

Nothing About Us Without Us

Interview Transcripts

18pt

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Andy Walker

So, I'm Andy Walker. I'm a 41-year-old gentleman who for the past thirteen years, has been a proud wheelchair user. I've had a spinal cord injury since an accident in Goa in 2006 which left me paralysed from the neck down. So I use a chin-controlled wheelchair to get me mobile and about, which is important for me because amongst other things that I do, I run a business called Living Your Dreams Consultancy which provides consultancy advice around issues which effect disabled people and also motivational speaking. So that's a little bit about me.

So you know, at the age of 28, I didn't really know much about issues which affected people living with disabilities at all. I was involved in businesses and I had a construction management degree, and whilst I'd done work with charities, I'd never really understood how people had so many barriers in society.

I didn't know, whether that be people who are blind or deaf, or people who use wheelchairs or it could be a non-physical disability like autism. So it was an interesting world for me to enter myself in and I really tried to embrace it after leaving the spinal unit.

So the first thing I wanted to do was to get busy and get to work, and I found so many barriers about that, which was the main thing was people's perceptions of what I could do.

A funny story was that there was a social worker who came to my house and told me they had the perfect job for me, so I was delighted to hear that because I was really looking to get back out and do some work. I had adapted my own property, and I was keen to find out what ideas he had because he had the experience.

And his idea was that he had me working in a chicken factory, counting chickens which for people who work in a chicken factory counting chickens, no disrespect but that wasn't my dream and I've always done things which were my choice, my aspiration.

So I found that people's perceptions of what could be available to people like myself, you know, even the health professionals that were there to help support on that journey. The first steps I was taking on the journey were quite, in my opinion, quite low.

So I started to volunteer, I started to meet people in Link Centres and Centres for Independent Living and I started to ask a lot of questions about you know, people's lives and their stories, the challenges that they'd had, that they'd tell me about.

But what I found a lot with disabled people is that, you know, they're amazing, positive people who are excellent at overcoming barriers, hurdles and challenges. And I started to get involved in things like the Right to Control Movement, which is all about people accessing benefits easier.

Because from my family's point of view, there wasn't enough information and advice out there. We really struggled and were challenged about getting a care package, what's called a Personal Health Budget. So I was told that I couldn't have one of those, even though they were available through my local authority and NHS at the time. They were the pioneering site.

So I started to campaign, I started to think this isn't right, we need to make a change. And from what I'd been told from all the people who had much more lived experience than I had with disabilities, that you know, by working together, by having a voice and by challenging perceptions and the barriers that are out there, and by trying to live with the social model of disability, that we can make a difference.

So that's what I did. I started to volunteer and that's basically how I got entered into the world of, you know, the world of campaigning, the world of consultancy, the world of information, advice and you know, through my business and through groups and through the third sector and disabled people's organisations, people I work with, people I'm inspired by, you know, I try to do as much as I can to reduce the barriers and you know, to open up opportunities for people like myself and people in different situations living with disabilities.

The first thing that I was really keen on was to sell. You know, being quite selfish, you know, I needed to get my

own family situation right and a lot of... a lot of the problems that I had was around the care and support that I was receiving.

So I worked with the CCG, I worked with the NHS to look at this opportunity for personal health budgets and an organization called People Hope and the NHS England invited me to become a national peer leader so a group of people that talk to CCGs about the benefits of personal health budgets.

So the idea of a personal health budget is that I hold a budget that I can employ and recruit my own staff, because the other alternative was for the NHS to do that. And I kind of said, look, I've run businesses. I know the best people that I want to work in my house, the people who need to bathe me, the people who need to help babysit for my God children, the people that deal with my finances and the people that you know, live with my partner.

So you know, that was the start of things. And then I was introduced to a fantastic organisation called Breakthrough UK and they invited me to apply for a position because I had knowledge of the built environment, through my construction degree, to apply for a role for the Disability Design Reference Group. Which I was awarded the facilitation role.

And it just opened up this world of you know, issues related to, you know, the Metrolink in Manchester, the

willingness of Transport for Greater Manchester to remove those barriers, not just physically but in terms of service provision, the website and you know, it's a group that I'm really proud to be involved in.

So there's many, many groups that I've worked with alongside those. So the Coalition in Manchester is a fantastic organisation that's been very prominent in, you know, supporting and guiding disabled people and local authorities and NHS to try and remove those barriers.

So it's been... it's been you know, a plethora of organisations that I've worked with and along the road you meet so many different people with so many different stories, and it's amazing what journeys people have been through.

I mean, I've been hugely inspired by disabled people and what they've done. So people involved in the Disability Design Reference Group, you know, there are so many people. I mean, the entire group.

You know, I turned up with at the time, probably six years' lived experience, living with disability, two of which was really sort of self-focused. So there's a chap who's part of our group with visual impairment, a blind fellow called Francis Salt, who is just an amazing chap who has campaigned for the rights of disabled people, but people in society in general. I think he's amazing.

Lorraine Gradwell, who was involved with the Coalition and Breakthrough UK for so many, so many years. Before she passed away, used to sit me down and tell me off, and give me direction and say, “Look, you’ve got a voice. You can’t sit there at home,” and “You’ve got to really push yourself and these are what the issues are...”

And this is why someone who she considered articulate, not myself particularly, but she said, “You know, you need to get out there. You need to. You need to campaign, you need to challenge and you need to be a voice in meetings.” And not just me, but to try and inspire people.

So I try to volunteer, so I group lead certain courses with young people living with disabilities, people who have acquired spinal injuries through a variety of different reasons.

And I try to inspire them about you know, getting back to work and you know, getting back out in society and you know, don’t be... Get, you know, “Ask a girl out or ask a guy out. Don’t be shy,” and you know, “You’re still you. You’re still exactly the same person. You know, circumstances might have changed but you know, as a person, as an individual, your aspirations should be the same.”

And I speak to them about the movement and I say to them, you know... You know, “Challenge these things.

Don't just accept something because you know, the public sector say it has to be like that or the employer says it has to be like that, or society says it has to be."

You know, you need to challenge these things if you feel it's not right. And there's a way of doing it but like I said, people like Francis Salt and Lorraine Gradwell and you know, I could name... I could name probably 5,000 people, if not more, you know, within nationwide and regionally, who have had a massive impact on me through their experiences, their stories and the individual campaigning that they've done, with their successes and their failures, but they continue to do it and they inspire me to continue to do it.

And I'll do it for the rest of my life.

Jackie Driver

So my name's Jackie Driver. I chair an organisation called Breakthrough UK which is a disabled people's user-led organisation in Manchester that focuses on employment and independent living rights for disabled people.

I also currently work at Manchester Health and Care Commissioning, leading their inclusion strategy for them and I'm seconded out from the Equality Human Rights Commission. I also chair a couple of other organisations. I chair an organisation called Sign Health which is an organisation that supports deaf people's access to mental health services.

We are 70% deaf BSL users on the board and we employ more deaf people than any other organisation in the city actually, across the organisation nationally.

And I also sit on an advisory committee for an organisation called Result CIC and Result works with disadvantaged communities to get access to coaching, where coaching may not have been accessible before.

