

## **Mike Oliver Memorial Transcript**

### **Gerry Zarb**

Okay. Right. Well, thank you all for coming today. It's brilliant to see so many people here, it really is. I just want to say a few words about Mike and why we wanted to have this celebration today. Lots of people talked about Mike and wanted to have an event like this to celebrate Mike's life and work. So there were a group of us, and I must stress it wasn't just myself and Frances, there were actually four of us: Jane Campbell, Barbara Lisicki, Frances Hasler and myself. And we decided we would try to get this organised, and of course we also made sure that Mike's wife Joy was consulted all the way through, and I'm happy that she gave us her blessing as well as her support although I know that this is a very difficult day for her. Mike was one of my oldest and closest friends. I started working with him, in fact, with my very first job when I left university, and his loss has been hard to take. I still struggle with the idea that I won't be talking to him or seeing him again. And we had lunch together, a week or so before he died. He was on his usual good form, and there was no hint of what was to come. I remember we said goodbye in the pub car park, see you soon. It was a sunny day, and we drove home, and we were very happy. And then a few days later, this happened. So you just never know, do you? But I'm also proud and happy that Mike was a friend and advisor, and I have very many happy memories of things that we did together. So we wanted to have this event today to celebrate Mike's life and his work and the huge contribution he made to the disabled people's movement and the impact of his ideas and his inspiration on the lives of thousands and thousands of people across the world. His was a life that truly deserves to be celebrated. And obviously, while this is a celebration, it's inevitably tinged with sadness, and there's been a lot of the time when the four of us were organising that celebrating was the last thing on our minds, obviously. And that's because Mike was such a big man in every sense of the word, and really, you know, the hole that he has left in our lives is painfully huge, but at the same time, we kept reminding ourselves the impact he has had on so many people has been so outstanding that we just absolutely have to celebrate his life. And in any case, as a lot of you will know, Mike loved a party, and he would be over the moon to see all these people here today, and he would want us to celebrate, so we're going to. So lastly, I just want to thank some of the people without whose support today wouldn't have been possible; particularly our hosts the University of Kent, who've provided the venue and lots of other help, especially all the help provided by Natalia Crisanti, who's done so much to make everything work it's been unbelievable. Also SPECTRUM Centre for Independent Living and the Spinal Injuries Association, who gave much needed financial support. And you'll be hearing from Brian O'Shea from SIA later. And we're also very grateful to the very many people who contributed to our crowdfunding appeal, there's too many to mention all of them individually, but I know some of you are here today. So thank you very much. So, with that, I would like to introduce our first speaker, Colin Barnes, who's laughing for reasons I don't understand.

Colin was a close friend of Mike's, and he worked with him over many years. And Colin himself has done much to promote the social model of disability, and he was only the second Professor of Disability Studies in the UK after Mike himself. So, Colin.

### **Colin Barnes**

Is that it? Well, I'm sorry, but Gerry's just blown it for me now, because at events like this, I really do get emotional, which is strange. If people know me, they know me as Mr. Angry from up North, but when it comes to sort of this situation... I mean, going back to Vic's funeral, I had a speech and all that stuff, and I just blew it completely, just stopped that and walked off, and Mike just looked at me and said, 'It's all right, Colin, don't worry'. Anyway, back to the script. Forget it.

I wouldn't be a Professor of Disability Studies if it wasn't for Mike Oliver. I grew up with disability, didn't want to be a disabled person, had a job in industry for a while, the catering industry for 17 years. And in the 70s decided I didn't want to do that. So I went to teacher training college to teach disabled kids how not to end up where I ended up as a young lad, basically. My first school was... Anyway, that's a long story, it doesn't matter. The point was that I went to Holly Bank Teacher Training College in 1981. And there was nothing about disability at all, so you had to do it all yourself, and of course that was the year of the International Year of Disabled People. I got hold of this book, somebody said 'Have a look at this,' which was an edited collection by a woman called Jo Campling, and it was called, 'A New Perspective for Handicapped People'. The last chapter is by this chap called Mike Oliver, and it was introducing the social model, basically. And I read it and I thought, 'Yes, I know all about that', because both my parents were disabled. They weren't disabled in the traditional sense about sort of continually going on about impairment, all they wanted to be was part of normality, as it was then. But what that little booklet did was trigger something. Anyway, I ended up at university. And of course, it introduced me to Vic's writing and Mike's writing and stuff, and I produced in 1995 a dissertation, called 'Discrimination and Disabled People in Society: The Sociology of Disability.' And fortunately, because of that, which was full of Mike and full of Vic, and the perspective that he and Vic had put forward, I got a first.

And somebody said to me, 'Look, if you feel so strongly about this, you should do something about it, go to university'. So I went to Leeds, and they had, you know, I was told to read Goffman, and somebody else who had time describing what it was like to be this poor disabled person. And in 1989, I saw this advert in the paper after I'd finished my PhD, an advert for a job to provide information on the campaign for anti-discrimination legislation. And I went down to London, to the Spinal Injuries Association offices in North London, and Jane's gonna love this, because I'm going to tell it over and over again every time. I went down to London early, because in those days, trains weren't very easy to sort out, so I was there really early on in the morning about, I must have got there about 11 o'clock or 10 o'clock or something. And my initial appointment was one o'clock, but the chap who was supposed to get the job before me didn't turn up. But I was sat somewhere outside waiting to go in at one o'clock, as I did, because, as you've probably heard of what people say about me now, I was very nervous about sort of travelling on my own and all that stuff. And sort of intimidated by academics, and then somebody came out and said, 'The other chap's not turned up, do you want to come in?' So I went into the room. There's Mike Oliver. Jane Campbell, Stephen Bradshaw, and I'm stood there, for an interview, don't forget, you know, a job interview... 'Excuse me, but is there a chair?'

There's no chair! Anyway, needless to say, I got the job. That's the first time I met Mike, but his work had been truly... And of course, you know, you're always intimidated by people. If you've never written anything, never been involved with academia, if somebody's got the title of, you know... he was a Reader then, not a Professor... that they were really clever and all that stuff. Mike was absolutely brilliant. Never patronised me, talked down to me, or whatever. And I've never seen him do that to anybody. He was the most accessible person within higher education... Apart from Len, he's not bad.

That I've ever met. And one of the things, you know, when we talked, because we got on really well... I mean after, when we were doing the BCODP project, I used to deliver chapters every month, you know. I mean, he introduced me to all the people that I now know in Disability Studies, like Jane, John Evans, Vic Finkelstein... because before we did the project... because I'd written something on disability before, and I wanted to make sure that what I was writing was comparable to what BCODP wanted, so my first month or two was going around the country meeting people like John, Phil Mason, Rachel Hurst... All people

that were involved in disability from the south, because, sorry, but up north, there wasn't a lot of activity in disability, it all seemed to be down here in the South East and all London and stuff. Anyway, the upshot was, if it wasn't for Mike, I wouldn't have met all these people, and over the months when I was writing the book on discrimination, I used to just issue chapters. Every month, I'd go down to London to listen to them being talked about criticised, restructured or whatever. But of course, knowing Mike, when the meetings were over, the pub.

So I used to push him to the pub, and we got on really well. I mean, we had so much in common. You know, he's from a working class background, went to university without any formal academic qualifications. We had the same attitude to music, and the same attitude to politics. We had the same cynical attitude to academics, you know, so-called scholars who'd spend their lives talking bullshit in universities and not doing anything.

So we got on really well, you know. I mean, I remember once in 1991, we were asked to go round... We'd got the campaign on disability discrimination up and running, it was accepted by Scope after... What was it, what was it called? Spastics Society.

They accepted disability was an issue, discrimination issue. Before that, it had all been, 'Oh yeah, well it's okay,' you know. Anyway they accepted it, and we got... Mike and I got invited to the House of Commons to speak in front of the Disability Committee, who hadn't decided whether discrimination was an issue for disabled people.

So we did our speech... No seriously, I mean this is not... This is not... This is true. This has really happened. And we just sat there, spewed it all out about, 'Disabled people are three times more likely to be unemployed than [non-]disabled people, they're on less,' and all that sort of stuff. And when I came out I said, 'Do you think we made a difference?' and Mike just looked at me and said, 'No, not at all.'

Because they just... They listened to us and just walked off, not, 'Thank you', you know, 'Kiss my arse' or anything.

So, you know that kind of, sort of attitude, was so wonderful because it made you realise that anybody in power was just there to be blown away, if you know what I mean. And one of the reasons that kind of experience, working with BCODP led to what turned out to be the BCODP Research Unit at Leeds. I did a degree and a PhD at Leeds, and I'd been teaching on a part-time basis there while I was doing the BCODP research. So, BCODP didn't have any offices, so we coined the phrase Disability Research Unit. And in 1992, because I'd got a couple of books out, one with Mike, the university gave me a one year contract. And they introduced the first Introduction to Disability Studies in the UK, and it became an undergraduate programme, and it's still in existence now—not as good as it used to be, I might add, but it's still there. But the interesting thing was that Mike was a major contributor to that. He.. The two core texts for essential reading were 'The Politics of Disablement' and 'Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination'. The whole issue of the politics.... The course was structured around the social model. The social model is not simply something that you can talk about. It's a tool with which to change things. It encompasses every aspect of disabled people's lives, or anybody's lives if you really want to do it, and it became the driving force behind that programme. Theory, policy, practice. Theory being an understanding of the way society works in a modern capitalist society, the policies that evolved from that, and how you overcome them. One of which of course is, as Jane pointed out in 1990, disability equality training. All of that is central to what happened at Leeds in the early 90s, and Mike was there for... He was the external examiner for the first four years, and then was the first examiner, second examiner for the next four years. Over the years we've attracted, up until 2014 when I retired, something like 700 students at Leeds, but Mike came up and Len came up to do sort of external examination meetings and all that. And I never

watched either of them, especially Mike, never talked down to students. I've never seen him patronise anyone. My wife was very critical about academics because she says I'm one.

