

CHARLI HOWARD

DESIGN SCENE's contributor SHERI CHIU sits down for an exclusive interview with our cover star CHARLI HOWARD to talk about the portrayal of beauty, modelling and social media.

Charli Howard was fired by her modeling agency in London for not being thin enough, despite being a size UK 6-8 at the time. Little did she know the course of her life would completely change when she decided to speak out against the fashion industry's narrow standards of beauty. Here, she explains why she was miserable when attempting to fit in, and how she's finally comfortable in her own skin while standing out. As a body positivity ambassador and curvy model, Charli opens up on her former self-esteem battles and how keeping a healthy state of mind is an ongoing process.

As Charli enters the photo studio in New York City, her jovial smile lights up the room. Having recently dyed her hair blonde for a job, she exudes the air of a young Catherine Deneuve. "I got to be a different character for a bit," she says. "I love that."

It's instantly clear how comfortable Charli is in her own body, with her graceful posing and carefree attitude. When I compliment her on how self-assured she seems, she bashfully smiles at me, and I see a flicker of uncertainty. Since she was a child and young teenager, Charli had struggled with OCD, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders.

"I'm still in recovery from it," she says candidly. "When I first got my anxiety as a child, I don't think my parents quite understood what was going on because it's like 'You're 7-years-old. Why would you be anxious? Why would you have these weird OCD intrusive thoughts?'" When I was 12 and started dieting, I think that no one really noticed me."

Why did you start dieting at such a young age?

I got to boarding school and was in a dormitory with lots of girls. I think some girl had made a comment on how I was fat. I never noticed anything about myself before. That night I went into my bathroom. I looked at myself and was like, "I am big. How have I not seen this?" I was so used to being a child and eating whatever I wanted. I hit puberty and I put on a lot of weight, like 2 or 3 dress sizes in a school term. I was eating because I was miserable. People don't see that. I wanted to go home. My comfort was food. I would eat five chocolate bars a day, chips, soda, just the worst foods for you. Nothing seemed to fill the void that I had.

How was your boarding school experience?

I kind of felt like a bird trapped in a cage, like I couldn't really do anything. Before boarding school, I was showing lots of signs of misbehavior. I had been kicked out of my previous schools before that. I think my parents wanted me to go to boarding school because they wanted me to be a straightened arrow, to keep me in line. Actually, it made me act up worse.

Were your parents aware of the situation? Did they help?

With the bulimia, I really kept that secret and I told my parents that when I first moved to New York. I was so stressed out being in a new city. I was like, "I don't know anyone, what am I doing? What am I doing?" I made myself sick for the last time. I rang my parents up and I was like, "I've got a secret that I've been keeping for 10 years. I throw up. I don't know why I do it. It's a stress release. I'm not doing it to lose weight." They said, "We literally had no idea." I was really good at hiding it. I don't blame them at all. I was very secretive - that's what eating disorders do. It's part of the game where you keep it secret as long as you can.

Tell me a little about your parents. What do they do?

My dad was in the military. He just left. My mom was kind of working in schools, but got a job wherever my dad was posted. They've just moved back to England now.

Were you moving around as a child?

Yes, we moved around all the time. I think that has made me quite anxious and quiet. I never really felt like I had stability. It was always up and down, up and down.

How did you start modeling?

I started getting scouted around the ages of 15 and 16 while walking around London. It was always the really big agencies that would take me in and build my hopes up, and basically break my heart because I wasn't good enough. "Once you lose weight, then we'll sign you," they'd say. That's when the eating disorders started. I thought that if I wanted to be a model, I would have to fit someone else's idea of beauty. I wasn't confident enough. Social media didn't exist where you could be yourself and other agencies would sign you based on that.

I think everything happens for a reason. I dropped out of university where I was going to study German and politics and instead went to the London College of Fashion to do pattern cutting, which is all about woman sizing. You really start to see how designers get a bit lazy with sizing because it's so much easier to cut fabric on a sample size. Then, my friend sent my Facebook pictures off to agencies and I got properly signed after that. Had I not done the pattern cutting, maybe I wouldn't have written a book.

How has social media played a role as a model?

