

Mentoring

Starting up Justdifferent 30 mins.

Hello everyone.

It is really nice to be speaking to you today, I am going to tell you a lot of my life experiences, good and bad. What I want you to realise is, when I am telling you my bad experiences, I am not trying to put you off getting out there. But, you do need to realise that life out there in the big wide world is not all plain sailing and you will have to take a few knocks. It is how you let these knocks effect you that matters. Do Not let them get you down. Get back up there and start again.

I thought I should give you some context to how I come to be here today. So, at the risk of sounding a little self centred which I don't mean to be. Here is a short history of me. I was born in January 1981. It was by all, accounts a difficult birth but I cannot remember much about it.

My first year was hard for Mum and Dad because no one told them that I had Cerebral Palsy. Their friends knew I was different, which as you can see is part of my natural charm. I was diagnosed just before my first birthday, which was somewhat of a relief to Mum and Dad because they finally knew the reason for some of the difficulties we were encountering as a family. They took it in their stride and did as much research on Cerebral Palsy as they could. I was treated as their son and allowed to do everything that a normal child would do.

When I was about 14 months old, we found a fantastic school, called Ingfield Manor in West Sussex. It was owned by Scope. But at the time, Scope was called the Spastics Society! Ingfield taught me so much. But you must remember that although I can speak to you all today on my Accent there were no speech devices like this when I was younger.

By the time I was four I had a word book. My helper would need to locate the page I wanted and then the square within that page to find out what I wanted to say. That is how we 'talked'. It was very slow so as a rule, up to age of twelve I communicated with my eyes, head and other parts of my body.

We had very little formal speech and language therapy at Ingfield. We worked to the pedagogy of Conductive Education and everyone helped everyone else in each of the Groups to learn different ways of achieving our goals whether it was physical or intellectual learning. It was a brilliant school with an amazing dedicated staff. .

I was supposed to leave Ingfield when I was eleven, but I stayed another year because they wanted to see if I could walk without help. But in the end I decided that it was just too much hassle.

The summer after my twelfth birthday, I had to leave Ingfield Manor and went to a secondary school in Dorset. Because that was part of the National Curriculum, they insisted for one year that I learned French. Now remember at that time I didn't have a Communication aid.

It was while I was at secondary school and at the age of 14, that I got my first communication aid. It was called a chameleon. It was a first generation A.A.C device and therefore nothing like the devices we have today. It was difficult to work with because it kept on breaking down. But it gave me my first taste of independence as I was able to set up screens which enabled me to go to the supermarket and make simple requests for items with pre-programmed sentences. Like please may I have some potatoes. So, I learned to go shopping on my own. It was fantastic because it built up my confidence. Mum and Dad would drop me off at Tesco's and go off shopping themselves in the town. And then they came back after an hour. I think it was a bit scary to start with for all of us. My dad told me recently that for the first three weeks they did not go into the town at all but hid behind shelves to see that I was OK. It is just lucky I did not find them there.

At 18 I started Lord Mayor Treloar College. My first week there my parents were summoned in to see Nicole, my speech and language therapist, who announced she could not teach me on the Chameleon. I was given a new device it was called a Liberator. I was not sure I wanted it as it used a different language called L.L.L. I was persuaded by being promised 2 hours a day tuition from Nicole who I must point out was very pretty and very sexy.

I was rewarded after 1 week, when I was able to send my first email to my dad. Quite an achievement! It took me 2 years to learn the language properly, but. It was 2 years spent with Nicole!

After leaving Treloar College at the age of 21, I employed my first full time personal support assistant, P S A for short. Who helped me with all my daily needs. Also at this time I was offered a local authority bungalow, but it needed total renovation and adapting for someone with a disability. I moved into the bungalow in January two thousand and one.

Having left Treloar, I wanted to go to a local college to complete an IT course, as I realised computers were the way forward. So for about a year I prepared thoroughly to attend Chichester FE college. I researched all of the software and hardware requirements I would need to complete the course and sent the college detailed specifications. I also gave them detailed instructions for my feeding and personal care needs. I had so many meetings and every time they assured me everything was in hand. When the time came to start my course I was really excited however when I arrived on my first day absolutely none of the equipment I had requested was there and neither had any personal support been arranged for me. The college kept assuring me that everything would be sorted out but after about 8 weeks, when there was still nothing, I decided they were lying and it would never be sorted out.

I then had another meeting with the principal. I felt very strongly because I knew the college had received funding of £30,000 to support me through the course, But the truth is they no idea how to deal with someone like me. They didn't know how to support me

through the tests and exams and the blunt truth is the whole experience was a disaster. And I left disillusioned.