And I can talk for hours on any subject when she gave me THE push, so I've got to be careful of what I'm going to say here, and I will only do a sort of... But she thought Mike was the most wonderful person in the world, because he made you feel so good, basically. But it wasn't just about Mike's academic life that's important. There is no doubt whatsoever that the social model has been the most important tool within the struggle for disabled people's rights, not only in Britain, but across the world. During my, in inverted commas, 'academic life', I've travelled all over the world; Australia, Canada, America, all that sort of stuff, you know, all these places, and they all know who Mike Oliver is. I've just written a journal article about Mike for a... I was asked to write it in June for a German magazine, about... saying what Mike's achievements were, why he's important and all that sort of stuff. So that doesn't go out without saying. The key to the social model is, unlike debates about language and whether it's 'handicap' or whether it's 'disability', whether it's 'impairment' or it's this, the social model can be understood by anybody. What's often forgotten is that when Mike introduced it in 1981, it wasn't saying about 'disabled people', it was the way in which society responds to—and this is a direct quote—'certain categories of people'. Because in the early disabled people's movement, UPIAS would always get criticised because it's about people in wheelchairs, it's not about us, you know. That's not true, even, you know, Vic recognised that and so did UPIAS later, but it didn't alter the fact that they were seen as just wheelchair users. The reality of impairment, of course is that any impairment can affect every element of your being; sight, hearing, the lot, you know. An annoying thing about disability arguments is, it's not just about this section of community that section of the community. It's about everyone, it's a normal experience, it's part of their life course, one way or another, and Mike understood that. He taught me that. He also taught me to never listen to critics, just get on with what you're doing and bugger them, basically. But the best thing about Mike Oliver, or not the best thing but one of his most admirable things was, he was a great person to be with. He used to have parties, and when he was living in Chatham, we'd go down to parties, and he and Joy would have a house full of people, and they would all be made to feel really good. Lots of drinks and stuff. I used to stay overnight, which was brilliant, which was great. You know, I could come down to at least get drunk and just not even think about anything. Wonderful. We used to sort of... When he was coming to Leeds or up North, we used to meet up and so on. I remember one time, which I mentioned outside, and I didn't know whether to sort of mention this because it makes me sound brilliant, but I'm not. We went to Scarborough, and Len, Joy, I, and Hilary, my wife, you know... went to meet Mike, and we had a lovely day in Scarborough, a meal and all that stuff, and we went down to the beach on the top. Now, if you don't know Scarborough, which is up North, and of course, you lot from South won't know what I'm on about because you never go up bloody North anyway, do you?

Anyway, the upshot is that we went down this thing, had a lovely sort of trip up and down the promenade and all that sort of stuff, had a meal, great stuff, and then decided to go back up, because the car was parked up at the top. And of course Mike's a big bloke. And his wheelchair was an electric wheelchair with a battery, and it stopped at the bottom of the hill, and God knows how I did it, it must have been divine intervention, because I pushed him all the way up the hill. And it was incredible. You know, it was just... Another sort of one of my fondest memories is, we used to go to conferences and stuff, and Joy, Mike and I and Hil went to... In 2000, we went to Chicago, because I've got the same taste in music as Mike, a bit more blues, I'm a real blues fan, basically. And Chicago, as you know, is the home of blues, and we went... Conferences are not exciting, you know, you go to conferences and stuff, you hear one or two presentations, and then if you've been around and forgot, we're all saying the same things, and arguing the same kind of tosh anyway, so you don't worry about that.

So you go to the conference and say, 'Yeah, it was a great event' but really [inaudible]. But Mike, Joy and I went out, and Hilary went out for a trip around Chicago by boat, which is wonderful. We went out for a meal one night, and—it was a three-day event—but we got absolutely drenched, and you couldn't get a taxi. We're all walking back from the restaurant, absolutely soaked, laughing our bloody heads off. It was absolutely incredible. But the best, for me, the best event was we went to Buddy Guy's blues club, which is on the south side of Chicago, which is the bad side, apparently. Had a great night, we went to see Johnnie Johnson, you won't know who he is, but he was Chuck Berry's piano player. He's dead now, of course. We had a great night, and it got to be about two o'clock, and Len will testify this, we couldn't get a taxi, because we needed a wheelchair taxi. So these big bouncers, you know... I won't mention this, but I did actually meet Buddy Guy at that event. Mike said to me, 'Who's that bloke over there? He looks like Buddy Guy, at the bar'. So I said, 'Oh, I know. Do you think it is?' And he said, 'Go ask him.'

So, this was about, something like half past one, you know, and of course, I'd had a couple of glasses of water (!)

So I went across to the bar, and there he is, stood there, and he had this sort of white fedora on looking really cool, you know, and there was this lady with him who was very attractive I sort of just ambled up, noticed him, and said, 'Excuse me, but are you Buddy Guy?' And he just looked at me as if I was something off your foot, and he just says, 'Yes.' And I said, 'Oh. Oh! Can I shake your... [hand]?'

And I went back to the table and he just looked at me and I just laughed. But we had to walk back from that because we couldn't get a taxi, but it wasn't painful, it was a joy. You know what I mean? Mike took that as just being part of life. To conclude, because I'm going on longer than I should do, I can't say enough about Mike Oliver. He was, for me, one of the most important people in my life. I loved the man. We talked at least twice a month, every time I knew, and the last time I saw him was in 2015 at the Scope attempt to claim responsibility for the Disability Discrimination Act. I say attempt because if you know the story, you don't have to go there. But it's a disgusting event, but for a lot of reasons. What surprised me was, Mike didn't... I wanted to get up and say, 'This is rubbish, this is not how it was. You don't claim anything for this', but Mike was very tempered in his response which I thought was very admirable. But I wish he would have been Mike Oliver as I knew him. should have been, but anyway, that's another story. But we talked twice a month for an hour so, talking about politics, Brexit, TV, music, anything, even disability. We moaned about the way disability has become a waste of space, and an academic exercise where idiots talk about theory that has nothing to do with the reality of life. You know, one of the things that our Disability Studies was about was about theory, policy, practice. Giving people anger, giving people skills with which to change society. And thankfully, a lot of them have gone out and actually done that. But it's not just sitting about in a university, sterile environment, talking about this theory, that theory, using language that nobody outside an institution like a university can understand. That's not what disability is, that's not what Mike and I wanted it to be. But, saying all that, I miss him immensely.

### **Gerry Zarb**

Thanks, Colin. Some [inaudible, super?] words there, and I haven't got any others just now. I just need to introduce our next speaker, Len Barton, who was formerly Professor of Inclusive Education at the Institute of Education in London. I think Len is probably Mike's oldest is and closest friend. Really, I think they were inseparable. I don't even remember seeing them apart before today, actually. And Len also regularly worked and published with Mike over the years, and pioneered the study of inclusive education He himself has had a profound influence on activists, students, and academics right across the world. Over to you, Len.

## **Len Barton**

Okay? Thank you very much. This is a real privilege for me, to give a paper on my perspective on Michael. I've never given such a paper before, so it's a challenge. What gives me the right to present such a paper? Well, I think it was the amount of time I spent with him. Listening to him, talking with him, arguing with him, reading his material and learning about him, and from him. Being sociologists, we had some common interests and met at various meetings. I also became an external examiner of courses at his institution. This became the basis for our closer working relationships with one another, from which developed what I consider to be this long-term, crucial friendship. Michael was a very kind man. He gave me so much of his time, into his thinking, and I really appreciated his patience and questioning approach to conversations. He shared so much of his understanding, his commitments, and concerns with me. The more I engaged in this deeply human relationship, the more I appreciated his openness, his honesty, and wonderful integrity. He was serious in his commitment to transforming the social conditions and relations of the world in which he lived. He made it very clear to me that this involved a struggle, which was a matter of absolute seriousness. Understanding his achievements require some knowledge of the working conditions he had to deal with daily in academic life. Most importantly was his central abiding concern, which stayed with him all his life, for the wellbeing of disabled people generally. And in a paper which he wrote just before his death, which is to be published shortly, he confirmed the concern and call for greater attention to be given to the perspectives of disabled people and our responsibilities towards them. Whilst I have absolutely no doubt about his academic contributions he has made in his life, this celebration today is about much more than that. He was not just a great scholar; he was a great scholar, but he also was a wonderful person. Michael was a complex person. He was both gentle and supportive, critical and challenging, and where necessary, he was willing to make his criticisms public. Michael worked in a system of education, which like the society which it was placed, was characterised by deeply-rooted inequalities between institutions, involving issues of status, resources, experience, opportunities, and income. These divisions contributed to a more competitive, selective, and exam-driven system of education. His reaction to this was his recognition—his absolute recognition—of the importance of critical analysis, and the need for serious challenges to these developments and the ideas and practices supporting them. I did not need to be in the company of Michael for long—I was in his company for a long, long... But I didn't need to be before I realised... It was quite apparent to me how passionate he was about his work. He wanted to contribute, seriously contribute, to transforming society in which he lived. This included providing alternative insights and ways of conceiving the world. He sought to challenge and disturb people—and he certainly did that with me—and to convince people that the work was part of a political project. The extent of his commitment was beyond that of the barriers in his own institution. For example, his support and leadership of the struggle for the establishment of Disability Studies within academia took on a national dimension. Administrative responsibilities increased for him, along with the creation and presentation of papers arguing for change. The pressures on Michael already were heavy, but these demanded a greater workload, an intensification. He was also conscious of the need for appropriate literature to support this development. Apart from his own several significant publications—which I decided, definitely, Michael would not want me to go into, so I'm not going to actually explicate any of those—but apart from those, he became involved in the development of 'Disability and Society', the journal. He became a member of the exec editors and provided significant guidance on numerous issues and developments. He was totally and utterly reliable as an editor, which is a dream for an editor, to have editors like that. And his reactions and concern for the quality of the journal encouraged constant consideration to its purposes and priorities, and he was always ready, always ready, without invitation, to defend the nature and interests of the journal at all times. Even though he was retired, he recently offered his support to the editor, who was undergoing what he believed was unacceptable criticism, which shocked him. I remember us talking about it. He particularly wanted to make sure that the editor was convinced of his total support for her. And although at the time I

