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22 August 2020

# The Telegraph Magazine

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'I WAS HAVING  
THE TIME of *my* LIFE...  
AND THEN I OPENED  
MY BIG MOUTH'

67-year-old supermodel  
*Beverly Johnson's*  
new fight for equality



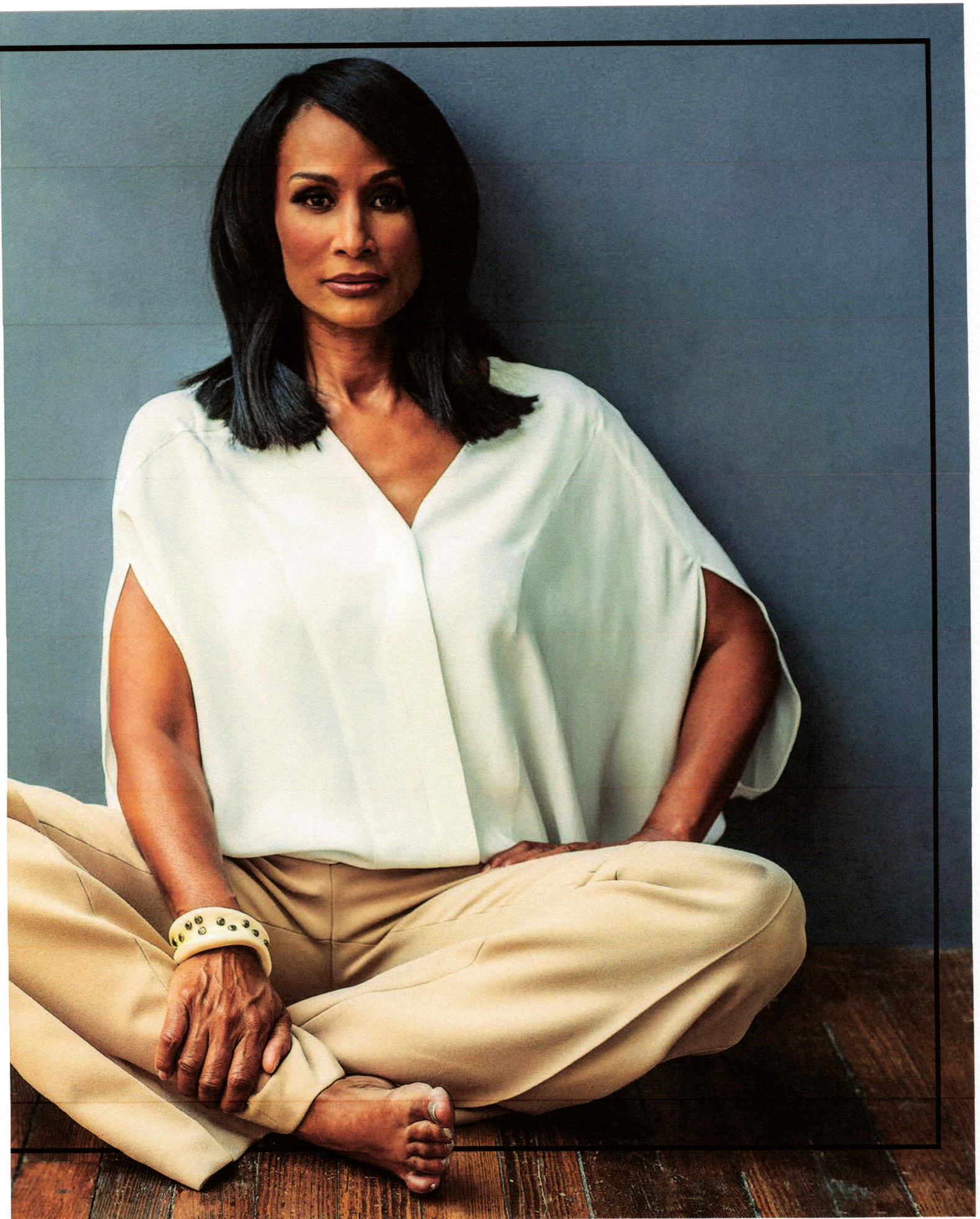
# The original activist



**In Vogue**  
Beverly Johnson  
stepping out in  
the pages of the  
magazine in 1974

She was the first black model to make the cover of US Vogue and helped bring sexual predator Bill Cosby to justice. Now, aged 67, Beverly Johnson tells Bethan Holt about continuing her fight with a campaign to tackle racism in fashion







**T**he headline of one article about '70s supermodel Beverly Johnson reads: 'Without Beverly Johnson, there would be no Iman, Naomi Campbell or Tyra Banks. Seriously.' Although relatively unknown in the UK, she has long been hailed a trailblazer across the pond: the first black model to appear on the cover of US *Vogue*, in 1974, and a heroine of the civil rights movement following that debut. She has starred on over 500 magazine covers, battled eating disorders, partied with the Rolling Stones, starred in the movie *Ashanti* with Michael Caine, been declared a 'supermodel legend' by Oprah, created a business empire to rival Goop and made the decision to share her Me Too story in the battle to bring Bill Cosby to justice.

