

## ORAL HISTORY RECORDING TRANSCRIPT

### 'Fighting for our Rights' project

<b>Surname</b>	Gaff
<b>Given name</b>	Brian
<b>Date of birth</b>	1950
<b>Place of birth</b>	Wandsworth, London
<b>Date of interview</b>	26 May 2017
<b>Length of interview</b>	01:17:04
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<b>Name of interviewers</b>	Uloma Paris, Callistus Dywili, Jen Kavanagh
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Q: This is an oral history interview with Brian Gaff by Uloma Paris on Friday 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2017. Also present are.

CD: Callistus Dywili.

JK: And Jen Kavanagh.

Q: The interview is taking place at Brian's home as part of the Kingston Centre for Independent Living's fighting for our rights project. Please could you state your full name.

A: Well it's Brian Gaff, I haven't got a middle one, I'm--, unfortunately.

Q: What is your date of birth?

A: [REMOVED] 1950.

Q: Where were you born?

A: Well I don't remember that far back but it was somewhere near Wandsworth I should imagine [laughs], that's where my parents were living at the time.

Q: What were your parents' names?

A: They were Muriel and Frank Charles Gaff. I can't remember whether Muriel had a second name or not, if she did she didn't let me know what it was [laughs].

Q: What were their professions?

A: My father was a TV engineer, and my mother was sort of a telephonist secretary, that sort of thing, you know? And, you know, mix and match really.

Q: Where did you go to school?

A: Well I can't remember the school that I first went to because it was in Wandsworth, but here I went to Buckland Road, I think, for about six months, for a year--, till I became eligible for the juniors which was then Moor Lane which is now no longer that of course. And then to the Southborough in secondary education up at the Ace of Spades.

Q: What was it like to be taught at home by your family?

A: Well I mean it wasn't actually--, well my grandmother did an awful lot of the--, looked after me at home, but I mean I didn't get taught at home obviously, I mean I got taught at school, but I mean I learnt to read basically at home, because my grandmother--, I'm not sure I put this in the article or not, used to watch the racing on the television, and used to get me to read the names of the horses 'cause I could see a bit in those days [laughs]. So we used to learn by reading things off the TV screen 'cause she had a very--, I don't know how old you folks are, but do you remember TVs about that size screen [laughs], with a magnifier on the front [laughs]. Black and white [laughs]. So you can imagine what it was like, you know, very small TV, well large TV but very small screen.

JK: So you weren't--, so you were in school full time?

A: Yes, I mean obviously I went--, when I got--, when we moved here from Southfields to the--, you know, from Southfields Wandsworth area to here, then I was at school full time, as normal, I was just a normal person, they didn't discover my visual impairment until I went to the junior school and at that point they didn't know anything about retinitis pigmentosa so they just gave me a pair of glasses so that I could see a little bit better farther away. Because I was--, I'm very short sighted, when I had sight I could--, I was about that distance, I couldn't see distance at all, so I used to tend to sort of not recognise anybody until they're almost on top of me [laughs]. And it's a degenerative illness as you're probably aware, so it's gradually gone in spurts through my life until I've reached the current situation where I've got no detailed vision at all, just a lot of flashing and blobs and occasional shadows. You know?

JK: Sorry, I meant to say at the beginning Brian, the--, because we don't want our voices on the recorder, we're not making any noises, but just to reassure you we are listening to you [laughs].

A: But if you want anything just feel free to prompt, I mean that's all I can say. Are you not editing this afterwards then?

JK: We will be, but the full recording will go into the archive as well.

A: Oh I see, 'cause I was going to say, you know, I sit there with GoldWave quite a lot every day chopping chunks out of stuff that I do [laughs], like erms and arms, and, oh, I don't want to put all that in [laughs].

Q: How did you make the transition from home teaching to school teaching?

A: Well it didn't really notice at the time because obviously the--, you know, they didn't know anything about visual impairment, they just used to say, "Oh he's got bad eyes, sit him in the front of the classroom," so that the general rule from the end of the '50s up until when I left school was if he's--, if he can't see well stick him in the bottom class and stuck him in the front. In other words, they didn't have what we have now, the way things are now isn't it, whereby you've got, you know, you've got people in schools to look after people who've got sight problems but in those days they didn't have those, so you were just left to your own devices really, I mean you could--, if my parents would--, told that they could

have me sent somewhere at boarding school but they didn't want to do that. And so they didn't [laughs], basically.

Q: What age were you when you left school?

A: 16.

Q: What was the first job you had, once you had finished your education?

A: Believe it or not it was when my father worked, I was offered--, at that point, this is going to be quite complicated, at that point what happened was that well they want--, they were looking for apprentices for people to help with the Rediffusion TVs, they wanted obviously in-house engineering and all that sort of thing, so they said to my father, "If he goes to Moorfields and finds out whether his eye condition is degenerative then we'll offer him a job, you know, basic job, but if he's--, if it's going to stable then we'll offer him an apprenticeship." Well as you probably realise by now when I got to Moorfields they told me that it was degenerative and it would get worse through life, although they said at the time that I wouldn't go blind, but of course they weren't to know at that time 'cause it's quite early days, bearing in mind it was 1966. So anyway, that I was offered a job and I did jobs then at Rediffusion which was in Fullers Way South at the time, it doesn't exist anymore, that you would never get a person with a visual impairment doing nowadays due to health and safety I'm sure, working with voltages of up to 15,000 volts and things like that. 'Cause my father taught me well to keep one hand in the pocket, so if you do get a shock off anything you're not going to kill you [laughs], basically. I mean this used to happen around my house 'cause I mean my father used to bring all sorts of gadgets and things home, and I had toys that were made by him, they were probably considered lethal by today's standards, but as long as I kept only one hand on it I, you know, got quite a few shocks but I never really did myself any damage, so no.

Q: Could you tell me more about what caused your disability, how the condition presented firstly?