was in hospital, I wanted that to be clear with regard to myself. Another nature, and feature of his life was the number of people, the number of people and organisations that he provided responses to with regard to their needs. This involved a great deal of his time and careful thoughtfulness, as well as an increase in meetings providing opportunity for people and organisations to speak with him and talk with him. Overall, his life was marked by increasing pressure. He needed support. Where did he get that from? Michael, as I learned increasingly through my relationships with him, had a very profound view of the nature of friendship. The role of friends in his life were very, very important. To become a friend to Michael was to be introduced to people who had been providing and continue to provide him with support and encouragement; people who he could—and this is really important—trust, rely on, and enjoy their company. I want now to outline some of the examples of the occasions when Michael met with his friends. And these were extremely important, stress-relieving times. Reflecting on them makes me conscious of how precious and happy times they were. Michael enjoyed meeting his friends, and one such gathering, which we've already had allusions to was what I call the garden party. This was a garden party at his house, surrounded by these wonderful pots of [inaudible, pigs?] all over the garden.

And we had a multitude of people attending; disabled people and others, academics and others, friends and relations, and they were wonderful evenings. A lot of laughter, a lot of good music, wonderful food and good conversations. Michael particularly, he particularly wanted to enter into the spirit of these evenings. And he wore some of the most amazing colourful jackets and shirts, he was a trendy dresser. and Johnny Crescendo—wonderful Johnny who now lives in America—a disabled musician, would turn up, play, and sing for us, which added to the wonderful evening in our memories. Michael also had a very impressive tape library, covering many of the singers and groups he followed. He also enjoyed going to live concerts, and was a fan of various artists. This included Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen. And I just will add here, why did he like Bob Dylan, and was such a fan of Leonard Cohen particularly? Because they were both brilliant lyricists, brilliant lyricists, and they spoke to the times in which they live in really powerful ways. And in his later life, as you know, those of you who read his work and read his work. He referenced to them as in any academic way on a lot of his papers. He asked me to come with him to one of the concerts where Leonard Cohen was the artist in residence in the O2 in London. During the concert, the audience participation steadily increased, and people were spontaneously shouting out their praise about Leonard and their thanks to Leonard. And suddenly, in the midst of it all, I heard this voice. And it was Michael, and he was shouting out, 'I love you, Leonard!'

It was so wonderful. I tell you why was so wonderful. It was so wonderful to see him relax. To see him really enjoying himself. It was something I could never ever forget. Michael enjoyed also going on cruises to which he invited several of his friends to go with him. I'd never been on a cruise before in my life, and I was very sceptical about them, but they turned out to be absolutely fantastic. They were occasions in which they provided insights into the richness of his character, and the ways in which he found real moments of happiness. For example, he came to me on one of the early days of one of the cruises and said, 'Right, Len, we're going to bingo.' I said, 'I beg your pardon?'

He said 'We're going to bingo.' I said, 'Yeah, I don't know how to...' 'I don't know anything about bingo, I've never played...' He said, 'Don't worry!' And this is what he said to me—again, putting it in the context of all the pressure he was under—he said, 'I want you to relax, and I want you to enjoy it.' And oh my, it was an enjoyable experience!

It was frightening at times, because some people didn't like our presence, but it was good. It was good. Another source of great pleasure was Michael's interest in horse racing. He had a very, very informed knowledge—this is Michael—an informed knowledge and understanding of different race courses, different stables, different jockeys, different trainers, different horses. He invited several of his friends to go with him for a meal at a

restaurant on one of the race courses. He'd book a table, and people enjoy a meal and watch the races from the table. It was always a deeply, deeply satisfying experience, and very informative—Michael was so knowledgeable about these things. And it would strengthen the relationship between all the participants. It provided a different, but enjoyable, form of conversation with him. For me, any celebration of Michael, any celebration of his life and work, must not forget what I believe to be the most important, significant influence in his life—that of his wonderful relationship and support from Joy, his wife. It was a shock to me, it really was a shock to me, when he asked me to be his best man. This was another privilege, and the relationship certainly helped me to have a closer working experience with him. The wedding ceremony! I don't think I could... It just, it was absolutely amazing. It was wonderful. And I don't quite know how we managed to get to the ceremony, actually, from their house, but we got there. The wedding ceremony was fantastic, but the registrar came looking for me with a most serious frown on her face. And she said, 'Excuse me,' she said, 'this music...' I said I gave her the music. 'Yes,' she said, 'Are you sure this is for the occasion here?'

I said, 'Yes'. It was Bob Dylan. And I said, 'Yes', I assured her it was correct. I shared so many happy times with Joy and Michael, who was clearly a source of fantastic support for Michael. They were ideal for each other. And it was wonderful to see their relationship develop over the years. I—this is my personal belief—after watching and knowing and getting to understand them and getting close to them, I believe, without the benefits of this relationship and all that was involved in that, he would not have been able to achieve what he did. Joy was a source of great strength to him. His rock. His greatest friend. His greatest critic. His lover. What a task this has been; to try to find a form of words and illustrations that would capture what I think of Michael. Looking back over my life, he clearly has influenced me in so many different ways. My initial experience of his death—and after that, I became very ill—was an absolute inability to stop crying. I couldn't stop crying. I couldn't talk about it. I couldn't speak about it. And now, I still cry. And I can understand Colin [well]ing up there. I feel that, but also I now understand the strength of those positive memories he's left us with. And with the help of my counsellor Jane, I've been able to move the emotions and explore my feelings about the matters that arise from them. After several sessions talking, she wanted me to talk about Michael. So I just talked about him, all the time. And she hardly ever interrupted me. And then she said at the end, 'I would have really loved to have met him. He sounds a quite remarkable man.' I said, 'Well, remarkable is quite an interesting word for that, what I feel about that.' So, for me, there is more to Michael—much, much more to Michael—than his academic achievements, and more to our relationship than being colleagues. I have had the privilege of knowing Michael as a friend, a true friend who I could trust, who I could speak about anything with, and knowing it was safe, and he would give me his honest opinion. And his friendship with him, it didn't just happen. We had to work for it. In this paper, I've tried to briefly engage with two concerns. On the one hand, for those of you who knew Michael, who had a working relationship with him, I hope I've tried to stimulate and reinforce some of those many positive memories you must have of your experience with him. Also, for those who appreciated his theoretical, political perspectives, but didn't know him that well, I hope you'll appreciate that to celebrate Michael's life is about more than his academic achievements. He was [not just] an academic of an outstanding quality, he was a wonderful, a wonderful person. To us all, I hope this paper will reinforce our appreciation of what a privilege it's been for our paths to have crossed in this life. To be able to read his work, hear him speak, talk with him, observe him. It's left us with so many happy memories and increasingly to be viewed as a [inaudible] that's precious. To the organisers of this meeting, I want to thank you, because you've really provided me with a cathartic experience, and it's helped me to recognise the power of wonderful memories. Thank you, Michael.

**Gerry Zarb**



Well done, Len. Right. That was amazing, Len. I was smiling all the way through that. Brilliant. Our next speaker is a very dear friend of mine, Michele Moore, who is has got a new job, and her job title is so long that some of you might fall asleep by the time I've finished! But she is the Head of the Centre for Social Justice and Global Responsibility at London Southbank University. And if that wasn't enough, she's also Editor of 'Disability and Society', which as Len mentioned, was the journal that Mike co-founded 30 years ago. And Michele worked with Mike in the very early days, at Avery Hill, in a nice little rabbit hutch they gave us there. And they've had a very close bond ever since, and I know that he was particularly happy to have left the journal in her capable hands.

