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## 'It wasn't always easy being a black model'

Having graced the catwalk as a model, Anne Bell has now set up her own agency. She tells Women's Editor Sarah Foster about her glamorous career and why she'd like to be a platform for ethnic minorities.

ANNE Bell's voice rings down the stairs. "Hello. Are you coming up?" I've stopped to look at striking photos on the walls, of pouting girls and handsome boys, and Anne is wondering where I am. I say I'm on my way and when I reach the top of the stairs, she's there to meet me. I can tell she was a model - she's statuesque with long brown hair and caramel skin. She asks me in and says she's sorry for the mess: there was a shoot the day before.

While not so long ago, Anne herself would have been the girl in all the pictures, she's now content to sit and watch. She gave up modelling in 2004, although she still steps in for clients when required, and now her agency, Zebra Model Management, is where her focus lies. Before we talk about the business, which she runs largely on her own from an office in Sunderland, I ask about her former life.

"When I was 16, my mum sent me on a modelling course," says Anne, now 35. "I think it was a ten-week course where I learned how to catwalk and had my portfolio done, and from there I joined several agencies throughout the UK. Living so central (in Northampton) I was near everywhere."

Yet at that time it wasn't easy for coloured models to make their way. The looks Anne inherited from her parents, who come from the Caribbean, made her difficult to place. "When I first started out in the late 80s and 90s it was very difficult for black models to sustain a full time career," says Anne. "Even today you hardly see any ethnic groups on the front covers of magazines. There are magazines like *Pride* and *Black Hair and Beauty* and I was featured in them. I entered a modelling competition in the mid-90s with *Pride* and I was in the final ten, and there were over 1,000 entries."

When it came to getting work within the mainstream, Anne was often turned away. A certain incident is truly shocking. "One of my experiences was entering a top modelling agency to be greeted by these simple words: 'sorry, no blacks'," she says. "That was a turning point for me but it didn't put me off."

That Anne was able to keep going was partly due to other talents. "I was always involved in the arts," she says. "I sang in Portugal and in the UK. I sang at the 100 club in London with a jazz band. I was also picked for the German version of *Buddy Holly The Musical* but I didn't take the contract because both my parents were very ill and I wanted to be at home. That was a life-changing time for me because a career in either entertainment or modelling is very insecure, and that's when I decided to go back and study. I did an HND in media and journalism, then I did music, film and media for two years at Brunel University. My final year was at Sunderland University."

In between her studies, Anne continued modelling. She did some pretty high profile jobs. "I was able to work with *Blue* and *Westlife*," she says. "I was featured in *Westlife's World of Our Own* video - there are about three clips of me in there. I was standing up against a green screen and basically they just did shots of me turning and a wind machine blowing my hair about. With *Westlife* it was them and us - they were with all the bodyguards - but with *Blue* they sat down and had chats with us, which was great. Simon (Webbe) actually heard me sing and asked if I was a singer and gave me his phone number."

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While others may have been star struck, Anne claims she wasn't fazed. "In my career I've worked with quite a few famous people," she explains. "I've worked with various artists like Nell McAndrew - we did a TV commercial together. It was a take off of Baywatch so we had to wear red swimwear. One of the big shows that I did was for Red or Dead and that was at the famous Fashion Caf  that went bust. I also did a show featuring Vivienne Westwood's collection. I actually wore the kilt that Naomi Campbell wore when she fell over."

When Anne moved up to Sunderland to finish her degree, it was also to lay down roots in her husband's home town. Having turned her back on modelling, she had to find a new career. "Over a period of three to four years I did recruiting," she says. "I actually worked for the company downstairs (her office is above Angel Human Resources). I just came to the end of my tether with it. I thought 'what can I do with these two skills of recruitment and modelling and where is my passion?' I thought 'this is the answer'."

She means of course her fledgling agency, which she launched in June last year. She says she's been happy with its progress. "It took us roughly six months to get a decent amount of faces that we could start marketing so we really only went live in January, and since then we've had about 30 clients, which I think is amazing," says Anne. "But with modelling the jobs are all one off so it's a constant battle to find new clients and get new models."

The sort of models Anne represents tend not to be the skinny, androgynous types we see parading down the catwalk - the North-East market is not geared up for this kind of look - but rather those with more conventional appeal. The range she covers is very broad. "The oldest people we have are probably Wendy and Joe, and they're in their 60s," she says. "With couples and families the jobs aren't that regular, so it's like Butlins Holiday Camp and the banks. We also get promotional bookings and a lot of fashion shows."

This doesn't mean that Anne has moved away from the glitz and glamour of couture. In fact she hopes to introduce it to the North-East. "This is why we are trying to create this couture edge to the agency," she says. "I'm able to train my models in the couture style of catwalking. I've seen shows in the MetroCentre and the way they present them is very old-fashioned. We've done a couple at Derwent Manor Hotel, in Consett, where we featured Mao Couture by Ahn Mao, who's based in Newcastle, and they were spectacular."

One thing Anne is keen to do, partly based on her own experience, is represent more ethnic groups. "We're desperate for ethnic minorities because a lot of our clients are looking for them," she says. "We have got one black model on our books - a male model - and when we used him at a fashion show, I had a lot of people in the audience saying it was fab to have him there. I want to do that a bit more."

While things are getting better for non-white models, according to Anne, the age old barriers still remain - and she for one would like to see them breaking down. She aims to offer opportunities. "Basically, with all the knowledge and experience I have, I want to offer that to other people and create avenues," she says.

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