A: Well it presented really as a lack of--, a--, well I mean I didn't know that I was visually impaired, you never do of course because when you're born that way you don't know any different, so it only came about when I went on a nature trial with the junior school when I first joined there and I couldn't identify the leaves on the trees because I couldn't see the shapes, without actually pulling them off and bringing them right up to my eyes. And at that point they realised that I had inefficient eyes but they never gave it a name until I left school, retinitis pigmentosa being a genetic degeneration, wasn't really known much about in the '60s. I think we've learnt a lot more since, but it's apparently to put it crudely it's a garbage collection problem with the parts of the retina whereby the junk that it normally gets rid of doesn't get rid of, hasn't got rid of by the cells enough and eventually they die. But the trouble is the more that die they trigger their neighbours to die as well so that means that you get a sudden advance of the condition and it might be stable for ages, and then you'll get another sudden advance when another load die, and there's nothing they can do about it, apparently nowadays they can detect it in the womb I'm told, and the next thing will be to try to use a retrovirus to correct the genetic defect before you actually are born, so that you don't get any more degeneration after you're born. But once you've reached the state that I'm in you can't--, there's nothing you can do until they can replace the retina or make it regrow.

JK: What age were you when you first--, when symptoms first appeared?

A: Well it's difficult isn't it because you don't know that you're visually impaired until you compare with other people what they can see and that was really I suppose in sort of junior school age, I can't remember exactly the year but it must have been when I was at the juniors, when they discovered this problem that I couldn't see certain details and but you know, it wasn't really recognised as a degenerative condition until I left school at 16, and all through my schooling they put me into just the bottom class and sat me in the front of the class all the time. But the trouble is I knew an awful lot more than most of the people in there did already anyway from my father as far as electronics and physics and maths and stuff

were concerned. But, you know, you just absorb it when you're young don't you, you don't know you're learning do you, if you're interested? That's the point, so I mean I don't think I suffered, in those days nobody ever went to a university, you know, if you got an apprenticeship you got on a day release course to college or somewhere, but I didn't get any of that, I just went straight into Rediffusion and learnt on the job, which I had several of [laughs] at Rediffusion. It's strange to relate actually that in later on I became known as a quality assurance engineer, when I was probably the least sighted quality assurance engineer in the whole of Surrey probably [laughs], but it didn't make any difference because I'd learnt coping methods and I had plenty of gadgets to help me out at that point anyway.

JK: Sorry, were you receiving any treatments at this point?

A: There's no treatment for it, other than spectacles, you can't treat retinitis pigmentosa, once you've-, once it's there, particularly in those days, there's no treatment for it, it is just a degenerative genetic disease and you have to put up with it, you don't know when it's going to spurt, the general times of it spurting apparently are during puberty, during around midlife, sort of 35 to 45, and then from 50 to 60, which has really been how it's happened for me, that you know, I've had stable vision in between. I've also had a--, some cataract, a cataract removed because apparently the same gene affects the cornea as well, and can give rise to cataracts, but they've only done one because there's no point in doing the other because they know the retina isn't any good, so that was done relatively recently, I mean that was done in year 2000.

Q: What disability services in Kingston did you have access to?

A: Well I never knew anything about disability services until really I had--, left Rediffusion, when Rediffusion made everybody redundant, at that point the local social services and the department, whatever it was called in those days, it wasn't the Work and Pension, it was something before that, they referred me to social services, but they really had nothing to give me at that time, other than just vague, you know, ideas, well, you know, you need magnification and this sort of thing. It's only when I was working at Racal which is--, which came on after Deca that I was--, that I actually started then doing a second job, 'cause we knew the writing was on the wall for a job, and I started doing a bit of computer journalism for various organisations, which I think I put in my list I think. And at that point I needed some help with computers, and because we--, everybody was beginning to use computers, and I needed magnification software and rather than pay the hundreds of pounds that it was, I was introduced to Access to Work, that was in the--, must have been in the early '80s I would imagine. And but because I was being self-employed, because most of the thing was being to do with my self-employment, 'cause once I left Racal I was self-employed, we did try the Job Centre's way of doing things, but they're just not set up for blind people, they--, you know, and most of the employers around wouldn't even give you an interview if you were blind, 'cause remember this was before the Disability Discrimination Act came in. And so they were between a rock and a hard place really, so I decided to go self-employed using my mother as my worker as it were. She'd retired-ish by then, but and that's what we did. I got magnification software off Access to Work and a large CCTV device, as well, and I had that with--, I had a--, the assessment at the RNIB, were at that time I think Great Portland Street or somewhere in a rabbit warren of a place that, gosh, you got in there you couldn't find your way out of again. But anyway, it worked very well, I mean, you know, I couldn't have afford to buy this stuff myself, and I also got onto something called the Enterprise Allowance Scheme which allowed you a several day course at--, and it wasn't Kingston University then, it was called Kingston College wasn't it? And that was very good because it was paid for by the department, and it gave us--, gave you attached relief, plus a lump sum money and free banking for a year. So with Lloyd's, so it helped me out in order to, you know, I--, me and my mother went on this course and learnt all about how to run a business basically, in about three days [laughs]. And I must admit they were very good at teaching blind people, they'd--, they obviously didn't have the sophistication we have now, but they were at pains to make, you know, to help you out personally, each person had a different disability or problem that were there and they were very helpful, something apparently you don't get as well these days, probably because they've cut back on staff I suppose. But generally speaking that served me well up until my mother died in

1993, we used to do computer journalism, we used to go to shows, we used to--, I used to also sell products as well as a mail order service for computers, and that used to work quite well. And as I say I made quite a bit of money at doing that, but when my mother died I found that then going back to the department to try to get someone to help me out with the accounts and all that sort of business, I wasn't getting the help, that by that time, by the early '90s it seemed that the, you know, they'd cut back on all these staff and they just weren't engaging with blind people anymore, and I got a few neighbours to help me out with a few things, but it was dressing me, and my doctor told me that I was getting far too stressed and that I should really give it up, and that's what I eventually did reluctantly. And went onto the benefit, and then went onto in those days it was Incapacity Benefit, and Disability Living Allowance. And you know, I just went on from there, but I took on, at that--, around that time more Talking Newspaper duties because I needed to keep my brain active and also I obviously had to grieve for my mother as well which I hadn't done for several months and that I think was part of the problem. We all grieve in different ways obviously, but and I had to, you know, then get the social services in to help me out because obviously there were things that I didn't know how to do that I'd--, that although my mother used to do them she never actually told me that they needed doing if you see what I mean, as you do [laughs]. So at that point I got involved with the social services more, so that's when I started getting training for mobility, although I'm not as good as I used to be because of the flashing I get now, but when I first started it was very good because I didn't have all this flashing and although I couldn't see anything I could concentrate on walking in straight lines and things like that, whereas nowadays I walk off to the side all the time [laughs] because everything's moving across your eyes all the time, it's very difficult to ignore it, even when your eyes are shut, but anyway what--, carry on, anyway, have I answered that, have I gone off at a tangent?