### **Michele Moore**

Oh, gosh, this is the hardest thing to do, because as everybody's said already and you know, you all loved Mike so very much. And so mine is a personal tribute, as well as one which... In which I'll try to address some of the most important achievements of Mike's career and how he felt about them and what they've meant to me. So as well as a personal tribute, of course he is a person of huge international stature and significance. He always will be. And he was the principal and lifelong architect of my own career. He was my personal mentor, and he became a steadfast friend to myself and to my children, and I, I have benefitted so much from that friendship over 30 years, as well as from his amazing intellect and academic support. As Gerry said, Mike gave me my first job as a young research assistant. It was to work alongside him to promote inclusion in schools and what was then the old Inner London Education Authority. And in those days, inclusion was called integration, and Mike already knew that that was not a good enough aspiration for disabled children and young people. And soon Gerry Zarb was appointed as a research assistant with me, and we shared an office, and it was in a little hut, but the office was next to Mike's, so how fabulous was that for, kind of, two young researchers? And we worked with him on the first in-depth study of the experience of men with spinal cord injury. And through that study, the power of the social model for explaining experience became absolutely unmistakable. And from the minute I met Mike—and I've been talking to Gerry, and I think it's the same for him too—he taught us to think, and then he insisted that we had to think harder. And then he also insisted that we had to speak very plainly, and always to derive strength—the strength to create change in the face of the struggle, and the greater the struggle, the more strength you must find, but he always was alongside you whatever those struggles were. Around this time, with Len Barton, he was setting up this new international journal, 'Disability and Society', which has become the world-leading journal in the field, and his intention was always that this journal must be accessible to disabled people, both as readers, and as writers. And at its heart, he wanted the journal to be committed to building on the social model of disability and producing real social change, and he installed in everyone that he taught, an expectation that if you were working with him and thinking with him, the focus was on the importance of brokering real change. That's what he wanted. And years later, when he and Len asked me to take on the role of Editor in Chief for the journal, Mike told me that the most important thing that I must always do is to keep the journal close to its founding values, principles, and beliefs, because these came from the grassroots democratic organisations of disabled people themselves, and he constantly placed emphasis on keeping those values and intentions alive. And that's what I try to do in his name. He involved me in a series of seminars, with Len again, that were funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to think about ways of researching disabled people's experience appropriately. And through those seminars and through talking and working with Len, I... Everything that I thought I knew about research and everything that I'd learned in universities through one, two, several degrees and so on, was turned upside down, because it was in the journey of those seminars that we came to the realisation that there is no disability research practice that's acceptable if it doesn't place disabled people's own voices right in the centre of the research, and he also helped to shape the foundational principle of, 'nothing about us without us' as an essential ingredient for research, and he gave me the confidence to take those two ideas, and those two practices, forward with me in everything

that I've done since, and the confidence that he gave to so many of us for looking for new ways of understanding and responding to disability. And in the middle of all this as the years went by, and my career started to unfold, I had two children, and the first, my son, was found very quickly to have physical impairments that would have lifelong implications. And then my little daughter to have hearing impairments. And as a young mother, I found that Mike actually had equipped me with the tools of social model thinking sufficiently that I knew in the moments of discovering those things that disablement need not actually define my children's lives, and what a gift is that to know the person who can give you that? He had taught me the enabling power of inclusion and tenacity for dismantling disabling barriers, but he did much more than that, as if that wasn't enough, he positioned himself firmly alongside as a lifelong friend to support me through what is a difficult and emotional journey of raising children with impairments in a disabling world. But he never ever wavered in his support for myself and for my children, and I'm very grateful for that. After retiring, Mike became very selective about where and when he would speak out, because he was always at the races or on Scarborough seafront, as we are now hearing, or cruising. He thought a lot over the years about the difference in disabled people's lives between the time when he started the journal, and as the years were moving on, he was kind of thinking back to that time and thinking, 'What difference have we made?' And by 2013, he wanted to write something about that again for the journal. And so he wrote a short piece called 'The Social Model of Disability: Thirty Years On', some of you might have seen that. And he just kind of wrote it very quickly and kind of said almost embarrassed, do I think anybody would be interested in reading it? And I said 'Yes, they definitely will'. And when I told him, 'You know, that's only been out a short while, Mike, and it's been downloaded 40,000 times.' He just said, 'Oh, it's good to know that people still want to read what I have to say', and I was kind of blown away by that, but that's very true of Mike. The power of his work was always balanced with this immense personal modesty; he was so modest, and so many people have commented about that. And similarly, you know, the years went by and his influence was spreading more and more across the world, in the universities in particular, and in Malta, they managed to launch a Master's degree in Disability Studies, which was built on years and years of Mike's pioneering activism in Malta with Len and with their disabled comrade in arms Joe Camilleri. And when this fantastic achievement of this course being launched happened, he just said, 'Oh, it's so good to know that progress is still being made', and it was all in his name, it was huge. It was worldwide, it's been phenomenal, and still is phenomenal. And then we came to this year. This is the year in which the whole world, as far as I feel, and our general community has been utterly shaken by Mike's death. And by coincidence, this is the year in which we are having a special issue for the journal 'Disability in Society' on disability and the academy and activism, and that theme was right at the centre of everything that was important in Mike's career. And he wrote a piece for that special issue, which with his much-loved wife Joy's permission, we are going to publish very shortly; it's coming out very soon. And in this piece, he comments on the need for renewal of the journal's original values and purposes. And when you come to read it, it's so just wonderful to read, because his voice is there again, so it's a lovely piece, but he shares his views—which are very strong views—on new ideas gaining ascendancy in the field of disability studies, many of which he felt needed bringing right back to the original purposes and values of the journal. It was not enough for Mike to have the journal grow and grow in stature, but to have its pages filled with articles building the career of academics. He wanted attention paid to the power of the journal for brokering real change. He constantly questioned the relationship between disability activism and the academy because he wanted to make that relationship stronger, and he wanted academic work to be married with action and change, for there always to be a purpose, for it all to make a difference. And so the journal's executive editors and I are immensely proud that this year's special issue will actually open with Mike's words. In that piece, he talks about his frustration in recent times by feeling that those who have established a strong academic base—in the UK and beyond—in disability studies have actually been distracted from the purpose of mounting a sufficiently rigorous defence of disabled people's living standards, and he felt that some academics are getting diverted from

the essential task of creating a public exposé of what's really happening to disabled people as a result of government indifference and cuts. And it's just lovely to have him just saying that right now. In a time when the rights and interests of disabled people are being renounced rather than expanded, he was very keen to say in his article that he wanted to write about this to let in hope that the 'Disability and Society' community and our wider community of disability scholars, and disabled activists, and disabled people, will never forget that our work together did emerge from the democratic organisations of disabled people, and that there's considerable importance to holding on to this history, and particularly within the journal. And in this moment of a brief return to writing for the journal, of course he was always caught up himself with matching his own voice in the academy with the power of his activism. So we were talking in emails about, 'That'd be a great paper, Mike, do you want to write a bit more?' And he was saying, 'No, no! I don't want to turn it into a proper article. Our local wheelchair service is virtually collapsed, and I'm off to try and sort that out with other users. [Laughs] It's just brilliant, it's so Mike. And then last year, he spoke to me and wrote to me a few times about facing the future. As people have said, the journal came under attack, he was very concerned about that. He didn't want to abandon optimism for the power of disability studies that he'd created over all these years, and he did know when he was writing for the journal that there are committed and passionate scholars still, working in disability studies, who work with the disabled people's movement despite the ascendancy of perspectives in the university which he felt had a very dubious and incoherent radical theoretical basis. He felt they were getting too far away from the essential ingredients of very coherent social model thinking. And even though the disabled people's movement has been largely decimated by what he describes as 'rampant corporatism'—the big charities—he still wants us to be optimistic. And at the end of this article, he wrote about a Leonard Cohen poster that's on the wall at home he shared with Joy, and a famous line on this poster saying, 'There's a crack. There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.' And he told me that disability activists and academics need to support each other. We mustn't kind of separate, we have to stay together and work collectively, to support each other to ensure that where there are those cracks, the light gets in and things are blown wide open, in the pursuit of change for the betterment of disabled people's lives. He thought that the future of disabled people and the strength of our activism depends on this, depends on blowing these cracks open together and working together, and certainly felt that the future of disability studies, depends on this too. One of the last things he wrote to me was a little email saying, 'Take care and keep fighting.' 'Keep fighting for what really matters, and is really relevant to disabled activists and other disabled people.' And this we must do. And so, I would like to conclude this commemoration and my reflection on the man, the power of his work, with words from another one of his favourite musicians—well, actually, it's Bob Dylan again—which I like to think that Mike would be saying to me, and to us, and to our wider community at this point in time, which is, 'Don't mourn, organise.'

### **Frances Hasler**

Hello, I'm Frances Hasler, and since I'm turning the pages, I should also introduce somebody who needs very little introduction to most people in the room, Jane Campbell, who has been a lifetime activist in all kinds of ways, and is now carrying out her activism in the House of Lords, although of course, this was far more important today to come here than to be in the House of Lords. So, I'm gonna let Jane tell you the rest of her story.

