

Eulogy to Chair of SDN Geoff Forgie by Emma Suddaby Patron of SDN

It is with heavy heart that I must make an announcement to members, with news so sad, I hardly know where to start. And yet, as your Patron, it falls to me to deal the awful blow and so I must tell you that on Sunday 7th August, our seemingly irrepressible Chairman and founder, Geoff Forgie passed away, unexpectedly, at home.

As you all know, Geoff had suffered from the cruel and relentless Multiple Sclerosis for some 23 years and despite the constant barrage of living with a chronic, degenerative condition, he managed to do so with a grace and energy that put the rest of us whingers to shame.

And yet despite his refusal to let MS limit what he could achieve in his life, even he could not stop it from ravaging his health and 23 years of damage had not only caused further complications but had left him physically weak.

Weak is not a word anyone would ever associate with Geoff, despite the disabilities his illness had forced upon him – the man was a phenomenon. Two years ago, Geoff saw the need for a local network connecting those with disabilities of all shapes and sizes with the sorts of services, schemes and social connections that the able world take for granted as their right.

He saw no reason why disabled people should not have the very same expectations and standards as everyone else but rather than nursing these feelings as a gripe, growing bitter watching as nothing changed, he set about changing things himself.

A mere two years later and here we are, proud members of a united, dynamic network of talented local people determined to work together to improve the lives of those living and coping with disability, in all it's weird and wonderful forms.

Geoff knew only too well how difficult life with long-term illness can be. He knew what it is to fight a daily battle with one's own body just to get through the basics of everyday life – and he wasn't prepared to let those with disabilities carry on facing the sort of up-hill fights that we often do face in trying to achieve an acceptable, dare I say 'normal' quality of life.

He knew that the true enemy of the disabled person is isolation and that in coming together, linking up our experience, talents and aspirations, not only would we fulfil our need for friendship and camaraderie but en masse we could become a formidable force for change.

Calling for a fresh approach to disability with a newly powerful voice. Geoff has been a strong and nurturing parent to the toddler that we, as a group, are. He led us confidently and lately, sensing our growing capabilities, had begun to withdraw the stabilisers, letting us pedal on our own, more and more through group activities, gradually stepping back and watching with pride as we learned to cope alone with group projects.

Happy with the foundations he had laid, he was planning to step down as Chairman, in order to spend a little more time with his own family, his wife Sue, daughter Jess and his son and grandson, Dean and Daniel.

After all, he had something of a track record in improving the lot of the forgotten, disabled population. He was also, virtually single-handedly responsible for founding, funding and creating the Berkshire Multiple Sclerosis Centre, one of the most up-to-the-minute, well-equipped and much needed multiple sclerosis units around.

He had been one of the forgotten MS sufferers doomed to attend his health checks and consultant appointments in a sad, ill-appointed portakabin in an invisible patch of NHS Berkshire. He had no choice but to accept his condition but he did not and would not accept his medical treatment under such conditions.

Not only did he challenge the view of the able world on what sort of standards and treatment the disabled could expect, he set about winning funding, support and then buildings approval for the creation of an entirely new, state of the art, purpose-built centre for the treatment of multiple sclerosis.

Today that centre stands as a lifeline for so many suffering from the onslaught of MS. They will never know how lucky they are and how much they owe to Geoff and his indignant refusal to accept a damp and lowly portakabin.

And for myself, I will always owe Geoff a debt of gratitude. Professionally, he was a joy to work with. No nonsense, sharp, capable and relentless when it came to achieving group goals, I only wonder what he would have been capable of without the hindrance of disability and poor health, the man would have been dangerous!

But my real, enduring memory of Geoff is of him, slogging into the orthopaedic hospital in Gobowen during my last, epic incarceration. He came to visit me every Saturday - every single Saturday - without fail, despite the complications of travelling in his powerchair and requiring the assistance of a carer to transport him there and back, and the pain and energy each expedition cost him.

He came, bringing books carefully selected to buoy up my flagging spirit, chocolates, interesting drinks to whet my hospitalised tastebuds. He would encourage me to make plans for the coming week on the ward, giving me intellectual goals to keep my brain alive and interested.

I will never now be able to properly thank him for all he did for me, for you and for every disabled person in Shropshire and beyond and it will take us all some time, individually and as a group, to come to terms with the loss of Geoff our founder, our chairman, our colleague, much treasured friend and so much more besides.

All we can do and the only thing he would want us to do is to carry on building Shropshire Disability Network into the group he envisaged, strengthening the foundations he laid and continuing to lift the horizons of those living with - but not being beaten by - disability. And from here on in let's do so in memory of Geoff, a man not beaten by anything.

Rest in peace Geoff Forgie 1940-2011.