JK: No, not at all.

Q: No, no.

JK: When did you first encounter Kingston Centre for Independent Living, or...

A: Well it wasn't called that was it, it was called KADP at the time.

JK: Yeah.

A: I can't remember exactly, but I remember that I encounter--, basically we encountered it through people that belonged to that, and belonged to the KAB as well, Cyril Young I think was the guy, he's now--, he's been dead for a few years now but he was on both the KADP committee and ours, and he'd been--, he was blind, he'd been--, he's gone blind, I don't know what with, I think with glaucoma, but he was on your committee and our committee. And as I say we got involved between the two of us gradually more as we went along. And I do think, and always have thought that the big problem with KCIL is the fact that they've got so many disabilities to cover that it, you know, that it--, some things kind of don't always get thought about when they're doing things and I've said this to Robert in the past and various other people including Jane Young when she was around a lot 'cause I used to go to a lot of meetings. 'Cause that's another thing we did of course, we used to meet up on these meetings that the council ran for the joint financing of various so called services, I don't know if you remember that far back do you?

JK: No.

A: It was called--, what was it called, the Joint Commissioning Group. As I say you think all this health and social care join up is new, it's not, it was going on in the '90s just the same, it's just that it--, they've invented a new word for it and set the clock back to zero and started again, and with different people [laughs], that's basically what they've done, that's one reason why I haven't got involved. I said, well we've been here, you should have learnt from your--, what you knew before, why are we going around this word, this all again, you know, 'cause I used to--, I got very critical about this three year pump prime funding, and then, oh no we're not fund--, we don't fund anymore now after this, everybody pulled their horns in and of

course a good service then never got funded by anybody, even though it had been running for three years. So, you know, and I got very dis--, very disillusioned by the way that everybody was guarding their budgets, particularly health, oh we must use it for patient care, while busily spending it all on loads of bloody admin and redecorating and moving stuff about every bloody six months in the hospitals and clinics. You know, I think--, I just felt that the whole thing was a way--, was being wasted, but I'm sure it's much the same now. But there's now even more of it because everybody's in little compartments now, instead of being one health service, it's all like this trust, that trust, that group, this group, you know, it's just a nightmare. Anyway, but as I say that's when I got involved in that and I mean I did--, Phil Levick used to like me on there, because I never used to come--, I never used to use the diplomatic approach shall we say, I used to call a spade a spade, if somebody was--, you know, I said, "Well health never turn up to these meetings, so we might as well vote without them," and things like that [laughs]. Or what was the other thing I used to say, yeah, I said, "Well it's alright you calling it stakeholders and--," what's that term that they use nowadays, inform something isn't it, where they say that's going to inform our policy, well that's rubbish, I said, "Why don't you just say we'll take notice of what you say but we haven't got the money to do it," [laughs]. You know, I mean that there's--, people are not thick, they know when it's bullshit, and but unfortunately the people that used to send to these meetings and were far too polite in my view, I think if they'd have got a few more people like me on there they, you know, people that to get rid of all this corporate speak and gobbledygook that goes on, then you know, maybe something would have come of it but I'd, you know, I was a lone voice and everybody else was quite happy in hiding behind the words, so I thought, well so go on, go on then, do it then, push off.

JK: Have you been involved with many campaigns in Kingston?

A: I was inv--, well I've been involved with a number of campaigns, but I mean the main one really was to get the taxi card scheme made better for blind people, in that I believe getting the private hire people onboard in order to try and reduce costs was a success, we wanted to keep Capital Call if you remember that do you, do you remember Capital Call? I arranged a meeting, when the Crescent Resource Centre was there, with Transport for London, Hackney Passenger Transport who ran Capital Call for the London councils, and that many of the local, what we now call stakeholders, [laughs], which basically people like me and people like who are disabled, and we wanted to get more of the private hire involved. Well we did, but they still axed Capital Call, and I thought we thought the Capital Call would actually--, most cost effective than hiring commercial companies, 'cause the big problem with black cabs is the way they charge, and the fact that the big problem with taxi card is the way it's charged in that they arrange it so it's always two swipes, wherever you go, it's always two swipes, that means that they pocket the rest of the subsidy. So you know, I've been always critical about this system and, you know, if it was done on a budget basis, in other words if you had a budget that you're allowed to spend, then you could decide if you wanted to blow it all on one trip a year down to the coast that was up to you. You'd then have to go and spend the rest of the time finding it yourself, but the way it is at the moment you're stuck with 104 trips, but I mean, you know, I tried to get this through to people but the trouble is it appears that London councils and Transport for London have some kind of vested interest in black cabs, which I would imagine it--, today is perhaps a little bit lower, but--, and they wanted to promote the black cabs out this way. And so when black cabs assumedly got more of them out this way, they tried to remove the private hire option. Now we out here on the other side of the A3 were being discriminated against because nobody wanted to come across the A3 at one or two points, it always meant going out of your way so in other words it cost you more in a black cab because you couldn't just go straight there anymore, you had to go via the two crossings. And so we got the rights up here, who live up here to use taxi card via nominated private hire firms by ringing them directly and we still do have that, but it's degenerated a bit because most of the cab companies that we did it with have now been amalgamated into other companies and have either lost the franchise to do it, or else they're about as useful as a chocolate fireguard 'cause you get some Herbert driving the cab who can't string three words of English together and can't even read the word superfish over a restaurant. And that's not very much help to a blind person trying to get where they're going really. So you know, it needs somebody to sit down and sort this out again, we've just had a consultation haven't we about the replacement of taxi card at the end of this year with something else and I've put my few penneth, and the