And that includes disabled people, asylum seekers, refugees, homeless people and so on. And so that's me in my professional capacity.

So it's an interesting question about when anybody first becomes involved with disability rights or any other rights, actually. And so, growing up in Manchester, you

know, as a deaf child, I was put through mainstream education in one of those kind of experiments that puts you through a system that doesn't actually support you.

So for me, trying to access the teacher when the teacher's back was turned, was quite difficult, as you can imagine. And so I didn't come out of education with very much in terms of qualifications. I was very good at art, because you didn't need the teacher to tell you what to do there. So I managed to work my way into working with different... a couple of years in a factory and actually on the way home one day from the factory, I happened to go into the local college, Wythenshawe College that had just been built, to use the toilet because I was desperate for it.

And as I came out, there was somebody there with a clipboard that said, "Don't you want to sign up for some courses?" And I said, "Well no, because I wasn't really very good at school so I'm not..." So at the end of that conversation, I signed up for art and because it was at the time when you used to be able to get grant funded education, I ended up signing up for sociology and psychology as well.

I was supported through the college to get through those, went to Liverpool, to the art college there, did my degree in sculpture and came out of that thinking, 'Well, you can't really do much with sculpture, can you?' And I

settled in to do my City and Guilds in Coventry in joinery, so the next kind of connection.

And it was then really that equality was first kind of, it was recognition for me about inequalities in society. Of course, I was the only woman on the course, I was the only person that couldn't get an apprenticeship. Working in departments as a carpenter when all of your contemporaries are much younger than you, sixteen, seventeen and I was quite a few years older, it was quite a challenge.

And that kind of opened my eyes to discrimination and how it... how it works really.

And then from there, various different aspects of my career later, I kind of made the connection between discrimination, how it effects a whole range of people, be it BAME, discrimination on the grounds of race, grounds of disability, on grounds of sexual orientation, gender, so on and so forth.

It kind of made me recognise lost opportunities really, not just for myself but for other people. So I gradually worked my way into roles that enabled me to get more insight. I worked in homelessness for a long time, worked with asylum seekers, refugees, I worked with disadvantaged, disenfranchised communities.

And absorbed and understood a lot about the kind of priorities in society. And during that period of time, I kind

of recognised a growth in the movement in disability rights and of course, that was very core to Manchester. Manchester, I'm sure you'll have heard already, has been the birthplace of a lot of the disability rights movement in this country and actually internationally, the way it's impacted across that.

So having the fortune to live here and for me to get involved in the disability rights movement, and I very quickly became... I had the opportunity to become the local authority's lead on disability equality for a few years in Manchester at a time in the eighties of strong political will to address inequalities.

And that opportunity really afforded me a great... a great sense of understanding how to make the connections between disability rights and structural and institutional inequality. And so from then, I went on to work for the Disability Rights Commission and then subsequently, to the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

And throughout all of those organisations really, my little experience of disability has really helped me to deliver in a way that I don't think I would have been able to, had I not had that. And the reason I say that is that very recently, you'll hear the kind of dialogue around disability as an asset, and that was kind of the dialogue that goes back, right back to the 1980s.

That it wasn't really formulated. Obviously, we were starting to formalise the social model of disability. It was

only known at that time to disabled people and disabled people's organisations. And even if I just bring us right back to date now, working in health and care, with people who have worked in health and care all of their lives really and you give them some training on the social model and they're kind of like, 'lightbulb moment.' And they're kind of, 'Well, of course. Why have we not thought of this before? Why am I looking at the person, not the structure?'

And when I say the learning for me; the learning for me does come from, you know, going back as far as working on things like the Macpherson Report and understanding institutional racism for what it was. That's very easily translated across to other types of discrimination.

And understanding institutional discrimination is one thing. Of course, lots and lots of authorities have heard of it and understand it but what the individuals in the authorities don't recognise as well, is that the institution is us. It's not, it's not the buildings, you know, it's the people that deliver those services and that deliver those employment opportunities.

And so therefore, we can change it. So you know, that was quite a long answer to a very specific question, but yes, lived experience and having lots of opportunity to fall into and to develop a career in tackling disability

discrimination has been very advantageous to me, to be able to move disability rights forward.

Yeah, so Breakthrough UK, we've been in existence for a fair amount of time but you'll have heard, I'm sure, some of the other... some of the other interviewees talk about Lorraine Gradwell, MBE. Lorraine was my Chief Exec for a number of years before she very sadly passed away.

She was an absolute freedom fighter for disability rights. She wasn't Mancunian born and bred; she was from Newcastle but she had a... Actually, she was from Durham, she was from the North East and she had a very strong persona and will about her.

She very kindly mentored me during my early years at the Disability Rights Movement. And eventually, I became the Chair of the organisation that she was Chief Exec at.

And she set the vision for Breakthrough UK, working with Manchester City Council, our local authority who were willing to go out on a limb for supporting disabled people to lead their own services. And Breakthrough is the service for employment for disabled people. It was at a time in the 1980s when disabled people, when we were given opportunities to work, we were all in the post room

or where you weren't going to be seen.

We still had supported employment in a way that was very derisory towards disabled people. Many disabled people still lived in... still had and still lived in segregated housing provision and still had segregated education. And in the early eighties with the political U-turn on segregation for disabled people, but didn't recognise that you can't just... put communities together and expect everything to be okay.

Jen Dodds

And I'm Jen Dodds.

I'm deaf, I've been involved in activism for a number of years. Well, I was involved in activism for a number of years – not so much these days.

But I was heavily involved when I was younger, in a number of different things.

It's difficult to pin down exactly when it started. I'm just trying to think. I mean, I grew up seeing a lot about the miners' strike on television as a young kid and I think that kind of instilled in me the idea that you could challenge authority.

Although I was deaf, my parents took the time to, you know, explain a lot of what was going on at that time. And so that was kind of an idea that I grew up with. As I got older, I realized that I was a lesbian and so became involved with gay pride, went on a lot of pride marches.

I remember going to a demo or a rally to parliament in Westminster, about the age of consent and I think that was probably... was that early nineties?

But anyway, so I had that feeling of being able to challenge and the importance of that. There was an organisation for deaf people, called the Federation of Deaf People, which was set up in '97 and I was invited to be part of that.

That was quite a radical organisation and I think my deaf activism, if you like, developed from my involvement with that group.

Could you tell us about some of the organisations that you became involved with?

I mean, as I mentioned, I was involved with FTP for I would say, maybe... about seven or eight years maybe. I was quite heavily involved with the work that they did.

A lot of that was awareness raising, in a way. So it was kind of keeping the deaf community informed of alternative viewpoints, I think, because the deaf sector was very controlled by charitable support at that time. And I think that goes for both national deaf organisations and local ones which had their routes in churches and missionary support and had become charities or had attained charitable status.

And they generally didn't have a very progressive 'can do' kind of viewpoint. And a man at that time, called Doug Alker, who had been previously involved with the RNID, that's the Royal National Institute for the Deaf, as Chair, realised that you know, the whole institution was very patronising, very...

So he set up the Federation of Deaf People and a lot of the thinking behind that was to sort of raise awareness within the community, of people's rights and about how

things were organised. And the marches for BSL recognition kind of came from that.

