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Interviewed by: Louise Roche
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So tell me, what it was like growing up in Milton Keynes.

Growing up in Milton Keynes was pretty good. I've never lived anywhere else. I've only ever lived in Milton Keynes, same house my whole life, but I like it, I like where I live. I like the schools that I've gone to. Yeah, I've never had a bad experience, so, yeah, I've liked it here.

Where do you live, or have...you've always lived in the same house and..?

Yeah, I live in Hodge Lea, which is opposite Stacey Bushes. I've lived in the same street and the same house, seventeen years. I live next door to my nan – so my mum grew up in the house next door, ended up moving in next to her mum and her dad. So yeah, like, our whole kind of family life in Milton Keynes is centred around the same place but that's quite nice. It means family's always quite close by, so...

And what was it like...I mean, you are interested in performing. Where did that start?

I started performing mainly in school. So my first big things were nativity plays in primary school, which I loved doing, and then I carried that on in secondary school. I went to Stantonbury and they've got a massive performing arts department and they're really proud of it and I'm really proud to have been part of it for seven years now. So yeah, I've done nearly all of the school performances there for the time I've been there. I've done...I joined a local theatre company, which I loved. Then I swapped to another one which is actually based in Milton Keynes, in Wolverton, and I joined the Milton Keynes Amateur Operatic Society, to do their pantomimes. So yeah, everything's kind of still been based in Milton Keynes but we've got such good connections with London and things like that that I get to go see

shows with school in London; we go to Northampton, to the Derngate; we go to Milton Keynes Theatre; things come to Stantonbury Theatre. There's just so much performance in Milton Keynes and that's amazing.

And what's your passion in performing? Are you a triple threat, or..?

I am a triple threat. I'd say I'm probably a triple threat. I'm not as strong a dancer as I am a singer and an actor – they're my two main things – but, yeah, I do all three, so musicals are like the best thing ever. I love musicals.

Tell me something about your disability.

Okay, so I'm blind in my left eye, completely, but that's quite a recent thing. I lost my central vision in my left eye when I was nine to eighteen months old due to a cataract that I had to have removed. So I've always lived with the disability but then, in November of 2017, I had a retinal detachment which meant the operation to correct it didn't work and then it did work but I did lose my peripheral sight because of it. So I have no sight on the left side which makes some things really difficult like, to adjust to it, I had to use a white cane and I had a lot of help at school for a little while but I'm kind of a lot more self-aware now and I can do a lot of stuff on my own now as well, which is really nice. Yeah, I've got used to it a lot more in the last couple of months. So that's been really helpful. But yeah, it's tough, living with any sort of disability, whether it's physical, mental, anything like that and I think somehow, living in Milton Keynes, I haven't necessarily felt it the whole time. So like, as a child growing up, I didn't feel like a disabled child I don't think, really. Like, I knew I was a bit different and I knew I couldn't see on one side and, for one year, when I was about four or five, I had my right eye patched to see if I could make the other one work and that was really difficult. I couldn't see for like a year, every so often, 'cause they had to try and make it work. And it didn't work and so now I just wear my normal glasses but, yeah, it's just...no one ever tried to put me down. No one's ever done anything to make my life more difficult. If anything, everyone's tried to make it a lot easier, whether that's at home, with my family; at school, with teachers; and even friends, they do everything they can to make it easier. And I don't know if I'd get the same thing anywhere else but Milton Keynes.

And how has it affected your performance?

Obviously it affects performance in a lot of different ways, so I can't walk in a... – it sounds really silly – I had to walk in a circle once and I had to...I was out of time with everyone else and they

were like: "Emily, you're out of time, you're out of time. Why aren't you walking with us?"

I said, "I'm trying but I can't see you."

It was only then that we realised that they were all on my left and I couldn't see their timing so I couldn't walk in time with them. So things like that, I have to adapt. And I adapt myself by, I turn my head more to the left and things like that but, other than that, it hasn't stopped me doing anything and I won't ever let it stop me doing stuff.