KABs few penneth have been put in, much the same vein as ours, but whether anything will happen I don't really know. But as I say I got involved in a lot of local things, I mean there were things like when they moved crossings they didn't move the tactile straightaway, but you know, I mean they just leave it where it was and then blind people would come along and try to cross where there wasn't a crossing and they didn't get it, the council just didn't get it, oh we haven't got the money to move the pavement at the moment. You know, so seems to me that Transport for London moved the crossing, they should be paying for moving that pavement, you know, moving that tactile, I mean after all it's part of the crossing, but you know, it just-, those are the sort of things that I used to get on about. But it wound me up so much big time I had to eventually come out 'cause you've got the feeling that every few months you and a few friends were pushing at the council, they'd then change all the staff, move them all around, and you start from square one again, so you know, "Oh and what were you talking to Mr so and so about?" I said, "Well surely you must have kept notes?" "No no, I don't know anything about it, sorry," and you think, oh, well if that's the way you are then I'll wait till someone gets knocked over or flattened and then you'll do something about it won't you? And let's just hope it's not me [laughs]. That's my cynic at work, that's how I feel now unfortunately, because I feel that the council have missed the boat big time, they should have been recording best practice when it came their way and built things as that when they built things, instead of having that joke thing that they built in Tolworth and the joke mess they've made of New Malden High Street and the bloody Portsmouth Road, and this stupidity that they're going to do in front of Kingston Railway Station, that's going to cause no end of havoc for people who are pedestrians, never mind whether they can see or not. You know, so you know, so be it, let them all get on with it, I'll stay at home, I'll do my shopping by the internet, and I pretend not to be here anymore, because that's the way things are going, meantime they're going to demolish all of Kingston so it won't matter anyway.

JK: When you're involved with these campaigns are you doing that individually or are you going...

A: Well basically what tends to happen, we don't do it through the KAB because they've not got a very good reputation, what we try to do is form a little group, so it would be, I mean it would be like Eye Contact in their earlier days did quite a lot of this which is a group that Jennifer Carpenter, I'm sure you know about?

JK: Yes.

A: And I formed, many years ago now, we've passed it onto others, I mean I still go to it but the problem is that every one of us that was active in that have now aged quite a lot, and we want youngsters to take it on, you know, more--, I mean, you know, I mean I was sort of 50-ish at the time, so I wanted some more people that are 40s, 50s, I mean I was hoping that's what the Eye Parliament was going to be, but I--, you know, I mean I know that everybody's trying, but I get the feeling that they're getting the same run around as I'm getting--, I used to get with the council and everybody else. I mean look at that green line that's supposed to be being painted from the Royal Eye Unit to the nearest railway station and bus stops, you know, nobody can agree what the hell is going to be doing--, who's going to be doing it, and that's our bit, we won't allow anybody to paint on our bit, and oh, [sighs] you just get the feeling. I mean they've done it--, if they can do it from Moorfields, in London, in the middle of London for Christ sake they can do it anywhere else. But there you go, you know, there's too many people involved who don't get it, what needs to be done, one of my real passionate things that I can't really do myself on my own in this borough, in fact in the whole country is when I was young, disabled people were going to schools and I mean when I say disabled I'm talking about blind people, and they were going to schools and they would teach schoolchildren about things, about blind people. But because they've managed to reduce blindness in children I get the feeling that they've decided that blindness has now been fixed and they don't need to do it anymore, whereas in fact we've now got older people that are blind that are even less firm than the youngsters that were blind before. And we don't--, I mean the number of times I get this, "You don't look blind Brian," I said, "Well I don't look blind in my own home, and I don't look blind if I'm standing there in a picture, but if you beam me down in the middle of Kingston I wouldn't know where the hell I was," and you know, that this is the problem that you get, that no--, you know, when you're asking somebody for help,

[laughs], it's still annoying to say, well if you just go over there, [laughs], or and all this business, that you still get it. Or the other one that you find is that you go into a shop and ask for assistance, and they go, follow me, and they've gone [laughs]. And you think, where do these people get their disability training, yet Marks & Spencer's all claim they've been disability trained but what have they been trained in then, been pushing people in wheelchairs or what? I mean I don't know, it just--, they obviously haven't been trained in how to guide blind people, or how to interact with blind, in fact in one place, I haven't been back there for since, I--, every time I went into Sainsbury's, not the one in Surbiton but the old one that used to be in Kingston, they used to give me the deaf girl to interact, so that--, you can imagine that would have been a good comedy act, if you'd have actually put a microphone on that, it would have been hilarious, because I didn't know that she couldn't hear me and she didn't know that I couldn't see her and it was like [laughs] hilarious really, except that I wanted my shopping, you know? But, you know, that's the sort of things that--, these are the things that wind me up big time, but unfortunately there is so many of them now that wind me up big time that I can't cope with all of them, I mean I'm fighting a rear guard action with the NHS as it is, trying to--, I mean they didn't book my transport for next week, even though they booked the transport for a week after that, even though they're both appointments are booked at the same time but they're two different departments, they didn't talk to each other, even though I've been to both before and had transport before. You know, and the only reason I know is because I rang them up, but you know, I'm not supposed to have to do that, they're supposed to do that themselves, you know, sort themselves out for Christ's sake, anyway.

Q: When did you first hear about the Talking Newspaper?

A: Well I knew about Talking Newspapers from quite a young age because I had a blind uncle who lived in Leeds, and when I could see what I used to do, probably highly illegally, does anybody remember a series called *The Rockford Files* on TV with--, probably before all your times, probably around 1960s, 1970s time, what used to happen was is that I used to do the audio description on a cassette tape 'cause he couldn't see at all, he was blind with glaucoma. I used to--, 'cause we were the first, me and my mother were the first people into the market with video recorders, so what we used to do, we used to watch *The Rockford Files* and I used to make some little notes 'cause I could see a bit in those days and I used to audio describe them, mix them with the sound from the thing and then send them up to him on audio tapes. You see, so I'd--, I knew because he got local Talking Newspaper from Leeds, so when, you know, when things sort of came to a head down here I got involved down here, mainly because obviously it trickled through to my thing that the Talking Newspaper was rubbish around here. I mean the lady and gentleman, were they called the Hancock's that ran it, and I tried to get hold of it via the social services, you know, the social services obviously told me about it, and when I got a copy of it we had all these ladies that sounded like they were about 92 all talking in a room that sounded like somebody's bathroom with somebody mowing their grass outside. And they're going [makes shaky voice impression], "And now I want to read you a little item from--," you know, like this you see, and it got worse because the guy, Mr Hancock died, and it was left to his wife who was I think already in, what we would now call in the early stages of dementia and I think she did her valiant best but she had these copiers that were made, well goodness knows when they were made, about 1962 probably, made by an American company. And they were--, they'd never been serviced I don't think ever and the copies that we used to get, they didn't erase them properly so you could hear last week's coming through and then you could hear, you know, the speed going up and down all the way through as these things were suffering 'cause the belts were slipping and [laughs], you know, it was knackered basically. So I got--, when they decided that they'd have to pension her off nobody wanted to run the Talking Newspaper, and of course Jennifer was on that committee at the time, of course volunteered me [laughs], as she does quite often with these sort of things. And I got on the committee there and we both--, in fact she became vice chair for one part of the time, of the KAB, and got a lot of things sorted out, but she suffered from bad health recently. But anyway, the thing is that once I got onto the committee I was the only one there that knew anything about Talking Newspapers, none of the other people there know anything and could run one. I mean our biggest problem at the moment is we haven't got any technical volunteers, I mean we've gone digital and we've only got three producers and none of them are really technical, I'm the only technical one and I have a problem because I use computers in a