So we wanted to see that, the UK government recognise British Sign Language as an indigenous language of the UK. We did attain that. It was officially recognised but that recognition didn't come attached to any kind of legislation, which was a bit disappointing but my involvement with that led on to us, me being involved in a splinter group called the Deaf Liberation Front.

FDP was very kind of... You know, it was the friendly face of deaf activism. They organised marches and there were nice days out, whereas DLF were more picket line tactics. You know, they would be blocking roads or chaining themselves to railings, that kind of thing. A bit more, erm...

And so, from DLF, the Deaf Liberation Front, a number of us got involved with DAN, the Disabled People's Direct Action Network. So a few of us got involved with the work that they were doing on a broader scale and we had a good relationship. The two groups had a lot in common and we would learn really a lot from them.

So we picked up a lot of tactics and they were really supportive in what we wanted to do.

A couple of deaf people trained in climbing through them. One of the great memories I have was of a woman called Milly. Milly Vagdana. I remember her

climbing a lamppost outside parliament, right to the top to hang a massive deaf education banner. I've got a photo of it somewhere, I think, but that was a really amazing day.

At the time, she was doing that but the rest of us were blocking traffic. I've also been involved in a number of other random demonstrations, so a lot of anti-war stuff that was going on around the Iraq war and also more recently, austerity and the cuts and threat to the NHS.

So I allow myself to go to one march a year really, in London. I went to two last year because Trump turned up, didn't he? So I went along to that as well, but...

There's many, many... One of my fondest memories, I think, was on the BSL march in 2000. There were about nine thousand people, deaf and hearing, who turned up for that. It was the second march, I think, that was organised but we had a lot more people come to it, I think because, you know, the people that turned up on the first one said it was a good day

There was a busy event for us, a lot of stewards and I was trying to organise and I remember running right down to Trafalgar Square at the front of the march and getting up on the plinth to wait for the march to arrive. There was me and a couple of stewards.

And just being blown away by the sea of all these people, just marching into the square. It was amazing. Really amazing.

So I think that's one of my favourite memories but I don't know, there's probably a lot of things I can share with you as well, there's a lot of bad memories as well. You know, standing outside with banners in the pouring rain and the freezing cold, or whatever. So there's yeah, quite a range.

I think one of the best things for me was that things that people learned as being part of that. You know, knowing that people were on our team and that, you know, that we believed in the same things about that kind of strength in community and I think that was a real shot in the arm for a lot of people.

Yeah, it was a real... It was important, I think. Really important.

BSL recognition is still an unresolved issue and to be honest, I don't ever see it being resolved to the satisfaction of the deaf community. Getting legislative protection is considered to be too expensive, too much hassle and I just can't see it happening.

There's a campaign kind of bubbling under at the moment. It's not a fully formed campaign; I think there are individuals that are kind of doing things but I think maybe later, they might join together. But there is some

work going on around getting a GCSE in British Sign Language set up which I think would be a great thing but I think you know, it doesn't come without problems because it would need deaf people to teach the language really.

Also, it would require a lot of resources to actually see it rolled out. I mean, I know going back to BSL recognition, Scotland recently instituted legislation to protect British Sign Language in Scotland, the BSL Scotland Act. So it would be interesting to see how that pans out.

I think that deaf people still need to be more assertive about what they want and what they need, but I think that that's an ongoing issue for lots of people and not just deaf people.

I think we were probably at our most active in '99, 2000. I never imagined I'd find myself in a museum talking about it twenty years later. I mean, for me it's a way of life. I can't just accept the status quo and I can't really imagine me ever towing the line. I think I'm always going to be one of the challengers.

I don't know, maybe in twenty years' time, you'll be interviewing me again and I'll be telling you what else I've been doing.

I mean, I think one thing for me that I find quite frustrating is that more people aren't willing to... well, they're not willing to organise the protests. They're not

really prepared to put the work in. So there were a couple of us that organised the march. We did another one, let me think... Oh yes, that's right. It was the Stop Changes to Access to Work protest.

There were a lot of problems for deaf people within employment when access to work started to put cuts, bring cuts into their funding for interpreters in the workplace and put caps on a limit on how much they could claim in a year. So there were a couple of us that organised the whole thing really, and it's disappointing that more people aren't willing to get involved.

It's been much more difficult, I think, since the terrorist legislation has come in. It's not so easy to organise a march these days. So now, I think things are different. The climate's just different.

They're there. They're there. There are some people there. The GCSE campaign that I mentioned earlier, one of the main players in that is a twelve year old boy.

So that's, you know, that kind of thing is really great to see and I'm going to meet him soon. I'm interested to see, you know, what develops with that and with him. So there are others.

We need a kind of organisation or something like FDP to kind of put these people in touch with each other and give them a structure to, you know, support each other and we don't have any structure at all like that anymore.

We have the BDA, the British Deaf Association but yeah.

Yeah, a bit up and down.

I remember going to a BSL march in Nottingham, one of the regional marches. I went along to support it.

Because I was one of the London organisers, we helped the local organisers quite a lot, just by sharing with them what we'd learnt. There was one in Wolverhampton, Newcastle, Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol... Quite a lot.

And I went to as many as I could to show my support and I remember turning up to the one in Nottingham and there was loads of people, which was great, but there was no music. You know, I'm very deaf, why would we have music for a deaf march? But I'd brought a drum with me and I handed out a load of whistles.

And I kind of felt responsible for all the sound on that march. Again, which was a bit weird and of course, I can't hear any of it at all so I don't know how that was for people watching, but it was quite funny. It was a good march.

I remember in the London marches, at that time, we had to work quite closely with the police to organise that march and they were really quite supportive. I remember them saying we had to have St John's Ambulance at the back. That was one of the rules that they, you know, had to follow.

But now, actually, they were very much like, “Well, you’re on your own. Off you go.” But they had one steward for fifty people but we had thousands of people. So every march that we organised, we had to, you know, whenever we had a meeting at a pub or whatever, if we saw people, we were always, always trying to recruit more stewards because we needed so many because the marches were so big. To the point where I think people started to avoid me because they knew what I was going to ask.

But we did, we got a lot of volunteers to help us out with those marches. But it’s not the same now.

I don’t think I went on holiday at all during that period. Maybe four years, five years, because there was always marches in the summer. That’s when we organised them for, and it was a lot of organising beforehand. And then by the time it was finished, you know, the prices were all school holidays and it was too expensive so I just never went.

And if I went on holiday, I used to just get loads of text messages about what needed to be done anyway, so I never really got a break from it. But it sounds weird to say it, but they were my life at that time. I mean, my day job was as a journalist and that’s what paid the rent but the journalism really paid for, to keep the marches going. Yeah, for me to get to all these meetings and what have you.

But I haven't, I don't have any regrets about it. It was a good time.

I think the medical profession which has incredible wealth, you know, so much money spent on trying to eradicate deafness, find a cure for deafness, develop new equipment to solve the problems of deafness... So much money goes into it and I think it's so difficult to fight that because you know, it's so vast.

And I think, I realise now that that's perhaps not the right place to go with it. We did protest at a lot of medical conferences. There was one in the middle of nowhere, somewhere, just on a university campus out somewhere and we got, we actually infiltrated the conference. We got into the conference hall.

