



Interview with Tracey

Tracey and her family came to live in Norfolk from Leeds 14 years ago, having first visited East Anglia when helping a friend to move to Suffolk. It was at around this time that her husband Tony was made redundant and the couple were beginning to feel that their neighbourhood was becoming an unsafe place to live. Consequently, within a matter of months the family had come to settle in Banham. Initially the couple struggled to adapt to the leisurely pace of country life and at school it took some time for their daughters to adjust to their drastically smaller peer groups, but despite these changes Tracey felt that a rural move had defiantly been the right one as it meant that her girls could now play outside safely and independently. However, after living in Banham for 7 years the family decided that it was time for a change and made the move to Fersfield. When asked what she liked most about living in the village, Tracey replied, "I just love...[the]...quiet...[and]...the countryside...I couldn't get used to living anywhere else". Nevertheless, she admitted not only feeling that Fersfield has lost some of its community spirit, but also feeling frustrated at the lack of public transport in the area.

A few years ago Tracey was diagnosed with an eye condition called Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) which has robbed her of her peripheral vision, her night vision and has left her partially sighted. As a result, she was forced to hand back her driver's licence and now relies heavily on her family to get her from A to B. Although she couldn't speak highly enough of her family's support, "...my husband's just brilliant...he doesn't moan about anything...[and]...my kids amaze me" Tracey confessed that having to rely on them 24/7 can feel frustrating, as it reduces her independence. A trip to the doctor illustrates the challenges that dependency can pose. Tracey explained that she is required to visit her doctor every 3 months, but due to a lack of public transport she is forced to arrange her appointments around her daughter. To make matters worse, the medical services that she requires are unavailable on a Saturday, limiting her still further.

Two years ago, in a bid to increase her independence Tracey set about applying to for a guide dog from the Peterborough Association for the Blind. The association is a local branch of Guide Dog, (the world's largest breeder and trainer of working dogs) and assists people living in Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. After a year Tracey was matched with Betty, a fully trained, friendly and energetic golden retriever which she adores.

Tracey first made contact with the blind community a few months after her diagnosis. She confided that, prior to contacting the RNIB (the Royal National Institute for Blind People) she found herself getting angry with those around her and could do nothing but cry and feel sorry for herself. However, after a while, with the help of the organisation she began to feel better about her situation. They assisted her with her white cane training and pointed her in the right direction when it came to applying for a guide dog.

Once Betty had arrived Tracey was required to undergo 2 weeks of intense training going to Norwich to learn traffic controls such as commanding Betty to approach crossings, approach steps, come to a curb, turn left, turn right, or go backwards. She also had to learn recall commands and the commands involved in feeding Betty. In addition, Tracey was taught how to groom Betty, how to perform health checks on her and how to ensure that she isn't overfeed. With Betty by her side, for the first time since her diagnosis, Tracey felt confident about venturing into town and walking the lanes of Fersfield alone. Betty also accompanies Tracey on her taxi journeys to work, where her employers enable her to attend to Betty's needs by providing her with extended lunch breaks. As Tracey herself says, "Betty has been amazing...she makes me smile [and]...makes life worth living".

However, it's not just a lack of transport and flexible services that makes living in the countryside frustrating for Tracey, but people's reactions to her disability. She describes how some people seem to feel that because she is not completely blind then she is somehow not disabled 'enough' and therefore doesn't warrant their understanding, patience or assistance. Such attitudes seem to be made worse by the false myths surrounding blindness. Tracey explained that some people seem to think that if an individual is partially sighted or blind then they can still function fully because their other senses compensate for their poor eye sight. In addition, Tracey expressed her irritation at people's common misconception that she has tunnel vision rather than RP. She went on to emphasise that in detailing these reactions she did not want sympathy, but wished to promote better public understanding of her disability.

Laura's Comment

After speaking to Tracey I decided to do some research in an attempt to help her and the other disabled residents living in our community. I am currently working on this and will update you with my progress in due course. Keep checking the website for more details.

In the meantime, see the link below to find out more about the Peterborough Association for the Blind: <http://www.mypab.org.uk> or, for more information about the Royal National Institute for Blind People visit: <http://www.rnib.org.uk/about-rnib>

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