Torch Trust Sight Loss 101.

In conversation with Jan Turner.

Hello and welcome to this episode of Sight Loss 101 where I have the chance to hear the stories of folk who are experiencing sight loss to help me to understand what it's like to live in their shoes.

Today I have the great pleasure of having Jan Turner with us who's been involved with Torch Trust for many years, which I’m sure we'll hear something about.

So Jan, a big welcome to you and really I supposed to start with I just want to hear when did your sight loss journey begin?

As far as I know it was at birth. I was actually born a triplet although the other two babies, two girls as well, didn't survive; one died hours after birth and the other one lived for six weeks – in those days they thought it was a good idea to put people out on the balcony to get fresh air and we were put out on the balcony and the other girl she caught pneumonia and unfortunately died.

I was only two pound twelve at birth so I was put into an oxygen tent and [there was too much oxygen which caused my blindness.]

Gosh, that's quite a traumatic beginning to your life, Jan.

Yes it was rather but of course my mum and dad knew more about that than me and there is a tale in the family that I was a very bad sleeper and because I didn't sleep very well and had to be fed hourly my dad, who worked for the railways at that time, overslept and lost his job over it.

After that I was very fortunate in that I had excellent parents who let me do as much as I could right from the beginning. I remember playing outside on my scooter and scooting with one foot alongside the wall while I rode my scooter.

I played out with friends and everything and so that was really good for me because it gave me confidence and it gave me confidence in mobility I think.

That's fascinating, Jan.

I wonder as somebody who has had sight loss all their life what would you say to folk, as there are increasing numbers of people who are losing their sight as they get older, what would you say to them, what would your message be to them?

Well I think it's much harder for people who lose their sight in later life but my message would be get all the help you can from wherever you can, and it is possible to remain independent and stay independent so you can learn to do things gradually, you can still go out with assistance, you can learn mobility, so you can live a very normal life.

So Jan, I’ve spoken to a couple of people who are blind and some have absolutely no sight, some have some light perception, do you have any?

No, I have no light perception, nothing at all. I did until I was about nine, I had light perception and then I was running and I crashed into a tree and from that moment it went.

I used to love sport as a child. I went to special school and for me it was a good thing for me to do that because I could do sports and that type of thing whereas when children go to mainstream school as they do nowadays they can't really compete with sighted friends in the way of sport and that sort of thing.

So what sports did you do?

I loved high jump, long jump, running, athletics that sort of thing. I didn't so much like discus, I did try it, I wasn't keen on that sort of thing, but certainly high jump and long jump and running I enjoyed very much.

Fantastic, bless you Jan. As you know I’ve recently become CEO of Torch and as a sighted person myself, although I had a few operations on my eyes and I’ve had glasses since I was very young, I really have no concept from a personal experience of sight loss. What would some of the things that you would want to say to me about a sighted person as I engage with you as somebody who's blind? What do I need to know? What helps you in terms of you knowing that I understand certain things?

If you're walking with me I’d rather you tell me when the steps are up or down, so that we don't trip over them that's one thing.

The most important thing is just treat me as a person and not as a blind person. I expect some of your other interviewees have said that. So because of me being born blind really I’ve developed my personhood as a blind person, so I’m a person first, if you see what I mean, I’m blind second.

An interesting thing is how we define people; some people define people by their job or by what experiences they've had. I mean I’ve had two children so I’m a mum, grown-up children they are but now I’m a grandmother and I’ve got nine grandchildren and one great-grandchild, so that defines me just as much really as my blindness. Also my faith defines me as well as a Christian, you know that's really important to me. I’m a practising Christian as well as saying I’m a Christian, I have Jesus in my life every day.

How did that happen, what was your journey to becoming a Christian?

I actually became a Christian through Torch. I lived in Brighton when Torch was what was called Little Torch in Hurstpierpoint, and my father worked in Crawley as a builder, and after college when I was 19 well I wrote (when I wasn't a Christian) I wrote to Mum and Dad Heath and basically said that I’ve just left college and I’m sure you would want my help, as teenagers do, and I went to Torch to help and I was absolutely amazed by Mum Heath praying before she wrote any letters to people. So I said to her ‘why do you pray before you write the letters?’ And she said ‘well, because I want God's guidance.’ So I said ‘but if you didn't pray you'd write double the amount of letters!’