### **Jane Campbell**

Mike would never forgive me if I'd gone into the Lords today instead of being here. Okay, Mike. I'm here, okay? So, Mike Oliver. Now, I'm going to talk to you a bit about Mike Oliver and his relationship with me and his impact on me as a 23-year-old, very naive graduate, who spent 23 years trying to be a normal person. I was advised by someone in the room who ended up advising me and largely telling me what to do from my 23rd year

to my 33rd year, and that was Frances. Frances I met when I was at a charity. It was my first job as a graduate, and I was a bit miserable. And I won't go into how we met, but she said, 'You know what you need, Jane? You need to go to this conference', run by disabled people, who—like me—were fed up with being treated like second-class citizens. It was good timing, because I'd just been sacked by this disability charity for not being able to use a typewriter. Just graduated, and I had a Master's degree, and I believed they'd accept me and give me other work to do. Maybe in the research department, or the equality department, in which there were lots and lots of able-bodied people, but no, they didn't want me. After all, I was never going to be a copy typist (!) So it was inferred at that time that I was too disabled, and should consider returning home to study another degree. At that time, I was really, really angry, but I really felt there was nothing I could do about it, and it was primarily my fault for being disabled. I, me, my sole problem. Naturally, I lost confidence. I believed that I would probably never work again. So when Frances suggested going to this conference run by disabled people, I can remember thinking, 'God, why on earth would I want to rub salt in my own wounds? And also, I've just left a disability charity 'who thinks I'm utterly unemployable because of my disability, so why on earth do I want to see yet more disabled people with similar experiences? It's the last place I want to be! Good God, 'it'd be like me going back to special school!' So, I thought, 'No, no. I just want to be around normal people!' But I went, out of curiosity, but mostly because I liked Frances. In my view, she was very normal, she was very intelligent...

And she might want to even become my friend! Little did I know, it was the best decision I have ever made in my life. The conference was organised by a uniform group of disabled people called BCODP. The headline speaker, who everyone's seemingly getting very excited about, was this big lad with a beard, who looked like my second-year Political History lecturer.

'Well,' I thought, 'that's about as normal as I'm going to get around here!' So I went in. 'I hope he's good.' He started well by saying, 'The day I broke my neck was the best day of my life.' So I thought, 'Oh! Starting well, he's a comedian!'

'At least we'll have some laughs!' But I soon realised he was making a very serious point. 'You are not the problem', he said. 'Hopefully, you will be part of a campaign; a rights-based solution campaign. The solution to your feelings of exclusion and second-class citizenship.' I suddenly woke up. This was the first encounter with a disabled person who didn't go on about their various medical problems or that they couldn't type, or they couldn't dance, or use a [inaudible] or read print like normal people. Instead, he referred to a radical, progressive solution; a solution that would explain why we weren't getting access to public transport, buildings, jobs, and especially why charities were treating us like shit. This isn't about being a victim in need of a cure or a charitable handout. He called it the social model of disability. And I was dumbstruck! Here was the first disabled person I'd come across that I didn't want to avoid. In fact, I was desperate [to see] if he would actually come up and say hello, because to me it was a bit like meeting a rock star. Everybody was excited in the room. Believe me, it wasn't his good looks, it was what he said. The man absolutely rocked. He exuded natural confidence, intelligence, and mature wisdom, and he unlocked a world for me that offered so much more than I ever imagined was possible. In under 20 minutes, my entire understanding of who I was and who I could be took a seismic shift. During those minutes, my deep-rooted anger, my sense of personal injustice, but more importantly, my internalised oppression, was unleashed, and my life changed from black and white into colour. Of course, I came to realise that it was not just the bearded man—Mike—who was single-handedly responsible for my liberation, but in my opinion, Mike was the very first person in my 23-year-old life who set me free from the chains of the medical model that was used to explain my life in terms of what I could and couldn't do. My medical condition—my spinal muscular atrophy—was never really going to change, but the external barriers that prevented me from living a life not only could, but should. I will always remember him and his writings to be the very best. That's why, I guess, he became an Emeritus Professor. But he was never ever lofty or a typical academic. His use of accessible language and simple

analogies that day, as he appeared to tell not only my story, but our collective experience, embedded that conference into my psyche forever. What's more important, and what's really important, I fell in love with disabled people, and I didn't want to be normal anymore. In fact, 'normal' was definitely what I didn't want to be. Those I chose to separate myself from for so many years, and all that exhaustion, and being 'normal', was no longer important. I wanted to meet disabled people, I wanted them as my friends; my comrades in arms. And I really think—and it sounds a bit over-the-top—but I think a freedom fighter was born the day that I met Mike Oliver. Although he explained this idea of the social model and gave life to it that day, we all know he was very, very clear that he was not the author. And he would always reference other disabled people and the origins of the social model, which was actually the culmination of the work of the Union of the [Physically] Impaired Against Segregation. But he, he was the man who summed up the theorising and named it the social model of disability. It became a brand which inspired us in our hundreds and became an epidemic. By naming it, we at last could identify our own brand. The assumingly simple definition of our situation in society was easily understood by everyone. There was no dissenting voices in that room that day. So, over the years, Mike promoted the social model through his lectures, books, and research, and amongst his friends. The work was revolutionary; a very dynamic tool. A tool which disabled and non-disabled people alike used to work out solutions to our social and economic exclusion, and second-class status. But, as we've seen, he didn't just preach from the pulpit. He would never love anything better than a good protest, and I've got the photos.

He really enjoyed an after party, and as Len said, those garden parties, they were something, although I would question the burger bar that night, as it was presented as, 'Well, this is going to be your food. Go to the burger bar and help yourself.' And there was a burger bar in a van outside the house! God help any vegetarians! As the years went by, I leant on Mike more and more. From the man who went from being my educator to becoming my lifetime mentor, wise owl, racing pundit—and we went to the races a lot. He was always incredibly annoyed that I used to win more than he did.

He said, 'You know nothing! You go and look at a horse, and you say, "I think that one's going to win," and it does, and I've spent hours looking at form.' And I'm still racing now, and if it wasn't for Mike, I'd probably be a lot better off!

But he was also a very close friend. The last time we spoke, we were talking about my 60th birthday party. 'Well,' he said, 'you never thought you'd get there.' And I said, 'No.' And he goes, 'And do you know what the problem is?' And I go, 'What's that?' And he said, 'You still haven't got a bloody pension!' He was more worried about me not having a pension than he ever was when I used to ring him up and say 'I really don't know what to do. I've got this speech in the Lords and I really can't start.' And he'd go, 'Well, never mind about that. Have you got a pension yet?' Well, Mike, I still haven't got a pension, because of course, I was told I was gonna die, as so many disabled people are told by the so-called experts. So he was very pleased that he was right on that. We didn't agree on everything. I'm not a Marxist, and I really, really don't think Bob Dylan is a genius, although he tried to convert me, but believe me, listening to his tapes round his house for hours just turned me in the opposite road.

He also told me that he attempted to mention Bob Dylan in every academic book he wrote, and would then send me away with books and say, 'Okay, if you can spot the actual reference, I'll give you a fiver.'

I'm still looking. But Mike understood. He understood my oppression to the core, and almost—almost—all those always accepted that I'd do more in what he used to say was the 'unelected day centre' that's the House of Lords than anywhere else. And he supported me. As a Marxist, he supported me there, and he encouraged me to say and do more and more and more. 'We need people like you,' he said. 'Many of us won't do it, but you will, and that's great.' I'm probably there because of Mike Oliver, and the [inaudible] that very first

conference. I had the privilege to write the very first book with Mike Oliver, my very first book, and I was able to continue drawing upon his wisdom throughout my career. His legacy is now central to the way disabled people think about themselves and live their lives. We are empowered people with rights, not medical conditions to deal with. So, thank you, Mike, for everything you've given me and thousands of others. Your legacy is alive and kicking in all of us, and will continue for future generations of disabled people. You will be very much missed. You will be never forgotten. And I'd like to pay tribute to Joy, who is with us today, who allowed us to come here and celebrate our Mike, our man, and to me—maybe not to all of you, but to me—the father of the movement. Thank you.

### **Simone Aspis**

It's from Simone Aspis, Changing Perspectives Director, and People First member. Mike Oliver will be very sadly missed. He is the only disabled academic that really believed in the full emancipation of people with learning difficulties, seeing them as leaders, rather than subjects of other people's research priorities and careers; the only disabled academic that I believe was pushing at the forefront and was prepared to listen to people with learning difficulties that wanted to challenge the elitism in academic research and education institutions. I was inspired to write papers that were published in 'Disability and Society'. I have many fond memories of Mike Oliver as a dedicated member of the Disabled People's Movement. My first encounter was outside Weekend London's TV studios, where we were protesting against Telethon—that saw disabled people [as] nothing more than people who should be pitied for—well before the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation. At the time, I was inspired by Mike's analysis and critique of the impact that capitalism and liberalism has had a negative impact upon disabled people's lives. It came in good timing; whilst completing an A-level Sociology course, whilst understanding what I should be doing in People First's office as the Parliamentary and Campaigns Officer at the time. A very principled academic and disabled person has left a very strong mark on my life. I remember picking up a BCDOP newsletter that contained two important paragraphs; the most important paragraphs, that I have ever read in my life. One on the medical model of disability, and the other on the social model of disability—the lightbulb moment. Those models have been debated for 20 years on 'Have we made a call to what needs to change in today's society?' But we are not only fighting against organisational, attitudinal, and environmental barriers, but also the cultural drivers that inform the oppressive laws, policies, environments, and shape people's attitudes towards us. Mike's commitment to inclusion was second to none, as well. He was one of a handful of BCDOP members and activists, at the time, that attempted to include people with learning difficulties, where there was plenty of resistance. Thanks to Mike, I no longer get accused of banging on the disability rights bandwagon, which happened during an important Rights Now meeting that focused on securing anti-discrimination legislation for disabled people. Thanks to Mike, a father and a brother of the movement, let rip. Simone Aspis, Changing Perspectives.

