

Disability history month

My personal journey in the disability liberation movement

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Richard has asked me to tell you about how I became involved in the Disability Movement and how I became a leader for disabled people's equality and human rights.

Well, firstly it's important to say that there are many leaders of campaigns and organisations, which make up the UK disability civil rights movement. **No one person can claim that they were, or are, the leader at any one time in our history. The success of our movement is because we are a collective enterprise.**

My role during our history came about after a chance meeting with a group of the Movement's formative thinkers and organisers; from who I learnt my trade. Let's call this **the apprenticeship stage**. It all began when I was sacked from my first job for not being able to use a

typewriter! It was a charity for disabled people. Although I had just graduated from university with a good degree, they said I was unemployable and should return to studying.

At the time, I remember feeling very angry and defeated in equal measure. I believed there was nothing I could do about it. It was simply my fault for being disabled. I believed my goals of leaving home and financially living independently, had come to an end, aged 23.

But as fate would have it, I happened upon an advert in the Spinal Injuries Association magazine, advertising PAs to assist disabled people to go on holiday independently. The idea of doing something without my parents or some ghastly charity holiday for the disabled, was very attractive. So, I called up the woman running it who was Frances Hasler.

Little did I know that that phone call was going to be one of the most important acts of my life. I complained about my sacking experience and why I needed a holiday. She seemed to know exactly how I felt and suggested I meet other like-minded disabled people, who were in the same boat **but were doing something about it** – organising a campaign to address such injustices.

I can't say I was enthusiastic. I remember thinking ***“why on earth would I want to get together with disabled people when I've spent the last 4 years avoiding them, trying to prove to everyone that I'm a normal person, with a degree from a normal University!.***
expensive

Yes, my internalised oppression meant I didn't want to be the person that society labelled as burden”

But I went out of curiosity. Little did I know that decision was going to be the best one I ever made.

The conference was organised by a newly formed group of disabled people called BCODP. The headline speaker was a disabled lecturer called Mike Oliver. “Well” I thought “that’s about as **normal** as I’m going to get around here, I hope he’s good”! He began by saying “the day I broke my neck was probably the best day of my life” – great I thought, he’s a comedian, at least we will have some laughs!

But I soon realised he was making a very serious point about being proud of who you are, because “your medical diagnosis does not need to define your life chances”. He went on to talk about the **social model** and politically campaigning for a rights-based solution, where the barriers to our exclusion must be torn down! Only then, he said, will we be free, equal and included in society. I was captivated.

Here was the first ever disabled person I’d come across, who I didn’t want to avoid! **Much the reverse** – in 15 minutes he unlocked a world for me that offered so much more than I ever imagined

possible. On that day I also met other disabled people who were equally enlightening, and my entire understanding of who I was and who I could be, **took a seismic shift**. On that day I fell in love with disabled people and my new self.! Emancipated!

My deep-rooted frustration and sense of personal injustice, became unleashed, **and my life's work in the disability movement has been fuelled by this consciousness ever since.**

Over the past 35 years I have personally grown and travelled through three stages, of change. Typical of most liberation movements.

Stage I: personal enlightenment, followed by separatism. Like the women's movement, disabled people needed a separate space to find out who we were, without the intrusion of non- disabled people, who had defined us and what we needed in life for centuries. That's

why we structured our organisations to be run and controlled by us, not doctors, charities or social workers.

Stage II: targeted campaigning and direct action. In the beginning we decided that our main campaign should be for overarching antidiscrimination legislation, to address our social exclusion. I think that's when I began to realise my destiny in government and politics. It was a very important stage in our liberation movement to address our invisibility. This stage included direct protest – like Rights Not Charity marches, civil disobedience - stopping traffic, chaining ourselves to buses etc. But protest needed to be accompanied by the movement lobbyists, negotiators and evidence gatherers. – Both were vital.

Stage III: post legislation. Once we had won the right to be treated equally and be included in mainstream society – **certain rights followed**. This is the hardest stage which we are still fighting and losing in equal measure now.

If I am considered to be amongst some of our leaders in our historical movement - it's only down to the fact that I met and learned from some of the best **and am old enough to have experienced all three stages, of our growth.**

But most importantly of all, because I have never left our family, as that's where I feel most at home, and where there is always something to carry on fighting for. Thank you