

Lived Experience: Keith Oliver, Alzheimer's Society Ambassador interviewed by Jen Holland

KEITH OLIVER was primary school head teacher when, at the age of 55 in 2010, Alzheimer's Disease was diagnosed. After coming to terms with the diagnosis he is now a national and international speaker is a leading Alzheimer's Society Ambassador, Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust Dementia Service User Envoy and a member of Three Nations Dementia Working Group, became a founder member of the National Young Onset Dementia Network and helped develop a guide on Young Onset for use by GPs. He is author of Dear Alzheimer's: A Diary of Living with Dementia and Walk the Walk Talk the Talk.

'Give me Identity and I will Shine', with Jen Holland.

Jen: Keith, you were diagnosed with Alzheimer's ten years ago. At the time you were head teacher of a Primary School. For over seven years, we have worked together on many arts projects, some of which we'll illustrate. Keith, what is your background the arts?

Keith: As a teacher and head teacher I was passionate about introducing my pupils to a rich, broad and balanced education which had the arts at its centre. My staff and I recognised that if we captured the interest of the child as early as possible then this could transform their learning, which in turn would open up life changing possibilities for them.

Jen: How would you transfer this thinking into people with early symptoms of dementia?

Keith: Transferring this thought to people with dementia is easy because the impact of the arts is again life changing. But most significantly, if available at peri-diagnostic stage, and delivered by facilitators and practitioners, like yourself, whose knowledge of their subject matches their knowledge and commitment to engaging with people experiencing the early challenges of dementia.

You and I know that everyone with dementia, myself included, who has taken part in art activities, either by the Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust, with Bright Shadow, or with DEEP has benefited. All say that, had this intervention been available at the earliest possible time, the benefits would have been even greater.

Jen: Could you expand on the value of arts being socially prescribed right at the early onset of symptoms?

Keith: It is a real pleasure and privilege to be able to share with you all my thoughts on SP and to shine a light on my identity as a person with dementia, whose wellbeing and positive health derives so much from the arts. It is crucial to make the prescribed intervention early - at the point of referral to the memory service.

I remember well how worried my wife and I were, wondering if I were to have dementia during the seven to eight-month testing period back in 2010. I did feel at a cliff edge. I needed something positive, constructive, rewarding and stimulating to fill the vacuum and anxiety that the condition, the tests and the diagnosis were generating. I know this is common to many others who have followed me since 2010. Frustratingly, we still have the barrier that some medical professionals are narrowly focused on pharmacological interventions, and at that point prescribe anti-depressants rather than social prescription, and if they do, it is often limited to physical exercise.

Jen: That is certainly one of the challenges isn't it, to disseminate that information, so that those professionals are well aware of what interventions are out there, which Veronica has wonderfully touched on with the directory. What else do you suggest could be done to address this?

Keith: Events like today are crucially important in showing the immense benefits socially prescribed arts activities have on the wellbeing of people with dementia, by way of educating professionals, public pressure from service users demanding this intervention. I know this is important. So often people say, 'How do I get this?' 'Where can I get this?' 'Who is going to deliver it for me?' Also, the media can help. Third sector organisations such as A4D, Alzheimer's Society, Age UK and many other local and national charities play a significant part in addressing this too. This is partly by providing training for the professionals, I've been on some of A4D's courses which are outstanding, and simply advocating alongside people affected by dementia.

Jen: I would like now to share some slides we have prepared together to illustrate some of the interventions Keith has accessed in the ten years since being diagnosed, which could all be usefully socially prescribed for others as arts for brain health. Every picture tells a story, would you like to tell us a little about your artwork on the left, and the image of the guitar on the right?

Keith: The guitar is, I am afraid, the opposite side of the coin... without encouragement, support and teaching my guitar which I did play quite well before dementia, but it has remained in its case since diagnosis. Art is something I am still enjoying doing at present, I am attending a Zoom DEEP group, taught by an inspiring teacher who has dementia

herself, supported by Innovations in Dementia. Remember, I had not painted a picture from the age of eleven, until a month ago aged 65.

What the arts does, be it painting, writing poetry, dancing, playing an instrument, singing or anything else creative is to help the person to express themselves when other means of communication are getting harder; to connect back to one's past, but also to be in the present and maybe even think ahead positively to something one is looking forward to. It enables one to connect to other people and to share a moment in time which gives pleasure and positivity to all it touches and where sadness and anxiety abounds, enters in joy and peace.

Jen: I am sharing some images which cover such a variety of mediums you have engaged with, painting, photography, poetry, just to name a few.

Keith: I would like to emphasise that for too long access to the arts and SP has been a lottery of where you live and who you know. We are lucky in Kent, to access the activities which you show so brilliantly on the slides. This is wrong, it should be a right for everyone with dementia. It is amazing what people with opportunity, support and encouragement can achieve. I think I am proof of this, and there is no doubt that any social prescription for the arts or anything comes with no adverse side effects. To prove this, I am going to close with something which might inspire others to take up the baton:

Give me myself and I will be me
Give me an ear and I will speak
Give me patience and I will relax
Give me music and my heart will dance
Give me joy and I will laugh
Give me a way and I will follow
Give me a baton and I will share
Give me inspiration and I will excel
Give me teaching and I will learn
Give me truth and I will consider
Give me compassion and I will care
Give me identity and I will shine
Give me attachment and I will engage
Give me occupation and I will be focused
Give me inclusion and I will belong
Give me comfort and I will feel warmth
Give me love and I will thrive.

Thank you for listening and thank you Jen and Veronica for supporting me today.

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