I think there were five or six of us and we were all deaf, and we went into the conference and we sat down but we had no idea how loud we were when we... There was no interpreters in there at all. Everybody was there, you know, talking and listening to the speaker or whatever and we got in, but it kind of felt so weird that they were talking about us but there were no deaf people there. There was no interpreters there. They didn't even know we were there and I just... I just think how do you fight that? And then of course, as soon as we revealed ourselves, that's when we were thrown out.

We also, at the end of the nineties, there was a lot of protest about hearing leadership within deaf

organisations. We wanted to see deaf people leading those organisations. And I remember going to one organisation where we had a meeting with the Chief Executive and we actually asked him to resign.

Of course, he said no but it was kind of the principle of making them aware of the fact that we felt that wasn't right, and making other deaf people aware of that. This particular person had a medical background and of course, on the day, face to face with him, you know, there was no way we were going to walk out of that meeting and be able to say, "Yeah, guess what guys? He agreed to quit his job."

It was never going to happen but from doing those kinds of things, I think the deaf community started to understand the issue better and know more about, you know, how to be more assertive and... You know, to come to realise that they can do this for themselves. They don't need hearing people to help them.

And so I think that even though those individual actions weren't necessarily successful in themselves, they led to that kind of growth in understanding and assertiveness within the community. So I think, you know, in general deaf people just accept less crap now.

I found a piece of paper, actually, that I... I don't know why I've even kept it. It was a list of different roles for organising one of the big marches. I think it was the 2003 march. It was a big march that year because it was

just after the government had recognised BSL. I think it was about six or seven thousand people that came.

And it was a list of roles and all the names of the people that were involved. I was really quite impressed at how organised we were and you know, when you think that you know, we were organising that across the whole of the UK at a time when it wasn't that easy to communicate with each other across distances, not the internet like we have now.

So there was one person in Sheffield and one person in Leeds, and one person in Bristol and we managed to work together and pull it off. It was a big thing to do really. I mean, the deaf community are, you know, they do travel big distances and they do stay in touch in different ways but when we first started, we didn't even have mobile phones much.

We had SMS pagers. What a waste of time. I mean, and as the technology came to, I mean it was a big help and made a big difference. We did paper petitions as well. I've just remembered that, and the address on the petition was my home address.

And the postman used to really hate me because they you know, we sent these bits of paper out all over the UK and people would take them to their local deaf club or whatever and get hundreds of signatures, and then post them all back to my house. And we were really shocked by how many we got back.

We had a great stack of paper, huge great piles of it, of signatures from all over the UK to this petition. And we actually, we actually took that to 10 Downing Street and delivered all that paperwork as our petition. It's not like just signing up online now, is it? It's not the same. No.

Pam Thomas

I'm Pam Thomas and I'm currently a City Councillor in Liverpool and I have a cabinet position of Inclusive and Accessible City, so, I am looking particularly at making sure that disabled people are included in all policies and practice.

I was very first involved in activism in the 1970's, when the Government issued invalid tricycles for disabled people and they were, they were very small vehicles with only the driver in there, so you were quite isolated.

The Government's own statistic showed that these tricycles were dangerous, people were killed and injured in these vehicles, so I was part of a campaign, called the Invalid Tricycle Action Group. I worked with other disabled people to get these vehicles replaced with cash, so that we could make our own arrangements to get around. And we won that because we got the mobility allowance in the, in the 1970's.

And then I had a bit of a gap, because I've got two sons and they were quite young and in the early 90's, I discovered, through reading a book by Professor Mike Oliver. And he described the social model of disability, which for me and many other disabled people, was a complete turning point, because it replaces the problem with systems and practices in society, rather than us individuals, with whatever condition we may have.

And in the book, Mike had mentioned an organisation called Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People. I'd never heard of them and in those days, of course, there was no internet.

So, I got in touch with directory enquiries and got the phone number and rang up and spoke to the most amazing woman, called Natalie Markham and that set me on a path that completely changed my life and it's been a great adventure, as I've met lots of other disabled people and GMCDP, as it's known, has been absolutely central to all of that.

It's known as, and particularly in the 1990's, as being right at the forefront activism and worked for Equal Rights for Disabled People. So, from GMCDP I also got involved with a National Organisation, which was called the British Organisation's, sorry British Council of Organisations of Disabled People, but they also stamped the title of BCODP. They didn't really go for short names, I'm afraid, in those days.

So that was organisations, which are totally controlled by disabled people, disabled peoples' organisations and it's very important to understand that, because that's very different to organisations, which are for disabled people, but run by non-disabled people. And there's been a lot of conflict, particularly in the 1990's, as disabled people became politically aware and

campaigning for changes in society, which currently still does exclude us to quite a large extent.

So, that national organisation was also very, very important, at that time. Also, important has been disability arts, and I'm currently a board member of DaDaFest in Liverpool and that organisation goes back quite a long time and there's a whole network of Art Organisations, Disability Art Organisations.

But along with disabled people's organisations, the funding has been lost in the last ten years, so it's very, very difficult now for disabled people to meet and consider these issues, of the ways, the way in which we are excluded from society.

It's good that those of us that were around in the 1990's, we still do keep in touch. Of course, social media has helped with that, we all keep in touch on Facebook, in particular and we're all around the country, but we're not getting younger people coming through, who understand that we are disabled by systems and practice in society, which is imposed on top of any limitations of activity, that we may have as individuals.

So we just trying, at the moment, to find ways of bringing in younger people and new people, so that they understand that, because the dominant view remains that we are the problem and that we need to fit in with, what is considered to be normal society and the systems

and practices that are created for and by non-disabled people.

Disabled people's activism has changed. I was talking earlier about the 1970's and at that time, there was a group of disabled people, who realized that they were confined into residential accommodation, because the so called, normal systems and practices excluded disabled people who, particularly, this was a group of people who were mainly wheelchair users, so physical barriers were very, very evident.

And that stops people living in their own home, getting out and about, using transport and so on. But there was another group, who were particularly campaigning around finances, basically saying, give us enough money and everything will be all right.

So that group of people, again, another snappy title, Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation, we called the UPIAS, and they were saying it's got to be about much more than just money. The whole system is leaving us out and that needs to change.

And we've kind of gone back to that now, because of austerity measures and what's happened to disabled people, is, money has gone, so if you can't work, either because of your condition you may have, you may be ill, or you just may have limitations of activity that doesn't allow you to work, but also the worst problem is discrimination from employers, who, basically, will not

employ disabled people and the figures of employment of disabled people, has not improved.

In fact, it's probably got worse. The Government claim it's better, but the quality of the work and the pay that people are given, is really, really poor, so you still can't live on that. So the current campaigns are much more about trying to get those, that benefit system improved again, because it was, you know, it was better in the past, it's gone worse now, so in a sense, it's kind of gone back to the 1970's, that income and making sure people have got enough money takes priority.

And that's really, really important, you can't stop doing that. But political awareness of the other issues, and the way the that the whole structure of society is designed by and for non-disabled people, doesn't take account of people with certain activity limitations, which come from medical conditions. But exclusion from society doesn't come from medical conditions, it comes from the way that society is organized and doesn't take account of us.