sightless way and I can't tell them how to click the mouse to make something do something that they want to do, because I can't do it, I don't do it that way, I do it via the keyboard. And they won't learn via the keyboard, oh no no, I use a mouse, I don't use--, I put the keyboard under a box, you know, that sort of attitude, I use a mouse and click everything. So what I really need at the moment is a volunteer digital translator [laughs], you know, to translate what I do into what they do. Because otherwise I can see we've lost one producer recently, we really need another two more really to help us out who are a bit more technically proficient, because most of our people, I imagine this happens with all volunteers, are getting older and the young ones are not coming in, you know, you don't know how to talk to try to recruit younger people do you? Is it Rotary, is it University of the Third Age, well they're old to start off with, you know, who do you go to, I don't know 'cause I'm not, you know, I'm not au fait with what's around. But you know, I was hoping that somebody at the KAB might know, but nobody seems to. Anyway, I don't want to dwell on that for a moment, so what else do you want to know, go on?

Q: Can you explain what the Talking Newspaper is and how it's actually worked?

A: Well I'll tell you what--, how it works now, right, basically what happens is that I sit here all week gathering stuff for email and audio, that sound like they're very--, they could be useful for blind people, so they might be national or they might be local events or whatever. Sometimes it's just stuff from the council like we want to consult with blind people or whatever, but anyway, I do that, then on the Friday supposedly the *Surrey Comet* comes out and the guys--, the--, at the studio record it, and shove it into a pouch once they've done all the copies, 'cause on ram sticks we do them, and if I'd have known, you know, that you would be asking this question I'd have kept one back for you but you know what a ram stick's like don't you?

JK: Hmm.

A: Oh alright, better go.

JK: Of course. [Break in recording]. Okay.

A: The KAB give a--, if they give away these players which will play a ram stick you see, when I say give away, obviously permanent loan, nothing happens of course when you switch it on until you plug a stick in, now I don't know what's going to happen here because this is one of my sticks, could be anything on here. [Plays audio]. That's an automatic voice, but that I put--, you get this from [inaudible 00:39:19] at the council. [Plays audio]. This is the voting bit. [Plays audio]. And we do also put In Touch on which is from the BBC. [Plays audio]. These are extras that we put on the stick 'cause we've got a lot of room here you see. [Plays audio]. Then there's--which we put two on, from the RNIB. [Plays audio]. You can [inaudible 00:39:58] it just like a CD player, you know? [Plays audio]. This is a newsletter for--, just told you what it is hasn't he [laughs]? We get that read at the studio, I do the engineering on this one and it's all on various news and stuff. [Plays audio]. She had a cold at the time. [Plays audio]. And then got [inaudible 00:40:48] phone numbers. [Plays audio]. This is something I put on this week as an extra. [Plays audio]. That's about preparing set-top boxes that bit. [Plays audio]. We put a lot of bits on from that. [Plays audio]. Sorry about that, that's an instruction bit that I keep on there. [Plays audio]. Give this to everybody that gets one of these see. [Plays audio]. This is my bit for this week, this bit. [Plays audio]. Put that bit on from Info Sound, I think we've got the full circle, but you get the gist of how the thing works don't you?

JK: Yeah.

A: You've got normal--, that there, that button there is called folders so in other words what we do is we put the extras in folders, so that they can skip directly to another folder, whereas these are just like controls on a CD player, you can go backwards and forwards in the track you're on, you know, or go backwards and forwards between tracks, it's battery--, it's rechargeable batteries so you get a mains unit with it, a bit like your one here, you know, and those are the sticks we use. I mean obviously we have a tag

on them which says [KTN? 00:43:08], a great big tag on the end of there and it's a little sticky dot on there to tell them which is the front 'cause you can't put them in backwards, but some people if they won't go in they'll take a mallet to it and, you know, we get a player back with no socket left, you know, so yeah, it's--, but that's how they work. But as I say that's how it works, but I mean if you want to hear a bit I can show you at the--, I can play a bit to you at the end if you like.

JK: Okay, thank you, how often do you produce it?

A: It's weekly but--, it's weekly out this way, I mean it's weekly online as well, but we don't put all the extras online because of copyright issues, the fact of the matter is we're allowed to put them on here by the rights of what--, of the people that produce them, but they're already online from those people themselves, so we don't want to duplicate what they do either, so obviously we only put our Talking Newspaper items on the talk--, online. We've got a podcast and we've got a sort of an online player, and it--, you know, it works quite well, and I know that Mir--, do you know Miriam Osborne who works for the social services in sensory impairment team?

JK: No.

