "The only difference was I wasn't wearing the red jacket."

While event management sounds jarringly modern compared with her toastmaster role, Denise believes the service is still relevant today: "People want to enjoy their big day the best they can, so having someone to make sure everything runs smoothly actually adds value for money."

And if you have any Israeli or South African guests at your event they'll be especially impressed with her particular presence. After starring in a series of adverts for yogurt company Yoplait, Denise became an overnight star abroad. She recalls: "When I first got off the plane in Israel I couldn't believe it – there were posters with me on them everywhere, buses with me on, cars – I was screaming! I rang my husband up and told him I was on the back of the newspaper and he said, 'No, in Israel that's the front!'"

The Yoplait colours are the same used by toastmasters; just one of many ironies for Denise: "It was for the diet Yoplait – so they've obviously got a funny sense of humour if they think I can advertise something diet."

International dairy-endorsements aside, Denise's focus is now purely on her ceremonial duties: "There is one wedding this year which I'm really looking forward to; the couple have some spectacular surprises in store for their guests, including opera-singing waiters and a secret casino." There'll be large numbers attending so the logistics are challenging, but she also revels in lending her gravitas to smaller events: "I have a civil wedding for two gay men who recently married in South Africa. They're celebrating the union with their British friends in a London pub."

She's also excited that, as a celebrant, she can officiate at weddings and take vows virtually anywhere: "There are no licensing restrictions! Even in the middle of Gay Pride I could marry you. There are people who do that!"

My inspirations:

Maya Angelou for her poise and dignity; Queen Latifah for her versatility and creativity.

hertstoastmaster.co.uk

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WORDS PARIS LEES, PHOTO TONY CASSERIO

