

***Giving Life
A Go***



***Ann
Whitaker***

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by

Ann Whitaker

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Foreword

My name is Ann Whitaker.

I am writing my story so that anyone who is born like me would have the chance to benefit and achieve what I thought was impossible.

I was born in December 1964 and diagnosed Cerebral Palsy, 'Athetoid'. This meant that my body was rigid and all my movements jerky and uncontrollable. My parents have told me that when I was three months old they realised that something was drastically wrong. They took me to see a paediatrician, who told them: "Put her in a home – she will be a cabbage. Forget about her, she will never walk or talk."

Since then my parents have taken me to specialist from Leeds to London, not one of them gave any help or advice. The same story again and again – "Put her in a home."

They devoted their lives to helping me all they could, knowing I was mentally alert, trapped in a twisted body. No doctor or specialist would allow me to have any treatment on the National Health; consequently my parents knew they had to 'go it alone'.

Over the years they paid for physiotherapy, speech therapy, hydrotherapy, horse riding and swimming. From the age of five I attended a school for the physically handicapped, where I was treated as a normal human being with only a physical disability.

At the age of ten I went to a boarding school for physically handicapped girls. Throughout my school years I only made very slow progress, never reaching the potential my parents expected. My parents then moved from Yorkshire to Hampshire and I came to live at home. They found a local physiotherapist who came once a week; she was called Elizabeth.

After a few years I wanted to make my own way in life with other young handicapped people. My parents never stopped looking for anything new to help me. Elizabeth suggested trying the Alexander Technique with Mr Bob Donovan, near where I was living. He treated me once a week for two years and this helped my body to relax, as it had never done before.

Mr Donovan came to see my parents. He was quite excited – he had been on a seminar in London where he had met Mr Peter Blythe, who gave a lecture on a treatment he had given children at Chester. He asked us if we would meet Mr Blythe, as his treatment might help me. We decided that I should go and have an assessment.

Mr Blythe asked my parents questions about my treatment and early years. He seemed to know all about it before they had time to answer, and while they talked, he was watching me too. He was kind and understanding, knowing how embarrassed I felt with my jerky movements and speech difficulties.

After another assessment with his partner, Joan Young, Mr Blythe told me that he could improve the quality of my life. He gave me a daily exercise programme to be carried out at home, telling us it would be hard work for us all, and that dad would get fed up with driving to Chester every six weeks!

I have been on the treatment now for three years. The progress I have made is unbelievable – not only physically, but mentally too. I find now that when I am with people I don't feel embarrassed because, with the improvement in my speech, they understand what I say without my having to repeat myself and I no longer have the jerky movements which restricted me and gave me so much embarrassment.

I find the only way I can explain the difference the treatment has made is this – I always felt I had a spring wound tight inside me, now that spring has wound down.

I continued to progress over the next year of treatment but I was beginning to feel restless and knew I had

to find somewhere to live where I could be with people of my own age and make a future for myself. I knew my Mum and Dad were getting very tired.

I have now found a lovely family home with my own room and have made many friends, the lovely staff are always there when I need help.

I continued my treatment with Joan and Peter, improving quickly.

I think my only problem was my speech, which was most embarrassing, having to repeat myself. Then Peter and Joan found a treatment for my speech. I was so excited.

They tested my hearing and found I hadn't been able to listen properly, having a different sound in one ear to the other. This has been the cause of my speech defect. I started the treatment, using headphones and tapes which sent different sounds to each ear. It worked – it's a miracle!

My treatment in Chester is finished now. I don't get embarrassed when I speak or by not doing physical tasks quite as well as the able-bodied, but I am still improving.

The hurdles I overcame in the five years I was at Chester are quite unbelievable. I find myself helping others less fortunate than me. I never thought I would have a future, but my friends in the home come to me for help and advice.

I am asked many times to speak on my disability at meetings and my role in life now seems to be helping and making other disabled people happy.

I am content, happy and look forward to my future. I will always be grateful to Joan and Peter in Chester and my dear Mum and Dad for all their hard work and loving care.

Chapter One

I am a Northerner by birth and although I have spent a large part of my life in the South of England, now I am happy to be back in the North again.

My parents are both from the north, my mother was born in Colne, Lancashire. When she was five years old she moved with the family to Tebay in Cumbria. Her father was an engine driver on the London-Midland-Scottish Railway, when they closed the engine sheds down in Colne he was transferred to Tebay, which is a small village about twelve miles north of Kendal.

Mum attended the village school with her brother and sister. At eleven she passed her exams and gained a place at Kendal Girl's Grammar School. At sixteen she passed the certificate and wanted to go to college to become a teacher but her father told her that Frank, her older brother, was at college and they could not afford for them both to go. So mum decided to train to be a nurse. After writing to many hospitals she was accepted at Keighley Victoria Hospital in West Yorkshire.