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Now, a lot of people of your age, if that happened to them, they would let it...so what...how come you're so different?

I don't necessarily think it's a thing of I'm different. I think it's that I'm resilient, if that makes sense. I've kind of always lived with some sort of disadvantage that not everyone else has and I just don't want to stop doing the things I love. I would literally do anything I could to keep performing, to keep doing what I love doing, and I think the fact that I've got such a great support system, in the...[Unclear 00:06:14]...of my family. My mum and my dad are so supportive and help me with whatever they can and do everything they can for me. And I've got some of the best friends I could ever ask for who, again, just help me with everything and I think that's what's made everything possible. Like, I can do what I want to do because, if I find stuff difficult, I've got people I can talk to, I've got people who will help me, who do whatever they need to to help me through that. And that's what got me into school so quickly, that's what let me go back after my operation and helped me through day-to-day stuff. Just having people who care and who really want to help is just amazing, yeah.

What would you say performance gives you?

Performance... Performing is just who I am. It's as simple as that. I don't want to do anything else, ever. It's just...it's everything I love, it's everything I want to do, I feel most comfortable when I'm performing. Doing things like this, talking to a camera as me, is quite difficult. *[Laughs]* I'm not used to being me in front of people, I'm normally acting and being someone else, and I think that's let me express myself in a lot of different ways. Yeah, singing is another way to express myself. I love music, I write songs, it's something that I love doing. I love dance – I love all of it and it just kind of lets you be yourself in a different way to just having to say something. You can show it in a different way.

Anything on your performances? Can you tell us what your...what your favourite performance was or your last performance was?

Yeah, so my favourite performance I think I've done – oh gosh, that's hard – but it's probably the one I've...my most recent one. I did Footloose at Stantonbury as...with the school and I played one of the lead characters and it's the first time they've given me a lead and, yeah, I absolutely loved it; absolutely loved it. It was amazing. I got to perform with some of my closest friends, people I've worked with for so many years, and with teachers who have been with me my whole school life. And it's just amazing, it's just fantastic, they've just...they're so helpful and it just makes it a really nice experience. It's like a family, you work with everyone from year seven all the way through to year thirteen like me and we just all performed together and it's a chance for us to be together as a school and as a community of performers and that's just something really special.

And is there anything else about Milton Keynes and, you know, not having full sight? I mean, anything about the environment, you know, that it's so green and that...you know, that kind of..?

Yeah, I think the fact that we live in such a green and such an open community, like there's so many paths, there's loads of footpaths that I can walk on so I don't have to cross a road too many times. You've got the underpasses which is really helpful for people who can't see, who have disabilities. And our footpaths are really wide, so my grandad was in a wheelchair and he could get around all the time, either in his wheelchair or on a scooter and I think...yeah, I think Milton Keynes is just really adapted and it suits the people who live here, which might be a coincidence but, yeah, I think Milton Keynes was made for people of all shapes, all sizes, all races, all different, like, abilities. Milton Keynes was made for everyone and that's one of the reasons I love it so much, 'cause I can be myself, I can get around on my own if I need to, just because Milton Keynes is built that way, so...

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And tell me about when you...you go to Phoenix Arts don't you?

Yeah.

Yeah, tell me a little bit about that.

Okay, so Phoenix Arts is a theatre company, theatre group. They work with loads and loads of different children from the ages of four, I think our youngest are, all the way up to me – I'm the oldest at the moment and I'm seventeen. We do loads of little group performances. We meet every Tuesday in Wolverton and we work together as a whole group, we work in little groups. We do filmmaking, we do songwriting, we learn dances, we do all sorts of things and, it's just a really nice way to, again, meet people or reconnect with people you've already met. And it's just a really nice kind of environment.