So anyway, she guided me, along with Dad Heath as well but mainly her, she guided me and I realized that, as I met people who came through Torch’s door, they had something that I didn't have and it was a relationship with Jesus and so when I was 19 I asked Jesus into my life. So that's how I became a Christian and I’ve used Torch services ever since then, and then I’ve worked for Torch as well, so Torch has played quite a key part in my life.

Wow, that's lovely to hear, thank you. And how have you sort of reconciled your faith and your blindness?

I actually believe that we are made in the image of God and that God can use me and does use me as a blind person just as much as he would if I were a sighted person. Because I’ve grown up as a blind person I don't have any resentment about me not having sight because I believe I’m just as valuable to God without sight as with sight. If I had sight it wouldn't make any difference at all but I’m fortunate in that and I do recognize that those people who go blind in later life, it's like a bereavement for them and so they go through all those stages of bereavement. That's normal and one of those might well be anger and resentment which I could quite understand.

Can you articulate something about being a Christian, what difference it has made to your life?

Oh well, it makes a difference to me every single day of my life because of having Jesus with me by my side, living alongside me, living within me, and so that makes a lot of difference in my life and it guides the things that I do in life. I’m fully involved in the local church which I wouldn't be if I weren't a practising Christian. I do say practising Christian because so many people you know if they're asked on a form or in conversation what religion they are they say ‘Christian’ but if they're not practising as a Christian that makes a difference but because I practise as a Christian each day and I know when I do things wrong I can come to the Lord for forgiveness and my relationship with Jesus is growing every day.

I’ve been reading books from Torch for quite a long while and they help me and reading the Bible. I read my Bible on a braille note taker, so I read the Bible and I’ve got an audio Bible as well, so I’m very fortunate in that I do have the Bible available to me and that makes a difference too.

And Jan, just lastly, are there any particular resources, books or anything that have helped you particularly that you'd like to mention that might help other people?

I’ve got a lot out of one of the books, the Rick Warren books, The Purpose-driven Life, I got a lot out of that book but I do find I get a lot out of most, I get something from most of the books that I read and my favourite passage of Scripture is the one in Ephesians that says that God can do more than we can ask or imagine, because, I think you might have perhaps read in on a previous Torch News, at one stage in my life I was a wheelchair user and then God miraculously healed me and that was a key passage of Scripture at that time.

I hadn't Jan, I hadn't heard that story, do you mind just briefly telling us?

Not at all, well I had a bad back, my children were quite young then, my son was five and my daughter was nine, and I worked at Torch in school term time and school hours and I went home with my husband who also worked for Torch, and I bent down and my back sort of clicked. Anyway I spent a lot of time in hospital including having plaster of Paris from my neck down to my hips and then basically I had it off and I couldn't walk so I used a wheelchair. I used to control my wheelchair with my left hand and stick along with my right hand and so I used to do that. I think I’m quite a determined person. I think my enemies might call me stubborn but anyway, and then we were at my friend's house for Christmas and we went to bed, it was Boxing Day, and I was just thinking I wasn't thinking anything particularly I wasn't even praying particularly and then all of a sudden I felt how I used to feel before I used my wheelchair so I got up and I was amazed and I thought, well I mean I could walk a teeny bit with a frame or holding on to furniture but no distance at all, and so I thought well I'll do something I’ve not done for more than 20 years, so I jumped up and down and then I thought to myself I'll do something else, so I bent over and touched my toes and then I could walk so I went and alerted my friend and I told Dennis, so then we went back to bed and the next day it was just the same and I could still walk. And now I go on long walks and I love walking, it's one of my hobbies really, and so that's the story and so even without prayer or I don't really know for what reason but the Lord healed me, which was amazing.

Wow, that's a beautiful story, thank you so much for sharing it. It is amazing isn't it? I once had a thing where actually God healed something with my eyes for a period. I was living in the middle of Africa thousands of miles from an optician and my glasses broke and I just had to carry on and I realized six months later when I got home and my mum at the airport said to me ‘where's your glasses?’ that the Lord had healed my eyes for that time and it lasted a couple of years until I became a student and then I had to start wearing glasses again. So I guess there's no reasoning in some ways is there? We just have to accept these things as a gift when they're given.

Jan, thank you so much, this has been a real joy. I look forward when we can to coming and meeting you and maybe going for a walk together because that's one of my favourite things to do as well.

That would be great.

I’ll look forward to it .

Bless you, Jan. Thank you, thank you very much. God bless, bye-bye.

Bye-bye.

Thank you for joining us in Sight Loss 101.

For more information on Torch call 01858 438260