A: Well she listens to it on her iPhone and I know because although she gets copies of these, she gets two a week, 'cause obviously when she--, she's got one of these that she can take around to clients, so when she visits someone she demonstrates it to them you see and then obviously then she rings me up or emails me and the office and so and so wants to try the Talking Newspaper, then of course when our people ring up they say, "Oh that's not what I said," [laughs], you know what people are like don't you, they can be very cantankerous at times, they'll say whatever they think the original person wanted them to say. So you have some--, if Miriam says, you know, "Would you like the Talking Newspaper, all this local news?" and, "Oh yeah, that'd be great," and of course when you ring them up they--, "Well, you know, I've got a lot to do," you know, you get this, so I have to now wait until it's a cut and dry deal before I actually start sending them out, otherwise we end up in a terrible mess with pouches that have disappeared into the ether, players that are with people that they have never used in their lives, you know, and we've already lost quite a few. We bought 100 and something odd of these, I think we've got about five left in the studio, down at the office, and yet we've only got 78 or 79 people actively listening, so some of the people have obviously just vanished and taken them with them [laughs]. I mean we've got a big sticker on the bottom, but they probably say, "Oh I'm blind, I can't read that," doesn't really matter, they're about 32 quid a throw, so it's not a horrendous amount, but of course, you know, it's obviously if you started getting a huge number of people wanting them, you know? I mean I think what the RNIB would like everybody to do is get online and listen online to everything, but sadly that isn't the way things are going with a lot of the people that I talk to, the, you know, that they may go to these online today things, and pay some heed to it, play about with the iPhone and the Android, 'cause, you know, we've been running courses at the KAB office for some time with Davendra Kumar at the--, from the RNIB. They come along, they have a play and you never hear from them again 'cause they've already consigned it to the bin of too much agro by then. You know, I mean I don't do Facebook and Twitter, I mean I haven't got the time to faff about with all that, and Instagram and I mean I haven't got a smartphone, I've got a dumb phone [all laugh].

Q: So how many people access the newspaper?

A: Well at the moment officially it's about 88 but we have an active load of about 78 or so, so usually about ten stragglers, they're people that either haven't sent it back for a while or send one back every month, or get thoroughly confused and send them back before they've listening to them and, you know, you're always going to get a few. But I mean we used to have over 100 on the system, but I think more than anything else it's an elderly person's medium because most of the youngsters who are blind are actually using online resources because they've never known any different, they actually have to put up though with artificial voices and a lot of the people we speak to they're more older people actually like a human voice to listen to. So although a lot of this stuff, the information is on with a synthetic voice, all of

the news, the actual news is read on by humans, we've got a team of about 20 or 30 readers that the producer will either engage two or three of them a week to come in and read with him on the Friday. We do some reading on the Thursday as well, but they're--, I mean do you want to listen to a bit of it or?

JK: Yeah, maybe at the end that would be great.

A: Hmmm.

JK: Do you know how many people are accessing it online, do you have any figures?

A: I haven't got any figures, no, but I mean I do get people writing to me about that. I mean I think some people seem to do both, but there are some people that if they're away they have--, they can manage with a bit of help, to get it on their smartphone and just listen to the basic news, but for people that want to listen to the whole thing, like all the extras and everything, they obviously have got the player and they can listen on the players, so I do know that at least ten people of ours that listen online, some of the time, but they also have got the player, or they've bought themselves a different player, there's a smaller version of this now available that's also got Bluetooth in it so they can actually play their iPhone through it as well. Although I've never played with Bluetooth, I wouldn't like to say about that, but I mean, you know, I'm not anti-technology, but I do think that a lot of people assume that just because someone uses email that they use everything else as well, and you know, it's very difficult for a lot of people, like even Jennifer Carpenter for instance doesn't do the web, she's only interested in email and whatever she can get via her iPhone, that's--, that her son can set up for her. So in other words she doesn't--, she says, "I've got--, there's not enough hours in the day," she says, "to do things I want to do and then try to sit down and learn all this stuff to be able to use it," because most of the tutorial material is actually for sighties anyway as she puts it, not for blindies, so therefore you've got to learn all the keyboard commands and if you want to enter stuff into your iPhone and you're not very good at, adept at using the on screen keyboard, you can't see it, you've then got to buy yourself a Bluetooth keyboard and then you've got to work out how to pair your Bluetooth keyboard to your iPhone and, you know, one thing leads to another, by the time you've finished you've almost got a backpack full of stuff carrying around with you for various things to do with keeping in touch. And, you know, she--, I think all she actually wants to take really with her is a phone that makes phone calls really, you know, and I think that an awful lot of people are beginning to think that way. And I think one of the big problems that I have at the moment with people like the royal borough and health and all these people, they all assume that when they're going to do a consultation all they've got to do is stick it on a website, tell one person and it'll just happen by magic, but of course it doesn't, because most of the time people--, even I, who has spent quite a lot of time online don't know it's there. It's rather like did you ever read the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*?

JK: Hmmm.

A: You know the old thing about well I don't know why you didn't know we're going to demolish the earth because it's been on display now for century, for 100 years, do you remember that bit?

JK: Hmmm [laughs].

A: Well that's exactly like it's getting now with people running consultations, well it's been online for about six weeks, didn't you know? We spent--, it's on our Facebook and Twitter feed, you know? Oh is it? Yeah, good [laughs]. You know, they don't realise that the average person who they ought to be consulting with probably hasn't got the time, the wherewithal or even, or they even thought to actually look there, they'd much rather it actually was told to them by somebody either on the Talking Newspaper or a large print leaflet or, you know, wherever, around the shops or somewhere where they could see it on the noticeboard. Not stick it on Facebook and forget about it forevermore. One always gets the impression they don't really want the people that really are going to cause the complaints to actually know about it [laughs], in other words, you know, won't consider those elderly people, they'll all be dead in a few years

[laughs]. That's the attitude that a lot of people think to tell me about, they--, you know, they'll go in, they'll suddenly get--, I mean here's one, right, ask Jennifer Carpenter what happened when she went into John Lewis to buy some underwear, if you're--, I gather--, she said to me, "Went in there, do my usual thing, hardly any stock," "Oh no no no, we don't keep it all here anymore now you have to do click and collect," [all laugh], so how do you try underwear on online then, is this some new gadget for the iPhone that I'm unaware of then or what? I mean, you know, there are some things you can buy online but I would have thought that shoes and that's one she commented about, the shoes aren't there either, you have to--, you know, that they don't have the stock, it's all click and collect, so presumably there's loads of people returning every other week going back, oh no these don't fit, these don't fit, it doesn't seem very efficient to my way of thinking.

JK: No.

A: It's just a way, somebody hasn't thought it through somewhere, no, I can't see that it is working very well.

Q: You talked to us about is Talking Newspaper, but can you talk me through the roles you have had at the newspaper?