It's so important now. It gives you personality; it shows what you're about. Social media for me has been really powerful because I've been able to show myself as an in-between model, which some girls have been doing, but not on a high fashion level sense. What I want to prove is that you can get really cool fashion stuff and be a US Size 6-8 and still book jobs. I'm never going to be super plus size, which other models compared to me are - a US Size 12. I'm not going to be that big because I'm not built that way. I'm also never going to be super skinny. Social media has given me a platform to represent the girls in the middle. I'm not saying that everyone has to look like the girl next door because I don't think women want to see that. They do want to see aspirational, beautiful women, but I don't think beauty is associated with a size.

What are some of the main differences you have experienced modeling in Europe and America?

I think Europe is maybe on top of representing color diversity, but still very much bound to the size ideals. In England for example, there's no one who's really a plus-size model that I can think of, who does really fucking cool shit. It's always a bit commercial. In America, I feel that Americans really want to boost you up. They really want to see you do well, which is why I love living here in the States. I'm so happy.

What do you think of the media's portrayal of beauty and do you think it's changing?

I do think it's changing, especially here in the States. I think that body positivity is a bit of a trend and I don't want it to be a trend. It almost feels a bit forced sometimes, like every editorial has to have someone who is super extreme sizes. While that's great, sometimes it's like, "Ok, we get it." You don't have to make a massive deal out of it. Just make it normal. I think fashion holds a really big role influencing people and sometimes doesn't take enough responsibility for that.

You've collaborated with talented artists each with different aesthetics. From a more stylized shoot for Pat McGrath's campaign to a natural shoot with photographer Heather Hazaan, how do you approach each photo session?

I love modeling because it's such a creative process. I love being part of an art. I love working with friends and people who all want to do well in their careers based on something they love. Before I work with anyone I really look at his or her photos. I investigate and look at what they like. I look at their style and how I can bring it. It's fun for me because I get to be a chameleon. I love being able to transform into something else.

Is it you who we see in the photos or are you a canvas?

It's probably like a Charli I wish I could be, if I were really confident I would look like the Pat McGrath pictures.

How do you maintain a positive outlook?

Working on my mental health has really helped with everything else. I think mental health is really overlooked. I think it's more common in America to talk about your feelings and to go see a therapist, but in Europe, especially in London, it's just not a thing. You don't talk about it. I take time for myself with wellness and food. I cook for myself. The one thing I struggled with for a long time was the physical health. When I stepped into the gym, my mind was used to seeing how many calories I've burned. I'm learning to not focus on that. I'm focusing on wanting to get fitter, and to not punish myself for missed a week of exercise. That took a long time.

Self-love is so important. What are some moments in your career where you felt like you were helping women with their own self-image?

When Clémentine Desseau and I started The All Woman Project, we didn't realize how many people it would help. We just thought it was going to be an editorial where we used girls of different sizes. The End. Actually, we got all these messages from women of ages 60, 14, 10, mothers, sisters, cancer survivors, everyone, who has said, "You've really helped us." You can't beat that feeling, that you've helped someone feel good. You're not curing AIDS, obviously, but I think it goes to show how many women don't feel represented and who constantly feel ugly because of the images they see.

We started collaborating with brands. We've worked with American Eagle, Nike, and a luxury skincare brand called Babor, who now launched in the US. I want to keep doing that and proving to brands that they can use women with flaws and maybe even unretouched photos, and that's not going to damage their brand.

Your agent from Muse Models is in the All Women Project. In your agency, there is a huge framed picture of you on the wall. It must be incredible to have someone believe in who you are and your cause.

They helped me. It wasn't until they said, "You need to learn to let go. Relax. Accept your curves." I've never been in a position where I put on weight that people said "Well done. You look really healthy and womanly. You look really good." How many model agents do that?

Are there any new territories you want to explore or fantasies you want to realize in your life?

I would like to do more writing. I want to write books for young girls and create strong literary characters for girls. I think that's really important. I don't want to write about princesses and that kind of thing. I want to write about cool girls who do cool stuff.

At the end of the day, what fulfills you as a person? What makes Charli happy?

Definitely helping people and empowering girls. I'm a real believer of that's how we're going to progress. We're in a very weird time politically in so many different ways, like the #MeToo movement. I think women coming together is so needed. I'm proud to be a woman today.

*Interview by Sheri Chiu
Charli Howard's first book, "Misfit: One Size Does Not Fit"*