One of the major organisations, well it's not really an organisation, it's a network, the Disabled People's Direct Action Network and that started in the early 90's and I remember an event I went to, which was Block Telethon, because one of the big issues for disabled people then, and to some extent now, is rather than giving us equality and rights in society, that charity is seen as a solution to the issues that we face.

So I went down to London Weekend Television on a coach with GMCDP, so I met a lot of new people, at that time, from Manchester and a man called Alan Holdsworth, went round with a clip board, asking people to sign up to a direct action network and this would be going out on the streets campaigning and bringing attention to the issues that we were facing.

And that was very, very effective, we did that for quite a few years. There were some people who, we stopped the traffic, we did stop the traffic on Parliament Square a few times. I don't think you're allowed to do that now and it did bring attention to the issues.

And what was very interesting around that, round about 1994, I think it was, the Minister for Disabled People was Sir Nicholas Scott, and he denied that disabled people were discriminated against. But what was interesting was, his daughter worked for an organisation called RADAR and she disagreed with her dad. So this was really interesting for the media. So, they did pick up on that and were reporting on it.

It was very embarrassing for the Government because Sir Nicolas Scott actually mislead the house by saying that disabled people were not discriminated against.

BCODP had commissioned Colin Barnes to write a book. Colin became Professor of Disability Studies at University of Leeds. He produced a book which used

the Government's own statistics and showed that disabled people were discriminated against.

So all of that happening and the campaigns that disabled people had around, mainly in London, but we did go to other cities as well and in the end, the Government did introduce the Disability Discrimination Act, which had a Council, which was really pretty ineffective, but we did at least have a starting point of this legislation, which was then to stop discrimination against disabled people. And it has, in some ways, but, you know, hasn't completely done that.

That was repealed and replaced by the Equality Act in 2010, but we still do face discrimination and it's very, very hard to bring a case, that every time you're discriminated against, you have to take a Civil Case against whoever's done it and that's not practical. So we still haven't got full cover in the Law.

So the network of Disabled People's Direct Action Network, we called it DAN, and still call it DAN, was pretty amazing and that was, kind of, like the height of disabled people's activism in this country and the social networks, from that time, those of us that are left, because we've lost far too many people over the years and recently, in particular.

We still do keep in touch and we really want to be able to pass on the baton to younger disabled people and at the moment we're really struggling to do that.

I referred to when the protest we did outside London Weekend Television, Block Telethon, and that was the first proper demo that I went on. And what the organizers at DON was to set up an alternative to what was happening in London Weekend Television. So, they had this big Telethon going on, patronising disabled people and using pity as a way of trying to get in some money and that kind of thing does still happen.

And right across the road we had a disability arts event and it was the first time I'd seen anything like that, and it was amazing, so we had our own songs and comedy sketches. Comedy is really, really important in any group, and we've seen with other groups, where comedy by the people themselves, can bring about the change in culture.

So, we have that with Disability Arts and it was happening then, it's still happening now, where, in this case, disabled people would poke fun at the way that society treats us, but that really hits a chord, perhaps much more than, than lectures and that kind of thing, but I always remember that event, because going down on the coach with GMCDP, meeting people from Manchester.

And a lot of people I met for the very first time on that day, became lifelong friends and are still friends now, because we've met time and again doing various different things and that was a big turning point for

disabled people. Telethon was stopped after that, that was the last Telethon. There were other demonstrations against similar kind of events, but we do have some things that are similar, maybe the edge has been taken off it, but this reliance on charity, it's not helpful.

One of the difficulties we have is, in order to get enough money to live on and get the things that we need to live independently, we have to demonstrate all the things we can not do. In order to get a job, we have to demonstrate what we can do and it's a real dilemma. So, how do you do these two things? And that's still going on now. That's still a problem now.

Well, as I've mentioned earlier, the austerity measures have hit disabled people really, really hard and we've been disgraced by various reports. The United Nations Rapporteur has said, that the way that disabled people are treated, is really quite, I can't remember the exact quote now, but really put us to shame.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission have produced various reports on disabled people in Britain, so it's not just about the finances, but we are left out in so many ways.

One of the big things that I've been working towards and actually did a PhD in it, is Homes for Owner/Occupation and whether disabled people can actually find somewhere to live. And there's a certain standard in

building regulations that's optional, which means that homes are more accessible, because nobody knows if they're going to need access features in their own home tomorrow.

Anybody can have an accident or be unwell and find that they can't move around in the same way. So, at the moment, trying to get the government to make that compulsory in all new homes. In Liverpool, I've been able to get some commitment to that, so where the council has some kind of authority over the land, we can say to developers "you must build to this standard called Lifetime Home Standards" but it's actually equivalent to something in the building regulations.

So that's really important that we get that in place, because having a decent home, that you can use properly, impacts on everything else in life, same as it does to everybody else and it affects, certainly affects social interaction. So disabled people remain very isolated, I talked about how in the 1970's people were trying to get out of residential institutions, some people are still trapped in residential institutions because they can't find somewhere accessible to live, or they're not getting enough support to live in their own homes.

It's very social isolating and then that means that because we're not there taking part, non-disabled society will continue without us because they just don't think about us. Literally, don't think about us and often

in situations where we'll come, I'll be out with some non-disabled people, really good friends, and I'll come up against some physical barrier. And they are astounded. And I say, well that happens to me every day. "I didn't know, I really didn't know."

So that kind of segregation and pushing to the margins is still happening and that, we've got to fight that as well as, the financial issues that are so difficult for disabled people at the moment.

An interesting story from the DAN act, actions that we did, about an example of how things can be changed, when there's a will to do it.

When we first started taking direct action and out blocking roads and so on, the Police didn't know what to do with us, they'd never seen disabled people, including wheelchair users and others, behaving in this way. We, it was civil disobedience, we, you know, we weren't being aggressive or anything and also really careful about clearing up any litter, there was always a bin bag going around to make sure that, you know, we were well behaved.

But some people wouldn't move and so they were asked to move by the Police and wouldn't move. Some people got out their wheelchairs and were on the roadway and as a consequence, some people were arrested by the Police. But the vans that the Police had, were not accessible to wheelchair users and neither were the

Police stations, so they couldn't actually get people into the Police stations when they took them back

I have never seen buildings so quickly, all around the county, getting ramps put outside. Police Stations all of a sudden, had ramps outside, so it can be done, where there's a will to do it, so that's quite an interesting little anecdote, I think, about something that came about from DAN actions, we got some access to Police stations.

No Excuses

Ali Briggs

Okay, hi. My name is Ali. I'm an actor. I live here in Manchester. At the moment, I'm filming for Coronation Street which I'm really excited about. I've got eight episodes of that coming up. And now I'd like to introduce Mandy.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

I'm Mandy. I'm... I used to do a lot more acting and actually, I'm doing a little bit of acting but I'm mainly a writer now and currently, I am commissioned by LA Productions to write a first draft of Moving On, which is very exciting too.

Ali Briggs

Okay, so I met Mandy when I did my first ever acting job which was working with Red Ladder theatre company. So that was based in Leeds, a long time ago. What was the date, Mandy?

