

*Reflecting on
Marilyn Clenaghan's
Oral History
Interview*



Marilyn Clenaghan

ORAL HISTORY: Marilyn Clenaghan

Family:

The reaction of Marilyn's brother to her and her sister's sight loss is something that struck me as very odd as Marilyn spoke about how he denied really having sisters due to their disability. It made me realise how strange it must be for a sibling to have a blind brother or sister as the parents must have to adapt to that lifestyle and the other children accordingly. The order that the father introduced in the home through his naval training was very disciplined and this in itself I don't think is anything to do with their sight loss but just because the navy was his life. The life skills that the father introduced to the two daughters such as danger and peace through colour, the tree house and the tasks he set them gave me admiration for the father as he wanted to make his daughters lives as easy as possible; he was simply a man who loved and was proud of his daughters beneath the disciplinarian exterior. The relationship Marilyn had with her father seems a lot stronger than that of the mother: whether this is because as her father was away a lot of the time the time they spent with him was more special (?). This may be as her mother did not adapt to their sight

loss as well and therefore took a step back from their care. The attention that the father gave to his two daughters may have produced resentment in their brother and may explain why he feels the way he does and although the father tried to distribute his care equally it may not have appeared this way to the brothers.

School:

Marilyn's time at school led me to realise how much blind people are placed in the trust of others, even to the extent when Marilyn believed she was ill and food could become 'alive'. The fact Marilyn wasn't even allowed to discuss or question what was going on would have made the experience even worse. With regards to force feeding, the ill isolation room and the house mothers Marilyn's time at the Sunshine Home makes me think how strong Marilyn's character must be to stand up for herself when it would have been all too easy to let people treat her like that. When Marilyn stood up for herself saying that what they do is wrong it gave me inspiration to support people who are put into positions of a lower status and courage to make people know they can't treat people that way: why should they be disrespected?! For many people an experience of such abuse at such a young age

would have caused people to become very distressed in later life, but I think this formed the basis of Marilyn's strength and gave her courage to stand up for what she believed in.

I think this experience would have altered Marilyn's look on life and although Marilyn does say she had not lost trust in people I think if I was in that position I would have begun to distrust those people who should be taking care of me. The power that the house mothers had was clearly abused as they knew what they were doing and I couldn't help but wonder why it was only Marilyn that got treated in this way.

Marilyn adapted the way she was to get about as she moved from using a short symbol cane to a long cane in order to be able to commute to her course, this shows that all blind people use different methods to get about and obviously different ways are best used in certain environments: something I had never really considered before.

Later Life:

The way Marilyn was treated as a child obviously is attributable to why she was diagnosed as a 'Chronic Phobic', the relations

she made with slamming the food down and creating images was helped by the way Bob treated Marilyn. The psychological treatment that was stopped by Bob obviously helped Marilyn become more confident in social environments,

In the civil service Marilyn was able to use the skills she gained at the vocational college, showing that discrimination against normal jobs for those with sight loss is clearly unfounded. The further qualifications Marilyn gained supports this even further. The integration with sighted people on these courses showed Marilyn she was a 'normal' person, she just wanted to be 'one of them', which is what sighted people take for granted. Marilyn's adaptation to working with her disability is evidence that companies should be able to provide jobs for those who are visually impaired and Marilyn's work was treated just like everyone else's.

Marilyn experienced many problems when she was in hospital and these were problems that were dependent on visual aids such as name tags or faces. Becoming use to treatment in a place where different staff is taking care of you can become rather unnerving as the memory of the mistrust Marilyn had at school

would return.

The memories of Marilyn's childhood obviously have stayed with her and the responsibility of those who take care of those with visual impairment is great, in order to ensure people with such a disability are able to trust in people later in life.

Societies such as BlindVoice UK and Teesside Society are integral in the lives of blind people to ensure that the rights of blind people are not forgotten, from the conversion of text media and computing to enabling visually impaired people to undergo activities that those with sight can. As Marilyn says the integration of visually impaired people with those who are sighted is important to make sure that those who are blind are accepted and given the same opportunities.



Marilyn during her computer lesson.

BlindVoice UK

Oral History Project

“Blindness Through the Decades”

The Oral History of Sight Loss in the
Tees Valley from 1945 to date.

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and Audio CD.



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