Mum told me that the family did not like living in Tebay, it was out in the wilds with only about five shops, no cinema and a poor bus service into Kendal, the nearest town. She says it was a hard time, getting up very early to help her mother before going to school, then again in the evening when she got home. Being the eldest girl she was told it was her duty, she did not mind, but it left very little time for herself or friends, in fact, this was one of the reasons why she went away nursing, to make a life of her own.

My father was born in Bingley a town in West Yorkshire. His father and two sisters all worked in the textile industry. Being the youngest in the family he was spoilt by his two sisters. They told me when he started school he did not like it and would run away at play time, so one of them had to keep an eye on him. He did not want to work in the mills and passed his exams and went to Technical College, then began a five-year apprenticeship as a joiner/cabinet maker.

He told me that he had a very good childhood with plenty of friends who spent most of their time getting up to mischief of one kind or another, but he says, not vandalism like today! Unlike where mum lived, Bingley had many shops, two cinemas, a theatre, swimming baths and two lovely parks with the river and canal running through.

The family went to Morecambe every year for the annual holiday when the mills closed down for the week at the end of July. Phyllis, the eldest sister, told me one time they were all stood on the seafront watching the tide come in, Doris was standing on the rail to see better, and he pushed her over into the sea. Their Dad and another man had to jump in and pull her out. He said he was only playing and did not mean to push her over, she just lost her balance, but he was always playing naughty tricks or teasing them.

My parents met in hospital, Dad had an accident at work when he was nineteen, injuring his left hand, he had to go to hospital and have surgery. He was then admitted, for a week, to the ward where Mum was working. When he was discharged he asked Mum if she would like to go out with him, and that was the start of their life together.

When Dad was twenty his mother died, she had been rushed into hospital one Monday evening with severe stomach pains. It was found to be cancer which had spread through her body and there was nothing the doctors could do, she died the following Sunday morning, this was a very sad time for all the family.

After Dad had finished his five-year apprenticeship, at the age of twenty-one, he was called up for National Service in the Royal Signals Regiment, where he trained as a wireless operator. After this training he was

posted overseas to Egypt, it was the time of the Suez crisis there, so Mum and Dad decided to become engaged while he was home on embarkation leave. It was quite a traumatic two years for every one, not knowing what would happen, but he came home safe and sound, saying it had been a wonderful experience for him.

Mum passed her finals and worked as a Staff Nurse for a while, she then applied for a Sister's post at St. Luke's Hospital, Bradford and was successful. On coming out of the army, Dad went back to his old firm and they began to talk about getting married, but there was a problem. Mum's family were Catholics and Dad's Methodists, they wanted a church wedding and to be of the same religion, so Dad took instruction in the Catholic faith and after six months was received into the church.

This is one story they told me: Dad had always been a very keen cyclist spending many happy hours, and holidays, with his friends cycling together all over the country; the Yorkshire Dales, Lake District, into Scotland, North Wales, Somerset and Devon. He tried to get Mum to go with them, she was not so keen but he managed to persuade her to give it a try. They were out for a ride and Mum took a wrong turn and got lost, Dad had to go back looking for her. He told her, "when we are married I am going to buy a tandem then I will always know where you are", and he did. Mum got her revenge though, Dad had to learn ballroom dancing as that was Mum's favourite hobby.

They started looking for a house and found an old Victorian one overlooking a park in Keighley. It was in good condition apart from the inside decorations, but with help from family and friends, working hard, they cleaned and decorated it throughout, ready for their wedding. They were married on Easter Monday. Mum told me that it was a beautiful sunny day, she wore a long white dress and carried yellow roses, with four bridesmaids all dressed in blue. The church was full, with flowers everywhere, and it was a very moving service. They were blessed, and then they moved up to the high altar, kneeling while the priest continued with Benediction which was very special for them. After a reception lunch at a hotel they went to Southport for their honeymoon.

They had been married nine years, but there was no sign of any children. Both of them wanted a family and they made enquiries about adoption. One morning Mum was at work when the matron called her to her office telling her she had just received a phone call saying Mum's mother had died suddenly.

Mum told me that the death of her mother came as a great shock to everyone. Her father, who had been working the late 10.00 p.m.- 6.00 a.m. shift, came home and found her dead in the armchair with a cup of tea in her hand. She'd had a heart attack and must have died instantly. Mum, who was especially close to her mother, took it very badly, she became so ill she was off work for about three months. Dad said that Mum and her mother had a very special relationship with each other.

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