

The Disabled Person's Tale

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People have many reasons for starting a new life. Some, like Rose, have no choice. Confined to a wheelchair by crippling arthritis she has fought back all the way. Today she is an extremely active campaigner for other disabled people in the city.

I've lived in Milton Keynes for three years now although I've lived in the area for about thirty years so I'm quite familiar with it.

The reason I moved into Milton Keynes was that I was working for a voluntary organisation called D.I.A.L. {Disabled Information Advisory Link}. People who had problems to do with being disabled could contact us and we had information at our fingertips which could help them. At this time a lot of parties came from London with a view of moving here. We told them, yes this was a good place for the disabled and yes, we'd heard from a very good source that the shopping centre was going to be all on one level. This was before it was built of course

We thought that we could start a wheelchair scheme so that disabled people could come and go as they liked. They could do their shopping and have a meal instead of being left sitting in the car while someone else did their shopping for them. The corporation people who were showing these parties round latched on to what we were saying and asked me if I'd like to approach the Shopping Management Company with my ideas, which I did. They had already thought about something like this themselves but weren't quite sure what to provide. When I approached them it renewed their interest. They asked me to go along and voice my views and advise them on what was needed. I had thought about getting some battery chairs as I'd already acquired one myself and found it an absolute boon. I thought if the shopping centre could acquire some themselves, as well as manually operated ones it would mean that those who could cope with a battery chair could be absolutely independent.

Being disabled you can only go on shopping sprees when someone is kind enough to take you and then you just buy the things you need. It could be weeks, months or even a year before you get out again I've had experience of this because I was housebound for eighteen months without once setting foot over the doorstep. I was quite alone. Therefore the Shopping Management Company realised I did know a little bit about it. They were very co-operative and immediately set the scheme in motion. All this was happening a good nine months before the shopping centre opened. I was working with them, going round the shops which were still only three-quarters finished, to make sure that nobody put a step in where it shouldn't be, and that the walkways were wide enough and tills were accessible. They were tremendously helpful. They wanted me to do as much as I could because, as you can imagine, they had their hands full anyway.

A Tremendous Feat

When it was all decided what type of chairs we would have, the shop keepers and various organisations donated enough money to buy twelve battery chairs – which was a tremendous feat. The Shopping Management themselves funded at least three of them and provided the office, telephone and storage space. They also approached me about three days before the shopping centre was due to open – which came as quite a surprise – to ask if I would consider running the whole thing. I had expected to volunteer to help two or three days a week perhaps, but I never expected that I'd be pushed in at the deep end on day one. I was a little bit nervous having been confined to the house for so long. It was a terrific strain but a beautiful one. At last something really worthwhile had been achieved. It was then that the Shopping Management suggested that I got a flat near the City Centre – I was living in Stony Stratford – so I could be completely independent to come and go as I pleased. And if I felt I needed to go home for a few hours rest I could. So that was how I came to be actually in the centre, in the hub of things.

I resigned as organiser approximately a year ago because I had to have further operations and I was going abroad to see my son. I knew I'd have to have quite a bit of time off, so I thought it was only fair that I should put it on the line to them and then they staffed the scheme themselves. I still go in regularly to see how they are getting on.

I think the Development Corporation has thought quite hard about the needs of disabled people in the city. There's still more to be done but then this is a very new venture. They want to be told by the disabled themselves what their needs are. Milton Keynes Council for the disabled liaises very closely with the Development Corporation and the Borough. They have a very strong Access Committee of which I am chairlady. We push for access to all public buildings. At the moment there is no law to ensure this, only stipulations or suggestions given to the architect. We hope within the next five years – definitely within the next ten – that it will be the norm, as it is in Scandinavian countries, for all buildings to be accessible to everybody. I think that the city is a good leader for the rest of the country. There are so many people looking at Milton Keynes for ideas.

Even so, there are buildings here that do not cater for the disabled – for instance the leisure centres {apart from Woughton Campus which is the most recent one built}. In Bletchley one just can't go there, one has to phone up the management. They are very helpful. They help you get into the lift, which is great, but it isn't as it should be. We should be able to just go and use the lift ourselves. Also the theatre at Stantonbury only allows two or three disabled people to go in there at any one time. Again you have to phone up the manager and he will take you around the back because of the stairs. If it's raining you get drenched and it's a real hassle. So you think, 'Oh, I don't think I'll bother'. Do you see?

Bad Access Points

I am on several committees to do with disabilities. I made a film for the Open University showing up bad access points, and also one about the pitfalls of trying to get a job. We are trying to encourage people who are building offices and factories to think all about this. We say to them things like: "What if your managing director had a bad accident tomorrow. He`s a good man and he knows how to run this place from A-Z. He can`t come into work anymore as he can`t get in. It`s only his legs that have gone, not his mind. He`s got a wheelchair but how does he come back to work? You will have to alter your building to accommodate to the costs of thousands of pounds, whereas if you provided lifts and ramps in the first place?" Who knows, you go to bed all right tonight, but you don`t know how you`re going to wake up tomorrow morning and that`s how these awful things happen.

I worked nearly all my married life. We were hoteliers. We worked very hard, a sixteen hour day for many years. I have two children who are grown up, and I did say that when they went I would stop working so hard and would think about doing voluntary work. Unfortunately my husband died. I`d had arthritis for twenty years and I`d worked all the way through it, fighting it, but on the death of my husband, with all the fretting and all the upset, probably my legs just folded up on me. I required many replacement joints so that was why I was housebound for all that time. It was towards the end of that time, when I was going to have a new hip that the D.I.A.L. voluntary office started up and anyone interested was asked to get in touch. So I rang up the day before my ops. After the ops, I had about a week`s convalescence, and within two weeks I was working in the office doing two afternoons a week. I became very interested in rights for the disabled and that led to everything I have now.

When I heard about the new city being built I felt like a lot of other people. I thought: `Oh dear, what`s coming`. Not many people liked the idea of their country lanes being stripped and new houses being put up. But when I was asked to go round the shopping centre, which not many of the public had had the opportunity to do, I was quite amazed. My first trip round there left me completely speechless. I had no idea, I had never visualised the beautiful architecture and the beautiful floors, the big wide-open shops, words failed me. And that was only when it was three-quarters built. It was fantastic.

As for Milton Keynes, my hopes for the future is to see more in the way of entertainment for young people because so many young people move here, and soon enough their children will be grown up. If there`s nothing for them to do they`ll move away again. It`s important to relax as well as work.