A: Well basically my role has been coordinator, at when I first started I was just a provider of the items of interest, but now I seem to have been slightly talked into doing the rota for the producers, for three months, and also trying to reword all this stuff that comes through, 'cause bearing in mind that I used to write articles for the computer magazines back in the '80s so I used--, you get used to redoing things, because there's so much of the stuff that we get is written as if you're reading it yourself, you have to change it so that you can read it out loud. For instance, Sophie Camera's just done a shortened minutes for the VI parliament meeting, you couldn't possibly read that on as it was because it's blah blah blah, action AG, blah blah blah, action CS, blah blah blah, you know what I mean, you can't do that, you can't do that 'cause you don't know who the hell CS and AG are there. So you have to kind of longhand it a bit, make it more approachable and at least explain what the, who the abbreviations refer to, and do things like that, so I had to do that this week when she sent it to me because wasn't many people at that meeting this time because we were all somewhere else, actually, and you know, so consequently I put that out on the Talking Newspaper, tried to keep it as short as possible and give her as the contact. But so you get that sort of problem, you also get the--, you also get long long huge press preleases from Kingston, of which about a third or less is actually worth putting on, and you then have to chase the Royal Borough of Kingston to actually give you a phone number to actually, instead of a website address, because you--, some of these website addresses how would you read that onto a Talking Newspaper, and be able to copy it off, even if you had a computer, you couldn't. So we always say, for goodness sake, give me a phone contact, because it works, it's worth a million blooming website addresses. I did start at one point, going to Tiny URL and shortening all the addresses for them, I thought why am I doing this, they're getting paid for this job, not me [laughs], why can't they do this themselves, but they never do of course, it goes for about three weeks and then we're back as we were, www http, blah blah blah blah blah, forward slash, forward slash, dash, hyphen, underscore, question mark, 29496789 hyphen, you know, and it goes on. And you think, for goodness sake, if you're sending it to a Talking Newspaper send it in a form that somebody can understand, but they don't take any notice because they just put you on their mailing list and they send it to everybody that they send it to isn't it and that's all they do. And I have to sort of chump out great big chunks of this stuff to get it readable, because otherwise it's just impossible to put it on the Talking Newspaper without everybody going to sleep.

JK: How long have you been doing the coordinator role for?

A: I would say since about 2000-ish, I mean I've sort of fallen into it gradually really, I mean I--, because nobody else wants the poisoned chalice I suspect, I mean we've had lots--, had help from people, I mean, but they're only short-lived help, I mean we get items sent to us, I mean for instance Sheila Austin

sends us quite a lot of stuff because obviously her husband is a councillor and has been the mayor, he's in hospital at the moment I think. But, you know, we've got other people who are councillors who have given us information, for instance, what's her name, oh I have trouble with names, always have had trouble with names. Anyway, there's at least three people that read for us that are also councillors. So we do that, and as I say we--, we try to sort of, you know, mix things up, but the biggest problem is really getting stuff in a way, in a timely manner, you often get--, we're a consulting and the meetings next week and they'll tell you this, Friday afternoon when you've done the Talking Newspaper, when it won't be done again until the following Friday when it's already passed [laughs].

JK: Right, okay.

A: I'm sure you've come across this problem before, elsewhere. The stupidity of leaving things to the last minute to tell anybody, and then wondering why nobody turns up [laughs]. You know, I mean I--, that you can't tell these people because in six months' time they'll be all new people doing the job anyway and they won't have heard what happened before, as I said before, but anyway, what else do you want to know?

CD: I just wanted to quickly find out, so who funds the Talking Newspaper?

A: It's funded by the Kingston-Upon-Thames Association for the Blind, but a lot of our money comes from the Greater London Fund for the Blind and they're the people who run the Geranium shops, the Geranium, you know, charity shops, which I don't think there's one in--, I think there's one in, is it Raynes Park or somewhere like that, I can't remember, there's one fairly near. But they're like, they're on the range of--, they're a big charity, they run a lot of the ones around here, they mainly fund things like the tandem scheme which we're trying to get up and running again at the moment because unfortunately we lost all our front riders and I think Roy Smith who I'm sure you probably know as well do you?

JK: Hmmm hmm.

A: Is trying to get the riders trained and there's a lot more health and safety has to go into it now than when we first started it because, you know, everything's on helmets and riders are--, they call themselves pilots now [laughs], instead of front riders, but anyway, we've got three tandems, but we've got to get--, the trouble is everybody comes at say the AGM, "What's happening on our tandems?" they'll go, I don't go on this because I'm too scared, but anyway, "What's happening on our tandems," then when we finally get them up and running, they put an appeal out saying, "Who wants to ride on the back of a tandem?" and everybody suddenly goes quiet, so you've done all this work, you've got all these people trained up and nobody wants to ride with them, so I don't know quite what you do about something like that, but you know, it's the old old thing isn't it, you know, everybody's criticising you waste, apparently wasting money or not using your money. As soon as you use your money on something that people ask about they then don't want to do it, we've--, I mean we've got lots of clubs running, I think ten pin bowling is the latest one that's going well, and I mean this is the KAB I'm talking about now, I'm putting their hat on. There's a lunch club every month, there are two blind clubs, plus Eye Contact, there's something called Socialise for people who are finding it hard to socialise after losing their sight, that's going on as well. I'm trying to think what else there is. There's some sort of unofficial ones that do lunches like every Sunday afternoon, or Friday evenings, that if they want some money from us we give them grants, like if they need transport because people can't get there and I mean we use RAKAT so we get our, you know, if we go on a trip to say Eye Contact we get obviously RAKAT paid by the KAB, obviously to take us, we've been down to the coast several times in fact, on RAKAT, although it's a bit uncomfortable on RAKAT buses, you can imagine. I don't know if you've ever been in those have you?

JK: No [laughs].

A: They're a bit like school buses really, a bit narrow, you know? But they're okay, I mean for when you consider that we used to spend oodles of money on coaches, like Epsom Coaches and that their coaches are normally almost knackered anyway, you know, with dents in the seats, so these are actually a bit more luxurious than they were, just they don't have the flashy air conditioning with curtain at the windows that they used to have, you know, and they're cheaper as well [laughs]. But anyway, you know, so there's lots of things that they fund, I mean they fund grants for people that want gadgets and things, iPhone's for people that are--, people at a college or going to university that want special appliances and even people who want new cookers that are VI friendly and that sort of thing we've done. You know, I mean the talking microwaves is another one, or CCTVs to help them read their post and we do eye buddies for volunteers, to help people read their mail or help them go out places, I mean I can do with an eye buddy, I used to have one, but I now hire my own PA of course, so maybe I'm considered to be too wealthy now you see, that's what it is. But as soon as the DLA changes into PIP they'll probably take all my money away so I'll probably be back in need of an eye buddy then [laughs]. They haven't done that to me yet, you know about that don't you?