Ali Briggs

A long time ago.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

1991 was when we first met, yeah.

Ali Briggs

That was when we first met and it...

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

It was great.

Ali Briggs

It was kind of amazing, wasn't it? Because the play was actually written by a blind woman, Kate O'Reilly.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah.

Ali Briggs

Mandy was in it, I was in it.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

Ali Briggs

Tracey, another deaf actor was in it.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

Ali Briggs

Jo Verrent was involved in it. There were quite a lot of us, weren't there, deaf and disabled people involved together in that.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

Ali Briggs

And of course, it was a national tour, and the play was called Breaking the Silence.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And I didn't play a deaf person. [laughter]

Ali Briggs

No, you didn't.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

I actually didn't play a disabled person.

Ali Briggs

You weren't deaf, you weren't blind. [laughter]

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

No.

Ali Briggs

You weren't blind.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

I know, it's very strange. But they created a set that was tactile so I could run around it, so I could see.

Ali Briggs

Yes, but all that was quite revolutionary then. [laughter]

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

It was.

Ali Briggs

It was like, 'Wow!' Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

So it was great and we had, we got to know each other and we had a lovely time.

Ali Briggs

We did and it was always really an interesting combination, that deaf and the blind. I mean, it was just made for comedy really. We had lots of instances on tour, didn't... Oh, it was a fantastic tour but the political event of that tour, do you remember when Margaret Thatcher resigned?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes, she resigned. We went partying, didn't we?

Ali Briggs

[laughter] We went partying, we did. I think that was...

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Late into the night.

Ali Briggs

Yeah, that was probably the best performance of the whole tour because we were just standing...

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Not that we remember much of it.

Ali Briggs

No, so that was good. So that's where we met and then you were involved with No Excuses, wasn't you?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah, so my first experience of activism was I lost my sight quite late, well, seventeen, sixteen, seventeen. And I went to, I went from a comprehensive school to a blind school which was called Chorleywood and at comprehensive school, I was told I wasn't clever enough to do A Levels but I went to Chorleywood and I did A Levels and they just expected you to go to university and so I went.

And I did drama, and I actually met Mandy Colleran at university but we weren't friends, we just met a couple of times. When I left university, which was in Liverpool, it wasn't Liverpool University, it was actually at the

University of Lancaster, at a campus in Liverpool called C.F. Mott Campus, and so was Mandy Colleran.

Ali Briggs

Yes.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

I studied Drama and Contemporary Religion, which was very interesting. And when I left there, my first job was with an art centre called the Crawford Art Centre and I think they only gave me the job because the first event I went to, I got employed on a Friday and they said, “Your first day is tomorrow because we’re hosting the first Disability Arts Conference.” And I think they just wanted to say, “We’ve got a disabled employee too.” [laughter]

Ali Briggs

[laughter] Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And that conference was run by Arts Integration Merseyside, which was John McGrath who’s currently the Festival Manager at the Manchester Festival...

Ali Briggs

He is.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

... and Mandy Colleran.

Ali Briggs

Amazing.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

John had done an amazing thing, because he'd been given this full time job as a non-disabled man, to run a disability organisation called Arts Integration Merseyside. And the first thing he did was say, "Disabled people should be running this, not me." So he job shared and offered part, his half job to a disabled artist and Mandy Colleran got the job.

And then after about a year or two, John left and had built up enough funding for Arts Integration Merseyside to employ two disabled people, which was Natalie Markham and Mandy Colleran.

Ali Briggs

Oh!

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah, amazing.

Ali Briggs

No Excuses.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

No Excuses, yeah. So in those early days of Arts Integration Merseyside which became North West

Disability Arts Forum, the first thing they did, they were part of the Shape Network which was a national network of arts organisations that ran activities for disabled people and older people.

And none of the staff and none of the management were disabled people. So in Merseyside, being quite radical, we decided we would, we would leave the Shape Network. But what we did is we used to get on buses and go to Shape meetings and stand up, say, “Why aren’t we getting any representation on management? This is outrageous!” And then we’d walk out. We did that a lot.

LAUGHTER

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And then the big event was, gosh, when was it? It was something like 1990 or something like that. We went to one and it was coordinated by lots of disabled artists across the country. It was a national Shape meeting. We went to it, we disrupted it, we planned to disrupt it and then we elected each other onto a steering group and that became the National Disability Arts Forum.

And we basically all agreed to sabotage the meeting and to elect each other onto the board, of a new organisation. And it was quite radical.

Ali Briggs

Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

I can't remember the details but...

Ali Briggs

We needed it. Exactly.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

It was on the way back from that meeting, which I'll talk a bit more in detail about later on, that No Excuses was born. On a train journey on the way back from that meeting. So that was really how I got involved in activism and No Excuses was a lot more...

Ali Briggs

How, because I think I got, well, I know I got involved in that activism because of you, because of joining No Excuses. Because of course, I'd been brought up as a deaf person in a deaf world and at that time, deaf people didn't consider themselves disabled.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

No

Ali Briggs

So it was only when I met you...

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah.

Ali Briggs

... and we had all those discussions and everything about disability politics, that I came out then, as disabled. And like then, you invited me when Natalie left, to join No Excuses, which I was like, "Yeah!" I did do and then we just took off on the cabaret circuit then, didn't we?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

And the activism circuit, so we often performed at big events and alongside, there'd be political speakers and Jack Ashley and I think Mike Oliver, Vic Finkelstein, all those...

Ali Briggs

Vic Finkelstein, yeah, yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe We'd be speaking and then there's be a performance of a disability comedy or disability arts event and we were alongside people like Barbara Lisicki.

Ali Briggs

Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And Johnny Crescendo, and...

Ali Briggs

Ian Stanton, and I think that was the, yes there was anger.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

John McGrath???

Ali Briggs

But there was also, there was also such a lot of creativity, wasn't there?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

Ali Briggs

Remember the pink fingers, tokens?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Tokens, I was going to say tokens.

Ali Briggs

Yeah, there was just so much happening and it was really exciting. It felt we were really on the edge of change happening.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes, and we were fighting because we had no legislation. We had no equal opportunities. We had no recognition in society. At the time, we were regularly asked, I was regularly asked to leave shops or theatres, or buildings because I had a guide dog with me.

Mandy who is a wheelchair user, even if we could get into a building, she'd often be told she's a fire risk and she had to leave.

LAUGHTER

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And you'd be...

Ali Briggs

Do you remember...we could never get a taxi could we?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

No.

Ali Briggs

Because they always were reliant on ramps and when they go to... "Oh, I forgot my ramp. I forgot my ramp."
We knew.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

They had no legal obligation to allow us into places and we were regularly banned from, or asked to leave places.

Ali Briggs

Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

So we were fighting for equal opportunities because we weren't covered under the Equal Opportunities Commission.

Ali Briggs

No.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

We weren't, that was women and people from different ethnic backgrounds, race equality and female equality, but disability was not covered under that, so we had to fight.

Ali Briggs

No. But also, I'm going to add to that, disabled people we were scared, of being stuck back in that medical model, weren't we.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes. Very much, yes.