I wanted to tell you this to give you background into how I got to where I am today. I certainly didn't want to put any of you off going to college. This happened to me over 20 years ago, thankfully things are a lot better for disabled people today.

So, if further education wasn't going to work for me then I was determined to find a job.

One of my biggest challenges as a young disabled person has been finding real work. One of my worst experiences was when I went to work at the local Citizens Advice Bureau. They had a fantastic job that seemed to be just made for me. I was interviewed and it all seemed to go very well. They explained that the work involved counselling people on the telephone. They asked me what special equipment would be required and we gave them all the details of the suppliers, model number and everything else they could possibly need. They said they would give me eight weeks training. It seemed to go OK for the first two weeks and then one day they asked me to go into the office and said that because I could not read properly I could not do the training. I would not have minded too much except that they knew that part of the special equipment I needed was software to read to me!! It was another very hard lesson.

As with the account of my experiences with college, I have not told you this story to put you off trying to find a job because again this happened over 20 years ago and things are quite a lot different today. That does not mean it will be easy for you to find work because it won't. But that is no excuse not to try because your life will be a lot more rewarding if you can find a job you can get real satisfaction out of.

For 3 years I worked with a local charity delivering workshops to children, it was great fun but not very well organised.

Although I enjoyed my work with the local voluntary organisation, I felt I could do a more professional job. I wanted to focus not solely on disability but on diversity and difference in general. After all we live in a very diverse society and we are all different. I firmly believe that if we are ever going to change society's view of disability and difference, we have to work with our children to dispel their fears and let them see that whilst we may look different, we are all the same inside. We all have the same dreams and aspirations. I also wanted to be able to provide meaningful employment opportunities to young ambitious people with disabilities. And so, the idea of Just Different was born.

Backed by some private funding in May two thousand and seven we recruited a couple of staff. One to get the funding and the other to get the workshops. We started off by offering our services just to primary schools. We worked hard at ensuring that the workshops we run not only addressed our aims but also ticked a number of important boxes for teachers

Following the success of our workshops to key stage 1 and 2 children in primary schools, we then developed workshops for key stages three and four in secondary schools.

Each workshop follows an agreed format however each presenter is a modern-day storyteller, telling their own personal story. We make a point of ensuring that our workshops are upbeat and fun. The presenters talk about what they can do. Not what they can't do.

We try to match our stories to the things which are most important to children at each stage of their development. Thus reinforcing the message that whilst I may look different, I like the same things as everyone else, and have the same issues.

In all our workshops we allow ample time at the end for pupils to ask questions and we encourage them to ask anything they want. Fortunately none of our presenters are shy or easily embarrassed!

It hasn't all been plain sailing. It has taken a lot of hard work and perseverance to keep just different going. We have also had to be very adaptable. With Covid, we are obviously not able to present our workshops from within the school itself. So we have all had to learn how to present our workshops on zoom.

I hope I have given you an insight into the work that we do. It is quite hard to sit here and explain our workshops because they are so interactive. To date we have reached 206,316 Children and young adults.

So that you know what will be expected of you when you go out into the world to find employment, I am going to tell you what we look for in a new just different presenter. Just different is a charity so anyone who comes to work for us like any other company has to be serious about the work and must expect to work hard, sometimes long hours and always work in a professional manner. So, finding new workshop presenters can sometimes be difficult. The things we look for are.

First appearances are very important. People who are smartly dressed, clean, Impressionable and who look you in the eye when talking to you make the best first impression.

I like to wear a shirt and tie when going into a school to do a presentation, definitely NO tracksuit bottoms. I always make sure I look people in the eye, there is nothing worse than a person who looks into their chest when talking to you, It projects a lack of confidence. What is the one thing every disabled person hates. Non-disabled people who talk to your assistant not you. That is an extension of No eye contact.

The next thing we impress on new staff is that they have to be able to get up in the morning. Our workshops start at 9am and may be 1 hours travelling away. So they have to be up, washed, dressed and breakfasted by 7.30am. It is no good arriving at the school half an hour late and apologising as schools run to a strict schedule and if you have agreed to be there for 9am then you must arrive by 9am.

This can be more difficult for people who have assistants because they have to arrange their assistants working life as well as their own. But we do not employ anyone who cannot get up and get organised.

I have a few tips for you when entering the workforce.

Be Happy, Work Hard. Look Smart. Adapt and never give up.

Thank you very much for listening has anyone any questions they would like to ask me.