We've done one show, one big, full-scale musical, which was called 'Reach Out' and we did it at The Venue in Walton High. And I played a lead in that and that was amazing. That was a really, really interesting and new experience. And we're currently working on another musical written by the same person, written by Frank, and, again, it's an amazing musical. I've got a really cool character, she's horrible and nasty and mean but I love her; she's amazing. And, yeah, it's just working with new people, working with different people. The adults who work with us are phenomenal. They're so dedicated, they work so hard to get things together for us – organise trips, try and get us places, get us performing in different spaces – and it's just...it's a really nice group to be part of.

And what's your dream? What would you like to do when you're big like me? [Laughter]

Yeah, my goal at the moment is to go to university first. I didn't know if it was going to be possible for a year or so because of my operations and things have put me behind on a lot of stuff. But I've applied, so I'll be going to university in September, hopefully, to study performing arts. From there I plan on hopefully performing for a little while, learning a little bit more about my trade and what I want to do with it. And eventually my dream is to open up a public performing arts school in Milton Keynes for kids, like me, who aren't privileged enough to have the money necessary to spend on going to places like the Italia Conti in London but who just want to perform and, yeah, that's what I want to do. I just want to give other people the opportunity that I had at Stantonbury but even more.

We always ask people this. You may not...we'll give it a go. So you're going to be a pensioner in fifty years' time. What would you like to see Milton Keynes be like then?

Fifty years' time; that's quite a long way away. I guess I like Milton Keynes the way it is. I don't really want a lot of it to change. I like it the way it is at the moment. I guess the only thing I can think of as a person of my age, maybe, I'd love Milton Keynes to have their own university. There's an age gap that Milton Keynes misses because people who grew up here, at the age of eighteen have to go somewhere else to go to uni unless they want to study either computing or, like, mechanics at the Bedfordshire University that's in Milton Keynes. So yeah, I guess it would be nice for Milton Keynes to have their own university so their young people don't have to move away to get their education. 'Cause a lot of the time people move away and they don't come back. I plan on coming back but not everyone does. So yeah, I think that's the only thing I'd, not change, but I'd add, so...

And say you could speak to a young person of five, six, seven, who've got similar problems to you, what would you say to them? What advice would you give?

I think...the advice I'd give to anyone who's either gone through something similar to me or is going through something similar to what I've gone through, is just to keep going. Never stop, never give up, just, no matter what happens, keep pushing forward 'cause, although things might seem tough, they do get easier eventually and, by pushing through, you get somewhere and you're more proud of where you've got to because of what was happening before. So yeah, just keep going.

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There was only one...the usual question, like, if you could go back fifty years and change something about Milton Keynes, is there anything that you think could have been done better?

Anything that could have been done better? I can't think of anything. I don't know.

That's all right.

No.

It's a tough one, isn't it?

That's a tough one.

Well, I think you have to be around from the start. You know, have been around in Milton Keynes a long time to get that one

Yeah, but also, I mean, I think we all say the same thing: blooming public transport... [Laughs].

Yeah, I mean, I can't get a bus. I can't see them. I can't see the numbers on a bus to get on it, so... [Laughs]...public transport doesn't really affect me in that way.

Is there nothing that does that then? I would have thought, these days, they could...it would be good to have a system where, almost like Bluetooth, sort of says, "Number 67 approaching," or...

Yeah, no, not that I'm aware of. I can get...I get a bus with other people but not on my own at the moment, which is why things like learning to drive are quite a big push for me at the moment, so...

Does your sight affect your, you know, learning to drive at all?

Not really, not in the 'Am I safe to drive?' ways. I can...I'm perfectly safe to drive. I've checked it with the DVLA and my doctors and everything. But yeah, I can't...because I can't see on my left, it just means that I'd have to turn my head more for everything. So when I'm turning my head more, it's the same in a car. I just have to make sure I'm looking a little bit more at everything. But yeah, so...yeah, it doesn't affect me in any other way. I'm perfectly legally allowed to drive.

Okay, done?

Yeah.

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END OF INTERVIEW