Ali Briggs

And that was all about charity about oh, the tragedy of being deaf, disabled, that we needed charity and I think that's really interesting because like today, just is it last week, an MP, David Lammy, he was just talking about Red Nose Day and saying you know, actually it's terrible. It's a really patronising attitude, and actually, and it made me think, that's the same as us really.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes. Yes.

Ali Briggs

The medical model, that again is like, 'Oh, poor things.'

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes. Yes.

Ali Briggs

And we don't want that.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes, and I... What was really exciting at the time was the disability programmes unit that was run by disabled producers and writers and actually, we became part of that. We were part of the team. That was quite radical

and yet, that was dissolved in like 2000, 2001 along with all the other, they saw them as units that specifically championed minority issues. So I think the Asian Network was shut at the same time and other similar networks.

But the consequence is that today, any disability programming is designed and run by non-disabled people and I think you can generally see that in the...

Ali Briggs

Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

I mean, things like the Undateables and things like that. It's still a non-disabled view on disability, isn't it?

Ali Briggs

Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

It's not as radical as it was, you know, twenty years ago. So we went forward and then we, we dropped back again. Yeah.

Ali Briggs

Yeah, and that's where like as No Excuses. Three of us have been thinking again about actually, how far have

we got? And how different is it to when we first did our A to Z of Disability? Because some of those sketches there, they're still, sadly they're still there, aren't they?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Maybe we should talk about No Excuses a bit more now.

Ali Briggs

Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah. So it started in 1989. On this train journey back from sabotaging the national, [laughter] sabotaging the Shape Network national meeting.

LAUGHING

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And Mandy Colleran, Natalie Markham and I were all on a train on our way back to Liverpool, with a few other people. And we were in those very old fashioned train carriages where there's about six in a, do you remember, there's about six people in a carriage? We sat there and then this very well spoken lady came in and went, "Oh." [laughter]

And she said to me, "Did you inherit your blindness?"

And we just fell about laughing, and I don't think she knew what she'd said. "Yes, I got it with the family jewels. It was passed down from my great grandfather."

LAUGHING

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And we just...

Ali Briggs

That was the first guess.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And Mandy and Natalie who are very, very funny, and I'm not normally, I am the observer. But anyway, they said, why is it only on the cabaret circuit, it's only men? We should do some comedy. And I went, "Great. Lovely, when are we going to get together?" And they said, "Oh well, we can write our own stuff, we'll do our own sketch."

So we talked about it on the train journey and then they went back to work because they worked for Arts Integration Merseyside, and...

LAUGHING

And I went and booked two theatres for three months' time.

LAUGHING

Ali Briggs

That is so funny.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And then I told them and Mandy said, “What?” I said, “Well, we said we’d do it. I’ve booked the Green Room in Manchester for two shows and the Unity in Liverpool.” And they said, “What?”

LAUGHING.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

“So we’d better start making some work!” So we started improvising sketches and creating them. And then we did three shows and then I thought after all that experience, we need to go to Edinburgh.

LAUGHING

And we went to Edinburgh in 19... I think it was 1990. Yeah, it was 1990. Yes, 1990, and we got called the most satirical satire on the fringe but it was by the Scotsman, which was a brilliant review.

Ali Briggs

Fantastic.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah. And for two years after that, we had to pay off the debts we had incurred. But we had a very funny experience in Edinburgh because we were in St John's Church which was level access into the venue but the changing rooms and the toilet were downstairs, which weren't accessible.

So there was a very posh hotel and it's still there now, opposite, in Edinburgh, and every day, we'd be campaigning with our No Excuses T-shirts on and sort of giving out leaflets and then about four o'clock every day, we went into this very posh hotel. All three of us would walk in through to the ladies toilets that were accessible. Big, long mirrors, very posh and velvet seats and everything.

We'd change, we would put our makeup on and we'd walk out and it was a posh hotel and at the side were two guards sort of thing, in kilts. And every day, we expected them to stop us and say, "You can't come in here. You're not even buying a cup of tea."

LAUGHING

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

But they never stopped us. We just, every day, we walked in and changed in their hotel toilets and then had

to go and perform over the road. It was a wonderful time and it's soon after that, that you joined us, Ali, wasn't it?

Ali Briggs

Yeah. You were at Leeds University. I was living in Leeds at that time.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah.

Ali Briggs

And I came to see you, and that was just before Natalie left.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes, yeah. Yeah. And it was soon after you came that we started getting the television work from the Disability Programmes Unit.

Ali Briggs

That's right, Elspeth had just done, she'd done something about charities?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Elspeth Morrison. Yeah.

Ali Briggs

So they did that, yeah, and then she commissioned us to do the A to Z of Disability, didn't she?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah, so we did a few sketches for a charity one and I was pregnant and we did a few sketches for that, and then we were commissioned for the A to Z, and you and I sat down for two weeks to write. We were given two weeks to write it and ten days to film it. Twenty six sketches!

Ali Briggs

Yeah. Yeah. Oh, I know.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Some were good, most were sort of okay and some were absolutely terrible!

Ali Briggs

Sure, shocking. But a mixed bag.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

But they were very successful and they went out over the series of From the Edge, which was the magazine programme that the DP put out.

Ali Briggs

Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And then the following year, we were commissioned to do a half an hour special for the Over the Edge series, which were half an hour dramas and we did Whose Diary is it Anyway?

Ali Briggs

Oh yeah. And that was fantastic, wasn't it? Because that, we involved so many of the deaf and disabled actors...

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

Ali Briggs

... from the Liverpool area, all within, to do it.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah, we got Natalie back in that and then we had...

Ali Briggs

Natalie was in, wasn't she?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Ailsa Fairleigh, a brilliant blind actress, and those. And then I think they did the best of our A to Zs as an Alphabet Soup the following year.

Ali Briggs

Soup, yes. Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And then the Daphnes.

Ali Briggs

Yeah, the Daphnes. I was just going to say that, and that was just before the DDA, wasn't it?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes. Yes, because you did, we did a Daphne sketch. So I wrote the Daphne sketches, you were Daphne and a non-disabled agony aunt.

Ali Briggs

Yes.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And Mandy Colleran was your disabled presenter.

Ali Briggs

Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Co-presenter who was never allowed to say anything.

Ali Briggs

Yeah, just there.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

We felt that represented where disabled people were in the media.

LAUGHING

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

So you often used to tie a balloon to her wheelchair, didn't you, as well, and pat her on the head?

Ali Briggs

Yeah. Yeah. Oh, truly, truly patronising her, yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

She was. It came to you very naturally. [laughter]

Ali Briggs

Yeah, and in fact it was really funny because I always remember my mum saying "Oh, I do like you with long hair" Like...

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Because you wore a wig.

Ali Briggs

But yeah that was funny.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

There was a sketch about the DDA which you were going, “La dee da, dee da, dee da, dee da...”

Ali Briggs

“Da da da, da da.” Yeah. Yeah, and then there it came.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah, so we got the DDA and life changed, and...

Ali Briggs

Yeah, it wasn't funny.

LAUGHING

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And I think in a way, as political commentators, a lot of our fire and a lot of our anger and a lot of our comedy had been focused on the inequalities we experienced all the time. and when we got legality or we got equal rights in theory at least, some of the, some... I got a bit lost as to what we were fighting for anymore because it was like we won that battle and I didn't quite know where to go as a writer.