JK: Yeah.

A: I mean the idiots are actually those people that you go and see, you know, when they have a face-to-face, I say--, the thing is, never never never never never have them to your own home, people tell me, because they always evaluate you better in your own home 'cause you know your way around, if you go somewhere else and you bump into everything and particularly if you go on your own, then you're more likely to get the money apparently, and also filling in the form we've got a lady in the office that can fill in the forms very well and normally gets everybody the visual impairment, the right amount, because she has to--, because people do it on their own you see with their friends, they don't want to admit they've got a disability do they, so it's like, well I can usually manage that, or I can generally can do that, but that's not what they're asking, they're asking in the--, you know, if you had to do this could you do it every time? And people don't answer that question, and that's why they often get marked down apparently, that's what Kerry at our office says anyway. We've got three paid employees, they're all part time, we're looking for a fourth at the moment, you know, that administer all the clubs and do all that stuff and try to help people with transport and help people with queries and look things up online, order stuff for them online when there's no other way of getting stuff and all that kind of business, you know, so it's quite a busy time. I mean people say what do they do in the office, you know, I get--, it annoys me when people say, "What do you do, there's never anybody there when I ring up," I said, "That's probably because they're all out visiting somebody because somebody's got a crisis, that's why, they can't be there all--, can't be everywhere all the time," they've got mobiles but they don't want people ringing every five minutes on their mobile do they when they're trying to do stuff 'cause they'd never get anything done. But you know, that's the way it is. I mean myself, I don't go out very much on my own, I've always been a bit of a loner, so this thing is--, the time anyway. Yes, I shall have to get busy soon, if I'm going to go to Phil's, it's at five isn't it, so I shall have to get busy ringing up taxi card if I'm going to go down there.

JK: We haven't got many more questions.

A: Go on then.

Q: What has been your proudest achievement in your time at the Talking Newspaper?

A: [Laughs]. Well I think really between me and Jennifer is actually getting the eye buddies and the actual KAB out of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century into the 20<sup>th</sup> at least, because the KAB when we first joined it didn't--, the joke was is that they were just a glorified building society [laughs], in other words they had loads of money and they sat on it and occasionally they gave away the odd grant, you know, if somebody touched their forelock in the right manner. But what we did is we shook them up and we got somebody in who could actually hire--, get volunteers and recruit people, we actually got a paid--, one paid employee in there and I think although it's been a slow slog since then, because a lot of the people in that job, and I think, I'm

not being critical of the people generally, what happens is that when people get older, like me [laughs], they get stuck in their ways and they don't take chances that perhaps the youngsters of us would and that's why I think charities really need younger people in their committees and I don't really know how to do that, that is probably a problem that every charity, small charity particularly has got isn't it? You've got people who've been there for years, who have got in a rut and they've run out of ideas of how to innovate they don't really know what to do next, and you know, we--, I'm a bit critical at the moment of the Greater London Fund because they've wanted me to stand for chair so I could shake the Greater London Fund up, I says, "That's always been my role in life isn't it, I'm the one that fires everybody else's bullets while you all hide behind the edge, I'm not going to do it anymore, I've done it all my life, I don't want to do it anymore. I'm quite happy to fight the small battles but I don't want to get involved in being the chair of the KAB because I'd need so much help, you know, to do it, because of the sight problems that I'd feel that I wasn't really doing the job, somebody else was doing it." And I think one of the things that needs to be done is to get the Greater London Fund now into the 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> Century, so that they don't have this problem where we encountered a while ago where we couldn't write KAB on our collection stuff, we had to put Greater London Fund because they've got to monitor what we collect and then tell us that we can keep it. And also we wanted to fund a thing for children, as you know Achievement for Children is cross-borough between Richmond and Kingston, we wanted to get involved with a project they were running for blind children, we couldn't--, the Greater London Fund vetoed it because it was in collaboration with Richmond, and that they said, "Well that means that some of our money for Kingston might be going out of borough." And I said, "Well, you know, what planet are these people on?" I mean surely Richmond, what's the Richmond association called, do they get funded, nobody seems to know, is that VISR is it?

JK: Oh I don't know.

A: Visual Impairment Service of Richmond or something like that isn't it, I can't remember. But I mean, you know, unfortunately we don't get a lot, we know about a number of them, we've got fairly good relationships with the one in Surrey because they've now as you know taken on the services from the council that in Surrey because they need to make--, that for both hearing and sight loss, but Surrey's a big place and of course they've tendered for the job and they're running it all now. Including the charitable bit as well, you know? Whereas the Merton Vision is another one doing the same thing for Merton Council and I'm just wondering what our council's going to do, are they going to start farming out their services to local charities as well, I suspect so, because I was there when what's his name Davies was spouting at one of these meetings, you know, these--, what do they call them, conversations, where he talks and nobody else gets a word in, is that what they call them? And he has this big plasma screen doesn't he that nobody can understand what all these funny little graphics mean. Anyway, the thing is that he says, "We see ourselves as a commissioner of services, not a provid--, a provisioner of services in the future," so I took that to mean basically that it's going to be three people in the Guildhall, the rest of it will probably be at McDonald's, or something, and those three people will commission all the services from, you know, Joe Bloggs and Sons and everybody that comes along that wants to run it [laughs]. But you know, that's--, hopefully I'll be underground by the time all that shit hits the fan, pardon my French [all laugh].

JK: And so brilliant to get all your insight Brian, thank you so much, shall we finish with maybe listening just for a couple of minutes.

A: Okay, you'll have to come in, you'll have to walk, unfortunately, unless--, well your thing won't run off batteries then will it, or will it?

JK: It will do, yeah.

A: [Problems with playing video]. [Plays video]. And you get the basic gist.

JK: Yeah.

A: Is that enough for you?

JK: Yeah, perfect, thank you so much. And on that note I will end the interview, thank you so much Brian, it's very much appreciated.

A: Yeah, well as I say, I mean the--, it's a bit of a mish-mash at the moment I am but as I say because of our non-technical nature of our people we have to kind of, you know, I can't be down all the hours god sends obviously checking these people so they have to do it themselves to some extent, yeah.

**[END OF RECORDING – 01:17:04]**