This summer, the 67-year-old was hoping to begin taking things a little easier. After eight years together, her boyfriend, investment banker Brian Maillan, had proposed (using his mother's wedding ring) and she was beginning to settle into the idea of enjoying time with him and her daughter Anansa (from her second marriage, to music producer Danny Sims), 41, and her four young grandchildren.

Then the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis happened. Thanks to her boundary-breaking fashion achievement, Johnson was a woman who activists and journalists alike were looking to. 'People had been calling me asking if I had anything to say, and I'm thinking, actually, no,' Johnson tells me when I call her at her home in Palm Springs, which looks just like one of those glossy houses from Netflix's *Selling Sunset*, complete with sparkling turquoise pool and plush cream interiors.

It was when a statement to *Vogue* staff by the magazine's editor-in-chief, Anna Wintour, was leaked that she decided she had to act, instead of being 'glued to the TV watching this like everybody else'. In the memo, Wintour admitted that the magazine had failed to 'elevate and give space' to black creatives and had made 'mistakes' in 'publishing images or stories that have been 'hurtful or intolerant'. It's a hurt that Johnson has felt personally, both at the hands of Wintour (who reportedly snubbed her at a party to celebrate *Vogue's* centenary) and more widely during her career, which began during her university summer holidays in 1968. Indeed, she recently recalled how the pool of a five-star hotel was drained after she'd swum in it during a shoot. 'Twenty years later, one of the models told me it was because of me,' she told *People* magazine.

'I didn't just want to list off the complaints because we'd be here for days and days,' she says of deciding what to do next. Instead, Maillan told her about the Rooney Rule in



American football, whereby two ethnic minority candidates must be interviewed for every senior role in the sport – the policy helped to prompt a significant jump in the number of non-white coaches after it was introduced in the early 2000s and has

*'I wanted to rise to the occasion because I realised what it meant to so many black people'*



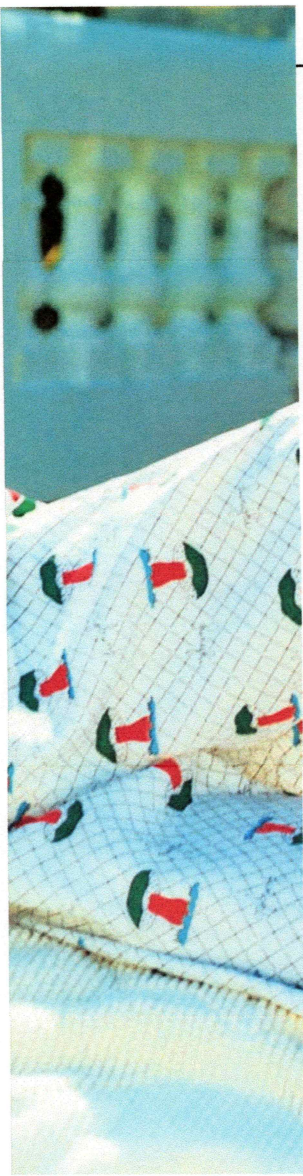
since been adopted by the FA in England.

'He said, either you call it the Beverly Johnson Rule or maybe they might call it the Condé Nast Rule or the *Vogue* Rule, it's up to you. You claim it or you don't,' says Johnson with her gravelly glamorous drawl. 'And I decided to claim it.'

In an article for *The Washington Post*, Johnson discussed her modelling experiences ('My race limited me to significantly lower compensation than my white peers... I was reprimanded for requesting black photographers, make-up artists and hairstylists for photo shoots') and proposed her rule: at least two black professionals should be interviewed for meaningful positions within Condé Nast, from executives to editorial positions. She also invited other companies in the fashion, beauty and media industries to take up this rule. Her suggestion was covered by outlets around the world, she spoke about it on NBC News and *Good Morning America* and took part in an online discus-

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**Above** Johnson modelling for *Glamour* magazine, 1973. **Left** Making history on the cover of *American Vogue* in 1974, and on *Glamour* in 1972

sion with Tina Knowles-Lawson (mother of Beyoncé) about tackling racism. Far from easing into a quiet life, Beverly Johnson is back and more passionate than ever.

Johnson was born and brought up in Buffalo, New York; her mother was a nurse and her father a steelworker. She was, she says, quite cosseted from the worst of the race troubles. 'I didn't grow up in the South, and there was talk of race, and Martin Luther King, and hoses and whatever... but we were up north, we lived in an integrated neighbourhood,' she says.