I don't know how you felt, Ali?

Ali Briggs

I think similar, because I had that experience in the Women's Movement, because we were fighting, fighting, fighting and then it was like, 'Oh yeah, we've got women's equality officers, we've got women's committees. Oh. Sorted.' And then they're a bit like, 'Okay, so what do we do now?'

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

Ali Briggs

And in that time, it was just like 'Ooh...' Not quite like we had imagined.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah, the focus of what to write about and what to, who to have a go at.

Ali Briggs

Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Because we were very careful as a comedy company. We were never going to get at non-disabled people for being non-disabled. That wasn't where the comedy was. For us, our targets were, the gatekeepers were the people that stopped us having equal... So it could be the media in general or it...

You know, I know we know our early days sketches, we used to always have a sketch point out that the Arts Council used to buy at the time the only rights for disabled people, they were, employment was the green card, the twenty percent rule. If you employed more than twenty people, three percent of your workforce had to be disabled people but you could buy your way out of that with £150 and the Arts Council did every year.

And so we used to have a go at the Arts Council. Probably why we never got any funding.

Ali Briggs

That could've been it.

LAUGHING

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

So we used to think about who are we, who are our targets? We were very clear with our comedy that we were having a go at the establishment really. And when these...

Ali Briggs

Yeah, the barriers.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

When the establishment supposedly gave us our way, I got a bit lost as to who we could have a go at anymore.

Ali Briggs

Hmm.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah. Yeah, it's very interesting. Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

So... now...

Ali Briggs

And now. Oh no, well then there was a little bit before now.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe Go on.

Ali Briggs

The Olympics, Paralympics.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Ah yes.

Ali Briggs

Because I do remember at that time, because it was fantastic that you know, in those opening ceremonies, there were deaf and disabled people. There were deaf and disabled athletes. So, but then there seemed to be a whole big change after that, didn't there, about people's expectations on us as deaf and disabled people that you know, 'What's the problem? Come on.

Everybody should be an athlete.' That was the way forward, for us.

And I remember it was very difficult, acting at that time. there was very few opportunities. So I think that was a very... It slipped us into a layby, almost.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

And I think also, the other thing to say is that once the Disability Programmes Unit went, and that had been this wonderful organisation run by disabled producers and writers, and actors and they said, the BBC said, "Oh, we're going to integrate disabled people into the BBC." But it didn't happen.

We were never approached. Nothing came for us as, as disabled writers and actors. The only person I knew, I think Peter, Peter White became the Disability Correspondent for Radio 4 which was great, at the BBC. He was a radio presenter who was already there.

I think a few people might have got jobs, producer jobs and things. I think Ewan Marshall and maybe David Healy. Yeah.

Ali Briggs

Ewan Marshall.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah, but most of us were just yeah, dropped and disability programming definitely took a hit. We certainly

weren't producing the same sort of work and I think that's still not recovered really. I think there's some...

Ali Briggs

No. I think, I guess now there are more requests for more talk about representation.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes. It's starting to really shift in a different way now.
Yes.

Ali Briggs

But that is very different, isn't it?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

Ali Briggs

Because that is what is being seen. Who's in the background, writing, consulting, producing?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

I think in the same way, they are thinking about disabled representation for actors, they are looking for writers, so I have had some success recently and had a radio play produced on mainstream radio.

Ali Briggs

Yes.[Inaudible]...

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Hopefully. Well, I'm just still hoping, but those weren't opportunities for disabled people specifically. They were, I think people are getting brave enough to let you pitch a story that has a disabled storyline, an alternative approach, as it were, to disability.

Ali Briggs

Yeah, and I think that, you know that film, I think they talked about Pride, about the gay and lesbian movement and the miners. But I think that is something that happens for deaf and disabled people because nobody has seen our story. I mean, we're talking about it now, at this exhibition which is wonderful.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

It is, yes.

Ali Briggs

But actually, that story is really fascinating.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

Ali Briggs

And there were fantastic people in there and fantastic examples of creativity, of new... Ooh, everything. And

that's been kind of us. So I suppose I'm hoping that very soon, Mandy... someone will...

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

I have plenty stories I am still pitching, about the movement. There were so many stories.

Ali Briggs

Yes. And I think that is why our stories need to be told.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Need to be told.

Ali Briggs

Because it is a fascinating story.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

Ali Briggs

I think so.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

I think there's lots to be told and people are very keen on character led pieces, so you've got to find... so it's a bit different from the days when we used to write straightforward sketches that were political and savvy, and angry and funny.

We have to, people are very keen on character led drama so you have to find a more subtle way to tell the story you want to tell from a more personal perspective. But I think I'm beginning to understand how we might do that now. That's what I'm beginning to understand. An alternative way of putting it.

Ali Briggs

And I do think it's interesting because of course, No Excuses and I'm thinking, 'Ooh, what is next for us?'

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

Ali Briggs

Because I do, you know, we have had a time gap.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

We've had a twenty year gap.

LAUGHING

Ali Briggs

Some of us have had children, but that's life, isn't it?

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes.

Ali Briggs

But now, looking back to that and looking at now, I think it would be very interesting twenty years down the line, about what is so different...

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

We've changed.

Ali Briggs

... and what is the same, or perhaps worse.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yes. And what are the new targets? You know.

Ali Briggs

Yes. Yes.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Because we are starting to lose, so we have so-called human rights but when, because of... because of cost cutting, people are going, "It's okay to cut that person's human rights." So the independent living fund has gone.

And people that need 24 hour care, although intrinsically, they're supposed to have human rights of choice and freedom established within the European

Declaration of Human Rights, because the local authorities can't afford it, they're saying, 'Well, if you need 24 hour care, you're going to have to come into a care home or a nursing home.'

Ali Briggs

Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

'You haven't got the right to independence because we can't afford it.'

Ali Briggs

And so we have gone right back.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

So austerity. Austerity has led to the reduction of rights for everyone, not just for disabled people. But I think because disabled people cost money, we are absolutely at the cutting edge. We are absolutely experiencing.

And you as a deaf person, things like you can't get right, the Citizen's Advice Bureau doesn't employ interpreters anymore.

Ali Briggs

They don't. No, all those have been cut. Access to work been cut.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah.

Ali Briggs

You know, everything, it's so much more difficult. More barriers. So if you've got any money, can you please send it in to me and Mandy?

LAUGHING

Ali Briggs

Thank you very much.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

We are going to change the world and you know...

LAUGHING

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

So I think there are new targets. I think we plan later this year to, to get together and look at our original

A to Zs, and decide which ones are worth saving and redoing, and which, which ones need rewriting. Which, what are the new sketches? What are the new issues?

And I sort of feel yeah, it's time to start being angry and funny and...

Ali Briggs

Yeah.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

... sassy again. What do you think? Are you ready to be?

Ali Briggs

Yeah, no. I'm ready. I'm ready.

LAUGHING

Ali Briggs

More comedy. That's what we need.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

More comedy. Yes.

Ali Briggs

Yeah. Don't know about her.

Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Yeah.