



Transcript:

People with learning disabilities: Richard's story

Richard Blake: I was always told actually you would never really succeed in doing very much with my life and that was all the way through my childhood.

Narrator: Richard Blake was diagnosed with a learning disability at an early age, but it was in his teenage years that he first realised that he had gay feelings.

Richard Blake: Unfortunately in special schools you never had any sexual relationship training or any sex education, it just didn't happen. So in the time that I was going through it, it was a bit like actually "What are these feelings? What is happening to me? Why do I fancy this person?" and you don't understand the reasons why, because you start thinking is it just a learning difficulty or do I have something else wrong with me as well?

Narrator: Richard might not have known it then, but his experience wasn't unique. In 2005 academics at Bristol University's Nora Fry Research Centre, published ground breaking research into the loves and lives of those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender with learning difficulties.

David Abbott: I think LGBT people with learning disabilities have all of the same kinds of experiences that anybody who's gay faces growing up, disabled or not disabled, feeling like you're the only person in the world, feeling that you're very different, feeling that you can't share that. I think what becomes different as they grow older is that it becomes very difficult to express your sexuality if you have a learning

disability because society in general expects you to be asexual or not to not be interest in sex.

Narrator: Richard still hadn't come out when he went into residential care at age nineteen. But when he started living independently his feelings about telling his care workers changed.

Richard Blake: I wanted to have a relationship and when you live independently, you have what they call Person Centred Review, so you have a monthly review or yearly review. And for about three years all they wanted to talk about was how am I doing with spending? How am ... what am I like with doing my own laundry, cooking and washing? And actually all very important things to talk about, but I wanted to talk about having a relationship. And for every single time it was brought up, it always seems to be "Well we can talk about that a bit later on" but we never actually got to a point of talking about it, it always sort of got swept under a carpet. What I decided to do was to have a review, who were people I wanted to invite, so I could say to them "Look, this is who I am, and this is the support I need."

Narrator: Richard's revelation got a reaction which shocked him.

Richard Blake: The first response was "Oh it's just a phase you're going through." We're not going to do anything at the moment because we think you'll get over it and actually in a couple of month's time you may be thinking differently." Being able to give the confidence, being actually to be able to say this and being told it's a phase, is like one minute you're on a high because you actually you've come out and you're actually telling somebody and the next minute you're almost on the floor thinking "Oh My God! Why did I do that? Why have I just said that? Have I just made the biggest mistake by actually telling somebody this?" It made me feel like it was wrong. It made me feel actually the support I needed and wanted I may not get anymore.

David Abbott: People that we spoke to in our study, when they reflected on their experiences of bullying, discrimination and homophobia, I suppose what was most alarming, or distressing was that it very often came

from very close family members, but also from staff in services where people often got a very clear message that it wasn't okay to be gay.

Narrator: Now aged twenty six and fed up with his sexuality not being taken seriously, Richard finally decided to speak out.

Richard Blake: I got the confidence to actually say to somebody "Look, this is who I am. You're being paid to give me the care that I need and this is part of my care that I need. I need someone for support to be the person who I am."

Narrator: Eventually Richard decided to make a formal complaint.

Richard Blake: My support became the best support you could imagine, so I think if I hadn't done ... hadn't put that complaint in, then the support would never actually have really changed very much.

David Abbott: There's quite clear policy about how people with learning disabilities should be supported in different aspects of their life. There's been two major White Papers and they're quite clear that sexuality and relationships are a topic in which people must proactively be given support. And we found very little evidence of proactive ... certainly proactive work of services thinking "What are we going to do to try and help support people?"

Narrator: Richard had still not come out publicly by age thirty. Then during a trip to London he chanced upon the gay scene.

Richard Blake: It was slightly scary because it actually ... I didn't know this area even existed and for me it was like "Do I turn round and go back into my hotel room and not come out anymore this evening? Or do I actually go somewhere and actually go for a drink?" I just went and found a little corner, went and sat in a corner, had a glass of wine and that was it. I didn't really speak to anybody and actually it's not as bad as people say it is, because social workers and support workers will always look at the risk, they will never look at the enjoyment first of all. So if you say to a support worker "I'm going to go into London and go and hit a couple of gay nightclubs or a couple of gay pubs" the first thing they're going to start thinking of "are you

safe? What's going to happen? All of these things could happen to you. And obviously support workers have a duty to say these things to you, that actually this might happen to you, but I do think sometimes they make it scarier, so people don't try things.

David Abbott: I think what people need is ... and what people said they wanted as their support worker to actually go with them, certainly in the first instance to a gay venue and just help them understand a bit more about "What's going on here? how does it work? What should I do? How should I be?" and to have some support in those first instances.

Richard Blake: I think it's about wrapping people up in cotton wool and I think it's about releasing some of that wrapping up, releasing that person to actually make mistakes, because it's life. You don't go through life without making mistakes.

David Abbott: I think the important assumption to challenges that somehow there are classes of people who are entitled or capable or competent enough to access inner emotions around sex, sexuality and love, and there are others who are not. And, I mean that's the challenge to services to think about and to find individual solutions and individual ways of supporting people to express their needs.

Narrator: Richard is now proud to be out. He's Co-Chair of the National Forum for People with Learning Disabilities who need sexuality training for care workers.

[End of Recording]