As a teen, Johnson was a competitive swimmer with aspirations to study law. 'I wanted to be a Supreme Court lawyer,' she remembers, with only the faintest glimmer of modelling as a possibility. 'I remember seeing Twiggy on television one time and going, "Wow, she's really skinny."'

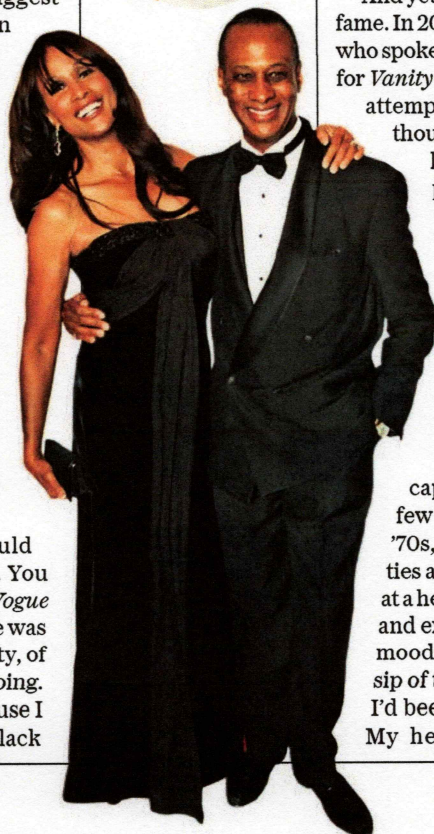
Modelling began as a summer job while she was reading criminal justice at Northwestern University in the early '70s, but quickly turned into a full-time endeavour and Johnson became one of the biggest faces of the decade, despite what might seem like some quite crushing obstacles. The legendary model agent Eileen Ford declared Johnson 'too fat' the first time she met her, and Kodak didn't make film that went dark enough to represent her shade of skin (never mind the photographers, hairdressers and make-up artists flummoxed by her non-white features).

But she admits that she was a little naive about the impact of being the first black woman on the cover of America's biggest fashion magazine (African-American model Donyale Luna fronted *British Vogue* in 1966). 'Sometimes you just have those goals that you're working towards and you don't really know everything about it. It wasn't like, "I want to be the first black woman on the cover." I didn't know about that. I wanted to be on the cover of *Vogue* because that's every model's dream.'

'When it came out and everyone was asking, "How does it feel to be the first black model?" I was like, "Oh, I am? Give me a little time to think about this." I was a 21-year-old kid thinking, "I need to get with my friends and party, and now this really heavy duty is on me." It really took me a while.'

'When you were a kid, you would think things are going to be better. You have this kind of innocence but that [*Vogue* cover] was the moment my innocence was replaced with this more mature reality, of really what America is doing, or was doing. I wanted to rise to the occasion because I realised what it meant to so many black

**Below** With partner of five years, actor Chris Noth (Big from *Sex and the City*), at a book launch in 1994; with her husband-to-be, financier Brian Maillan, in 2012



people. And I didn't want to let them down, or myself down.'

Now, such 'firsts' are celebrated with huge social-media fanfare – such as when Beyoncé was photographed by Tyler Mitchell for *US Vogue* in 2018, the first photographer of colour to shoot the title's cover – but that wasn't the case for Johnson.

'At first, the white models didn't speak to me and then the black models didn't speak to me,' Johnson recalls, suggesting that competition was so fierce among women carving careers for themselves that it was difficult to celebrate one another's successes, though she has said that model Lauren Hutton always stuck up for her. 'I was being hit by arrows from everywhere.'

Even so, that cover was really the start of a string of adventures that she describes in her 2015 memoir, *The Face that Changed it All*. These included Elizabeth Taylor loaning her the famous 69ct Taylor-Burton diamond ring during a dinner party hosted by the designer Halston, giving skincare advice to Michael Jackson and having an affair with Mike Tyson, which saw him so enthralled by her that he rushed from winning a fight in Las Vegas to see her in New York (she wrote that she had promised, 'If you win, I'll give you some'). She also had a relationship with Chris Noth, best known as *Sex and the City*'s Big, for five years in the early '90s ('Bev is actually hilarious,' he once said of her) and was married to Sims from 1977 to 1979 (after an earlier marriage to estate agent Billy Potter from 1971 to 1974).

And yet there has been a darker side to the fame. In 2014, Johnson was one of the women who spoke out against Bill Cosby. In an article for *Vanity Fair*, she said that Cosby had once attempted to drug her at his home. 'As I thought of going public with what follows, a voice in my head kept whispering, "Black men have enough enemies out there already, they certainly don't need someone like you... fanning the flames,"' she wrote. In the article she reveals she was asked by Cosby to audition for *The Cosby Show*, he charmed her and 'reeled' her in with a series of meals at his home with her daughter.