### **Brian O'Shea**

So I need to start by saying that I feel like an imposter, and I'm going to come clean on... I was going to come clean with two admissions, but I'm going to have to add a third. The first is that it was only about three years after I acquired my spinal cord injury that I even heard of the name of Professor Mike Oliver, and it was only when I had the good fortune of stumbling across a disability equality training programme that was being run by the then just Jane, now Baroness Jane Campbell and our very own Frances Hasler. And that's when Mike rolled over my horizon, as it were, and in the same way as, I think, for everyone else in the room, he's been part of my life ever since. Many times since then, I've often pondered why it took so long to learn of Mike and his achievements, and I've come to the conclusion that in 1994, I actually sustained a double injury, not only did I break my neck, but I also suffered from a serious bout of what I've come to call 'Condition Silo Syndrome', and that meant that I could only see the world through the lens of my own spinal cord injury, and of course that's one of

the many things that sets Mike and his contemporaries apart from mere mortals like me, is that he was able to see beyond the boundaries of his own personal perspective, and despite society trying to divide us up, he was able to see the whole picture. And I think this gathering here today is testament to the truth of that, and the truth of his legacy. And in seeing the whole canvas, Mike and those brave pioneers of those early days that we've heard so much from today, were able to demonstrate how much stronger we are together and arm us with the tools to make a better world for ourselves and for everyone. And the second thing I want to come clean about is that I never actually met Mike. We spoke on the phone and conversed by email, and I also had the privilege of working with a number of Mike's associates and collaborators, including Stephen Bradshaw, Vic Finkelstein, [inaudible], and latterly, Baroness Jane Campbell, to name a few. So I'd like to think that I legitimately fall within his six degrees of separation, even though I never went on a cruise and I was never invited to what I now know are the infamous house parties with burger vans outside selling a cornucopia of all sorts of delights and treats. And the third thing that I feel I need to come clean about is that I can't categorically state that the date that I broke my neck was the best day of my life. I mean, today's not finished, so as far as that's concerned the jury's out. I mean, you never know what might happen between now and the time I retire, so I like to take things a day at a time. For those of you that don't come from the spinal cord injury world, I think it's probably worth putting it in perspective that Mike was a graduate of the Sir Ludwig Guttman school of spinal cord injury rehabilitation. Now, some of you may have seen that advertised in the film 'The Best of Men'. However, I'm reliably informed by both staff and patients who were around at the time that this was something of a rather genteel portrayal of the actuality, and the consensus appears to be that a better characterization of the system can be found in Stanley Kubrick's depiction of Parris Island, which is the American Marine Corps training facility in Stanley Kubrick's film Full Metal Jacket, and the... The Stoke Mandeville story starred Sir Ludwig Guttman in the starring role of the infamous gunnery sergeant, Hartman. And so perhaps unsurprisingly, the paraplegics that emerged from that regime considered themselves to be the SAS of... Well, just the SAS!

And the tetraplegics considered themselves to be the SBS, the special boat service of... Well, the SBS. And that wasn't entirely without justification. They were and remain a physically and mentally tough and incredible bunch of people who are a force to be reckoned with. And few personify this more than the wonderful Mike that we are celebrating here today, and over the 20 years that I've been involved with the Spinal Injuries Association, it's just been becoming increasingly clear to me how large that Mike's shadow looms over the organisation. In the 1970s Mike was one of the members of our original founding committee who, with Baroness Sue Masham, started SIA, and he continued as a trustee into the early 90s. The organisation is fundamentally rooted in Mike's academic work and in particular the social model of disability. But as we've also heard, he instilled in the organisation three core values, and we've often failed spectacularly to live up to Mike's high standards, but those core values were; collaborative working, both within the world of spinal cord injury and beyond the world of spinal cord injury; campaigning and policy; and practical service provision, and actually doing something we've heard so much about today. And those of us who work in policy, in the policy arena, know only too well how... Let's face it, bloody-minded and persistent you have to be to get anything done. I can't add to the breadth and scope of the achievements of Mike that have already been described. And I think that that alone stands testament to the vision and tenacity of the man. But as we've learned today, there was just so much more to him than that. It wasn't... It wasn't just that, he was a human. He also had this uncanny knack for spotting gaps in service provision in my experience, and it was because of this that he was one of the driving forces behind SIA's first foray into the area of service provision, and he along with others [in tune?] were instrumental in establishing SIA as the first specialist provider... provider of specialist care for spinal cord injured people in UK, and Frances can pick up and expand on that. But this always complimented the information and advice service that SIA offered, and it was always fundamentally rooted in Mike's belief that we need to pull people out of the isolation and

the imprisonment that they exist in as a result of their impairment, whether that is institutional or just confined within their families, and one of his last public pronouncements was exactly on that matter; that we mustn't forget that we were the people that pulled ourselves out of the confinement of institutions and the confinement of our families, and the fight is far from over. And the model that they developed in service delivery was so successful that it was eventually taken up by private sector. I'm sure that that galled Mike in many ways, but it was almost inevitable, but it also set the trend for SIA in that we continue to this day, and we provide ourselves... We pride ourselves, sorry, in spotting gaps in provision and filling those gaps until either statutory or private sector of bodies fill those gaps in service provision and need. However, in one respect, I like to think that SIA has remained true to Mike's core mantra and beliefs, and that's that we've always been a service user led organisation with a trustee board of disabled people elected by a membership of disabled people. So I'd like to think that a little bit of Mike's DNA lives on in the Spinal Injuries Association, and long may that last, because if we lose that, then we lose so much. Finally, on a personal note, I feel that the further away I move from the world of spinal cord injury, the more I get to know the real Mike Oliver, and... For example, recently I was at a workshop that was organised by NHS England, and I found myself sitting next to a social worker from the Greater Manchester area, and we got chatting about today, and it turned out that she was one Karen Arnett, who was part of the team that set up their original specialist care agency provision in SIA all those years ago and... And just Mike's reach just goes so far beyond one single sphere of influence. So I'd just like to finish by saying thank you for not falling asleep during my long and tedious secondhand account here, but I... I feel that the various iterations of the phrase, 'standing on the shoulders of giants' is often overused, but I think for all the reasons that we've heard today from people with first-hand experience, as someone with mostly secondhand experience, I can say without a shadow of a doubt that I often very precariously balance my wheels on the shoulder of the particular giant that we are celebrating here today, and thank you for having me.

### **Jonjo Brady**

Okay now? Cool. Thank you for letting me speak. I feel slightly inadequate, to start with, because I suppose... It's just been so lovely to be here and just hear from people that have known Mike for, you know, all of their lives, essentially, and have felt such an impact in their lives, and they've kind of gravitated around, you know, a whole movement that existed before I was even born.

I'm only 27. I apologise my youth. I met Mike in 2017, he, we invited him, our little group of Kent people, to come back to the University of Kent, where, as you know, he did his undergrad here and had a kind of constant periodic connection with throughout his life, and he returned to give a lecture called, 'Bleeding Hearts and Parasite People', where he... Where he delivered a bit of a stinging rebuke of the contemporary disability charities who sought to rewrite the history of the disability movement and feed into the supposed tragicness of disabled people to justify their own existence. I don't think that's a secret, I think that's something that Mike was pretty much vocal about. And then since then he kind of returned for, you know, up to now, really. I mean, he's still here, isn't he, kind of giving us a bit of a fire under our bums, shaping our Disability History Month celebrations in 2017 and 2018, and generally giving us a whole new perspective on what we thought we were doing at Kent. Anyway, I'm babbling a little bit, but I'll start with what I actually wrote, and then I'll return to the kind of direct kind of impact that he made. So, yeah, so they say that you should never really meet your heroes. And for the most part, I think that is an adage that rings rather true; heroes are built for failure. They're built from those inflated poetic fantasies that we devise in our heads, from those powerful moments where we connect with someone's work, and it resonates with our life, our experience, so much that we take a little version of it away with us and carry it around in our pockets. And the reality of meeting these people is always somehow lacking, always slightly not what we expect. But not Mike Oliver. He was the real deal. He was the genuine article. It was everything that I had expected and