On another visit, he offered her a cappuccino from which she took a few sips. 'I was a top model during the '70s, a period when drugs flowed at parties and photo shoots like bottled water at a health spa,' she wrote. 'I'd had my fun and experimented with my fair share of mood enhancers. I knew by the second sip of the drink Cosby had given me that I'd been drugged – and drugged good... My head became woozy, my speech



became slurred, and the room began to spin non-stop. Cosby motioned for me to come over to him as though we were really about to act out the scene. He put his hands around my waist, and I managed to put my hand on his shoulder in order to steady myself. As I felt my body go completely limp, my brain switched into automatic survival mode. That meant making sure Cosby understood that I knew exactly what was happening at that very moment. "You are a motherf—er, aren't you?" She says that her memory of what happened next is 'cloudy', but that he eventually bundled her into a taxi to take her home.

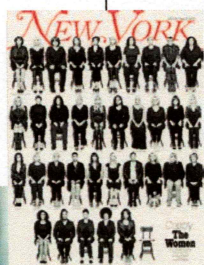
After Johnson's article, Cosby spent over a year attempting to sue her. He dropped the case in early 2016, and in 2018 was given a jail sentence after being found guilty on three counts of aggravated indecent assault, with dozens of women now having accused him of sexual abuse. Johnson's allegations were never tried in court. "Those were four years out of my life and it's not easy," she says now. "People were saying, 'Why are you saying something?'" They were very protective of me, but sometimes you're in a position where your conscience won't let you be quiet."

It's that conscience which is making her speak out again by proposing the Beverly Johnson Rule, which has been adopted by upscale skincare brand, Retrouvé. Alluding to fashion houses that have found themselves apologising after releasing products that depicted or emulated blackface, Johnson protests that, "If there was someone who looked like me on the board, they would've said, 'Hey guys, that's racist, that's a racial slur, that's not a good idea, and you know why? Because we were lynched in the South.'" They would be like, "Oh! We just thought it would be provocative." You know, that's not really provocative, that's distasteful."

'Sometimes you're in a position where your conscience won't let you be quiet'



**Above** Cosby during his trial, 2018; Johnson was one of 35 women who told their stories in *New York* – the empty chair symbolised those unable to speak out



Johnson and her daughter, model Anansa Sims, at a film premiere in 2012

Another modelling 'hazard' that Johnson faced is the cult of thinness which she battled with as a young model. She admits that she would go an entire day without eating. "When you're starving, you don't even know you're hungry any more. I had to ask myself, did I eat today? Because it doesn't work, there's no signals from the stomach to the brain saying you haven't eaten."

When her own daughter told her that she wanted to go into modelling, Johnson was reticent, concerned she might suffer the same fate. After trying to be a sample-size model, Anansa 'fainted in the elevator'. She decided to study instead and later became a plus-size model. "Back then, I thought 'is she rebelling?'" And she said, "I want women to know they look beautiful right where they are, right now." She became one of the top plus-size models in the world. I am so proud of her, she's taught me so much about loving my body. I'm a model, we're obsessed about weight and looks, and she's got me, I'm still obsessed, but I'm so much better, loving who I am right now."

As the videos and selfies on her Instagram account attest, Johnson looks flawlessly striking as she approaches 70. "I have an unbelievable dermatologist, it's just amazing what they can do now," she confides. "I've had no plastic surgery or anything like that, it's just these strange machines. It's fun, I love learning about all that, I love being her guinea pig, I'll try it! I'm having a good time."

Over the years, Johnson has built a vast

career portfolio ('my parents always told me I needed a pay cheque,' she laughs), with her books and hair products, a 2012 reality TV show on the Oprah Winfrey Network called *Beverly's Full House* (which showed the ups and downs of living with Anansa and her family) and a shoe collection (her company has designed a stiletto with the help of Elon Musk's SpaceX engineers).

Before Covid, she was touring her one-woman show, *Beverly Johnson: Naked!*, in which she speaks about her life and career, as well as executive producing a new TV series. Her next project will be planning her wedding – there's already been a lavish engagement announcement shoot in *People* magazine. "We're not doing a Covid wedding," she insists. Although she's now expecting to be spending more time campaigning than she'd imagined. "I was having the time of my life... I've got the love of my life, I'm going to get married. And then I opened my big mouth and my partner said, 'You just can't keep your mouth shut, can you?'"

She feels that, now that she's older, she has less to lose when it comes to being outspoken. "If I see something and know that I can shine a light on it, I can't ignore it. When I was modelling, I saw all these injustices but I realised that I wasn't in the position to speak out. I always said to myself, 'When I get in the position where I can speak out, where it's not going to damage my career and where I have some leverage, then I was going to do that.'" Well, I guess that's one of the benefits of getting mature... you can now talk about things from some point of wisdom."