hoped for from meeting someone who I felt so intellectually close to, and whose work I had respected and referred back to for such a long time. I think you'll acknowledge our very real experience is kind of fantastical in itself, and it's why I felt, and I think a lot of our little group at Kent felt too, and I still feel, that my time spent with Mike was both incredibly surreal and profoundly magical in the most wonderful of ways. So there's the version of Mike I knew before I met him. I grew up in the 90s and early 2000s—again, I apologise—A time after Mike had already established Disability Studies as a legitimate field of study in the UK, a time that already had legislation devoted to disability discrimination; a development that Mike and a lot of us, obviously, see as actually detrimental to the cause. It's not a debate, I'm not going to talk about that too much. But anyway, the time that kind of already had a kind of disability consciousness already tangled up in the larger social environment, we can kind of debate about whether that is a helpful consciousness or a hindering sort of consciousness, but it's certainly something that I grew up with understanding as far of my, kind of, identity. I already had an internalisation of the social model in my head even before I knew who or how or where it had come from in the way that I related to my immediate surroundings and taking institutions to account or [inaudible] knowing that I lived in a world that hadn't really given any thought or foresight to the people that are there were like me, and how it was set up. I think I can say, and I think that many of us can say that I have in some way, lived in the shadow of Mike's work all of my life. You know, from small acorns came Mike's earliest book, 'Social Work with Disabled People' which I read in my late teens when I was first having my own experience negotiating relationships with social services. You know, it began as a very modest and achievable goal to direct the social model towards practices and professionals, but it became part of this radically transformative moment in the disability movement, you know, philosophically, politically, and culturally, you know, and now it's the foundation upon which most of our advocacy lies. I mean, that's like, insane, you know, and incredible and profound. And then from being this man [who's] so responsible for so many of the sensibilities and environments that I kind of take for granted, being very young, to being a man who not only survived an era very incredibly different from our own, not only lived, and lived well, but a man who shaped the world around him as he went, who carved out spaces for himself around him, to be vocal and proud and indignant, and helped others to do that too. A man who lived at a time with no real disability consciousness to speak of in the way that we kind of talk about it now, but who helped create one. And at times, a man who lived 10 minutes down the road from me for so many years. You know, this mythology that I'd created of a man so profound to my identity and my life kind of went to the same cinema as I did. And, you know, ate at the same takeaway. It's erm, you know...the universe has a funny way of expressing itself, doesn't it? And then there was the version of Mike that I met.... That I knew after meeting him, and he didn't disappoint; he was gentle and humble, but he also had that fire in his eyes, that sturdiness and fierceness from a perhaps forgotten time when being revolutionary didn't seem so naive and thankless. And he had a way of telling stories—even and especially about himself—without any hint of ego or self-grandeur. He had nothing to prove and he knew that. On the other hand, he could really tell a story. He could tell the same story over and over again, and still find a new way to tell it, and still find a new way to draw you in. The film which I had the pleasure of making with him—it's called 'Kicking Down the Doors: From Borstal Boy to University Professor', which you can find on YouTube. It's actually one of the first things that pop up when you Google his name now, and I checked on it last night, it's up to 3696 views. So that's the first version, we a BSL version as well. I don't know, I didn't check on that one last night, but that's on YouTube as well. But if everyone went away tonight and watched it again, we could at least get it up to 4000 I think. Yeah? Don't worry, I'm in it for not even 10 seconds, so it's mainly, it's mainly Mike. But this film ostensibly began as an interview between him and I about his life and work, but honestly I asked him a question and then listened him talk just hours, just for the whole afternoon. Honestly, I think the difficult part was getting him to shut up afterwards!

We took him down the pub after, and he was happy with that, so... No, seriously, every part of the experience was wonderful, every part of my experience with Mike was wonderful,

genuinely. So I think I used the word 'magical' previously with a specific kind of meaning, because Mike, as you know, was a Kent student originally, way back in the 70s, spent his undergraduate years here at a very different university from the one that you're sitting in now. And so having returned to Kent after all these years to lecture, to make this film, to get the lay of the land again and show us how far we've come as a uni in terms of accessibility and disability consciousness, and how far we still need to go, it kind of felt like he was tying up loose ends, making one last final contribution to the institution that helped shape his disability consciousness in the first place. And it did feel kind of magical, like everything had kind of tied up in a little bow, and he'd pass it on to the next generation. And as I say, he certainly did light a few fires under our bums while he was here, certainly mine. I look forward to continuing to keep his legacy alive now and into the future, both at Kent and beyond. I have a few ideas about how we're going to do that. Feel free to come up and talk to me afterwards, talk about that more. Yeah, Mike.

So now to just conclude that, I guess, let's ask whether we should really [n]ever meet our heroes. I think after meeting Mike, I profoundly disagree.

### **Barbara Lisicki**

[inaudible] I met Mike in the 80s when I was a youth worker and I think there was some event on in Greenwich, and Mike was teaching at, I think he was lecturing at Greenwich University. I'm right, aren't I? Yeah, he was at Greenwich, and I met him, and we clicked straight away. And I was reminded by those of you that... We've heard Johnny Crescendo mentioned today, and those of you that know me and know Johnny know that we were together for a while. And I remember introducing Mike to Johnny and saying, 'Oh, you'll like Mike, he's common as muck!' [Laughs]

And given that we both were common as muck, it was all right to say it. So, but it was just somebody else. Somebody else who in, you know, the world of academic study and lots of other things where, you know, the people that spoke out were the people that had felt entitled to. To get some working class people in there, and to actually have a view and have a voice, I think meant something, and it was important. So, yeah, so me and Mike got on straight away, and I really liked him and I really liked his humour and I really liked his irreverence, and our common ground, there was a lot of it, which I think also cemented our friendship. So, we had common ground in our Marxism. We had common ground in our hatred and despising the disability charities and all their lies and their attentions. And Mike was vitriolic, he really hated most of the disability charities, quite rightly, and he'd done all the research to back up his hatred. I just had it in my gut, I just knew I was right. [Laughs] And radical activism; Mike was always a massively huge supporter of DAN, The Disabled People's Direct Action Network. He couldn't always make it on actions, but he always very generously supported us with funds; we always needed money, and Mike always put his hand in his pocket. And, of course, the social model of disability. I learned so much from Mike. And, you know, he just... Every time I passed on my copy of 'Understanding Disability', he'd give me another one. I must have had about 8 copies off him at different times, but he always had a spare hanging around somewhere. And of course, of course, really importantly, there was Leonard Cohen. And we were both obsessed with Leonard Cohen. I used to meet Mike at the Leonard Cohen gigs. I've managed to see Leonard Cohen just about every time he was in the UK, and I kept bumping into Mike at the gigs, and then one time he called me up and he said, 'I've got a spare ticket, do you want to come?' It was the one time I wasn't able to get a ticket. I mean, you know, of course, of course I was there. So that time, we actually sat together through a Leonard concert. And one of my favourite memories of Mike is the speech he made at the Block Telethon demonstration. Again, the organising behind that demonstration was huge and massive, but it paid off, because, if anybody remembers the Telethon, it was a sort of ITV version of Children In Need. It was patronising garbage, and the worst about it was, it's bad enough that it was on television, but it was on television for 27 hours. And so we had to organise a major action against this. And we'd already done smaller actions against Children

In Need, and that was the first time I ever got arrested. And then we decided to do a big one against Block Telethon, and we organised six months in advance. Mike helped massively with that and he spoke. We had a big sound system set up, so we weren't just kind of demonstrating, we were having a party. We took over the street, so anybody that tried to come through, you know, like, I mean, I remember... What's the boxer called, Bruno...thing? Yeah, Frank Bruno. He tried to get through with his [roller?] and he couldn't get through, because we'd just blocked the whole road and we'd set up our sound system and our mics, and Mike was speaking. And this was one of the most important things that I remember him saying. He said, 'With what's going on inside the studio, the only place that you can feel proud to be a disabled person today is right here on this demonstration.' And of course, of course it was, because, you know, it was, it was the charity system and all those events, they were crushing us, they were crushing us. They were misrepresenting us, and they were trying to make us out to be these sad, pathetic, useless fuckers that couldn't do anything. And we were saying, 'No, we're not having it', and you know, Mike was so, so into that, and you know, it was amazing, because everybody on that day, you know, felt the power that Mike expressed. He was a huge DAN supporter, as I said, and for him, he really supported non-violent direct action, and the action he loved—apart from the Block Telethon one that he loved the most—and we talked about it recently, was when, in 1997, after 18 years of fascism; Margaret Thatcher, and then John Major and then just endless Tories, endless Tories—just what it feels like now, really. [Laughs] And so we got, you know, we got a Labour government, and for few minutes we were excited. And then we discovered what Blair was like. But disabled people cottoned on to what Blair was like earlier than anybody else. And when Blair and his government started talking about cuts to disability benefits, we went, 'No, hang on a minute. It's not on, it's not okay.'

when you could get quite close. I think they put the bars up after that. [Laughs] And we all went down like good [crips?] with little takeaway lunchboxes in our laps—that was because obviously we were going to stay there for a while, we needed our lunch. They were actually filled with red paint, and we flung the red paint everywhere, and it was... That was... Mike loved that, he just loved the visual element, the directness, everything about it. And he really wanted to make a film about it. Now, I've tried to follow that up, and I've recently been contacted by a production company who wants to do something, who wants to make a film about DAN, so I'm going to make damn sure that's in it in Mike's honour. And I don't want to hold it up, because I know there's a couple of other speakers, but I just want to finish with a story, As Frances has said, I'm a trainer, and when I went to dinner with Mike, Mike was telling me about all the aggravation... Mike and Joy invited me, and he was telling me about all the aggravation with the local wheelchair service and the local CCG, which is the Clinical Commissioning Group. And he said, 'Will you go and train 'em if I can swing it?' So I said, 'Oh God, yeah, all right then.' And I did it after Mike had died. And I got out of there, I was, they were vile, I mean I could understand every single argument Mike had ever had with them, because they were a nasty bunch of arseholes [Laughs] And I left there that day thinking, 'Goddamn, I really need to speak to Mike! Where is he when I want him?'

And I'm sure all of us have thought that at different times. Because, I'd pulled over by the side of the road... I'd got out of there, I couldn't stay on those premises, but I drove away, I pulled over to the side of the road, and I had the conversation with Mike in my head. So even when he wasn't there, he was still in my head telling me, 'It's all right, Barbara, you must've, you know, there might have been some impact. You'll be all right, just let 'em have it'. And so, you know, he's, he's... Mike is always going to be there. I'm going to carry on having those conversations in my head with him, I think a lot of the rest of us are as well, you know, he's left a huge massive and superb and wonderful legacy, which we won't forget, we will never forget. And thank you Mike, for everything.

## **Mark Harrison**

Um, I just want to say a few words. I never met Mike, but our histories crossed and paths crossed from the 90s, early 90s. At that time I was, working at the University of Nottingham running a thing called the Centre for Social Action, which was applying a social model to youth work, community development, human services, and we were privileged to be asked to do a 10 year evaluation of the Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People with Ken Davis, people know? And we produced this 10 year history, which was groundbreaking. And we had a journal called the 'Social Action Journal', and Mike agreed to edit a special edition on disability based on the social model, which, you know, in the early 90s was incredibly powerful and groundbreaking. My own journey, as I didn't at that point identify as a disabled person... By the mid-90s, my impairment had deteriorated to the point where a member of the disability movement said, 'For God's sake, Mark, when are you actually going to own up and admit you're a disabled person 'and use a stick? Because it's painful watching you trying to be non-disabled.' And I go, 'Oh, all right then.' And I did, and it was a part of my journey and my liberation and, and without Mike, that wouldn't have been possible. So, my work over the last 35 years has been informed by Mike's work, and much of my work in the disability movement has been at grassroots level in disabled people's organisations with Norfolk Coalition of Disabled People and... which became Equal Lives, but also with Greater Manchester Coalition, with their Youth Forum. And I was always, as a, as a youth worker, wanting to bring on the next generation; transfer, develop, help young people understand their place in the world, and transform their lives through the social model and shed that internalised oppression that comes from the medical model. And in Greater Manchester coalition, we were able to do that. But, I think, two things that people haven't spoken about too much was; 1) Mike's application of the social model to research, and actually activating disabled people at every stage of the research process. And we applied that to the youth evaluations we did at Greater Manchester, where we trained the young people to peer evaluate their own work. And at that point, again, the work of Jenny Morris informed that, but it was, it was very powerful. And we did that also in Norfolk, and seeing young people just transforming and becoming confident, empowered human beings because of the social model was really important. Internationally, I was involved at the end of BCODP after it had lost its funding, but we had a very powerful International Committee that fought for the social model in the international disability movement, and the social model transformed lives across the globe. You know, people talk about thousands, I think it's millions. You know, I've worked in deepest Mozambique and deepest Cambodia and disabled people are trained in the social model in South Africa, Cambodia, Peru, and Mike's ideas have been transmitted across the globe, and have inspired the movement across the globe. The other one, which I... Increasingly since 2010 as we got into conflict with Adult Social Care, as they destroyed all the gains of self-directed support and Direct Payments and what-have-you, I loved his description of 'Bastards, ungrateful bastards.' And I think it was in a confrontation he had, probably with the director of Adult Social Care in Greenwich or somewhere. And they were in a room and they as good as said to him, 'You need to be grateful.' And he said, 'No, we're not, we're ungrateful bastards.' And that lives with me, that's on my shoulder when I'm sitting in the room with these bastards, I'm ungrateful, so I think that's another contribution I wanted to talk about. Just about the current situation. They destroyed BCODP by taking away the core funding, they destroyed UK DPC, which came after it. We've... in English DPOs, disabled people in England have reestablished a voice of disabled people in England through Reclaiming Our Futures Alliance—rofa.org.uk. We're currently doing a number of things. We've got a national independent living strategy that we're fighting for and we've got passed at the TUC, and the Labour Party... We're still fighting the Labour Party, because of their national social care thing, which is complete rubbish. So there's a real battle on. So we want people to get involved in this battle. Also, in preparation for the general election, we've written a draft manifesto, and a draft Asks for the First 100 Days of a New Government. We want people to contribute to it, to strengthen it, to improve it, and then get into the fight to make it a reality. The other thing I'm involved in is DPAC. And DPAC has led the fight since 2010 against austerity. The fight over the Independent Living fund we lost, although, you

know, in good DAN tradition, you know we occupied Trafalgar Square and brought London to a standstill, we occupied the grounds of Westminster Abbey, and had machine guns pointed at us in the lobby of the House of Commons when we tried to invade the chamber at Prime Minister's Question Time. We lost that one, but we're going to win Universal Credit. We're going to stop and scrap Universal Credit. So, we want people to get involved through ROFA and through DPAC, because the fight goes on. And, you know, it's not... We're not looking backwards, we're looking forwards, and we need the next generation to come through, and we need the generation in this room, or the generations in this room to still see it as their fight going forward. In whatever way you can play, please take your part in that. Thank you.

### **Richard Rieser**

did cross with Mike a number of times. Quite a few conferences I went to, he got me to be an editor on 'Disability and Society', and we had long discussions at a number of meetings in the early 90s and onwards I, I got involved with a—as a teacher, at that time—with setting up the Alliance for Inclusive Education. It was called the Alliance for Integration, and we relied quite a lot on a paper Mike wrote, probably in those days at Avery Hill in the 80s, where he talked about the old integration and the new integration. What he meant by 'the new integration' was inclusion. And that's what it's known as around the world now, and really thanks to his clarity of thought we were able to take that out into the world. And it was those of us from the UK who fought this really hard at the United Nations and won Article 24 to be about inclusion for all disabled people in the education system from the cradle to the grave. And, of course, we're a long way from that, and economic downturns and polarisations, the growth of the new far-right strong men fascists around the world is not helping. And so, but it's still there, and there are still fragments of it that we got, and Mike was always helpful in discussions around that and how to take it forward. Second thing that involved with... When Labour, for all its faults, was ousted it was clear that the next government—the coalition and then the Tories—were going to be much harsher on disabled people than actually the Labour government had been. And so, it was necessary to actually start reclaiming our history, so really I came up with the idea that we should have a UK Disability History Month and it's 10 years this November since we started that, and Mike, I asked him several times to come and speak at those meetings, but he said, 'I've already retired, I don't speak at things like that anymore.' But I met him at a Leonard Cohen concert...

well, a few of us met him there! And up at the O2, it's all... The disabled people are on one level, so we could all see each other, because that was the only accessible part of the arena. But anyway, he said, 'Well, email me and tell me what it's about.' So we did actually get him to come and speak in 2013 and he really was very powerful in terms of saying that what we needed was not a new paradigm, but we needed to refresh the paradigm, we needed to realise that the big charities were not our friends and that they had actually filled the vacuum that had been made because of the destruction of the disability movement by the refusal of the government to fund us as they should by international law and they refused to do. And then they asked, 'Well, how do we know what you think? Oh I know, we'll put an ad in the paper and the first 250 people who write in, they can be the voice of disabled people!' which is currently what the DWP are doing. So we don't have organised groups of the disabled people's movement anymore giving a view to government. It's this panel of anybody who just said, 'Well, I'll be the person!' rather than something that's democratic and elected and cross-impairment, which is what Mike stood for and what we went on to build very successfully with BCODP, but that was eroded, and we need to recognise that from about 1998 onwards we were in a period of erosion of the movement, and that movement, I think the best testament to Mike, really, for everybody here would be to help to rebuild that movement, because that movement is what we need. That movement is what we need to actually equalise the position of disabled people in this country and around the world. And the last thing I'll say where Mike has influence is at the international level, and I talked to him

a couple of times about the work I was doing with the Commonwealth, where I was the Treasurer of the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum. It never really worked the first time we set it up, but quite curiously, because certain ministers seemed to think... Maybe it's because Penny Mordaunt knew how to sign a bit, but anyway, she wanted to have a global summit where she could show her signing skills. So the Department spent something like £60 million bringing disabled people from around the world to the Olympic Park, and we had the global summit there in 2018, July. It was very managed, so if you as a disabled person wanted to put a question in—which you can do at the UN, you just put your hand up. No, not in Britain under the Tories. It was a panel of DWP and DFE analysts would take your question and change it, and then it would appear and you wouldn't... 'Was that my question? Oh, really?' So it wasn't democratic in any way. Anyway, by the second day, quite a lot of people came up to me and said, 'You know that Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum we used to have? Can't we get it going again?' And so called the meeting, as you do, and about 25 people from about 20 countries came along and said, 'Yeah, we need that. We need to coordinate our countries of 450 million disabled people across the Commonwealth, we can be a real force for pushing things forward'. Believe it or not, I went round the doors of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, DFID and so on, asking, 'Money? Money? Any money to do this?' because bringing people from around the world costs money. And then suddenly, six months later, I got an email, 'If you can put a bid in by next week, we think we've got money for you.' Easiest money I've ever actually managed to bid for, no competitive tendering, straight in. 'Yeah, here's your money.' So we have managed to set something up, and I think Mike would have been proud that we are actually building that on the principles of the disability movement as developed here. One debate we had in New York where we founded it where there were 29 delegates from 29 countries, 'Should we change our name to the in-vogue "Commonwealth Forum for People with Disabilities"?. And people here—I think it was Michele, who was here earlier, was one of the people who was there— said, 'No, we don't want it like that. We have to have it, because it's the barriers beyond us that are what No, you're saying no, but everywhere around the world, they've been told, 'This is what you have to have, because we want to be cuddly and friendly and people-first'.

'disable us, not our impairments. What unites us is the barriers against us, and that's why we have to be known by reclaiming the word "disabled people"'. That vote was put, and it was won by four to one at that international forum. So I see that as a beginning our fight back for the principles that Mike stood for. And I think the best testament we can do, and I'll reiterate your words, is actually the words [Joe Hill?] gave at his funeral, Don't mourn, organise. Thank you.