



Sharon Coleman >01



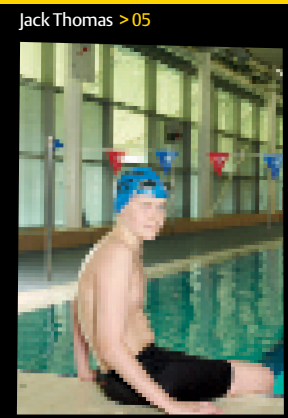
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# One Year, Ten Stories



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She lives in London.



London based photographer Suki Dhanda specialises in portraits of people in their environments. Her editorial commissions are regularly published in magazines nationally, most notably the *Observer*. Her work ranges from photographing leading politicians and celebrities to coffee farmers in Rwanda.

Photographs she provided for this publication are: Sharon Coleman, Duncan Fisher, Aston Sports Club, Southall Black Sisters, Jack Thomas, Dakota Blue Richards and Rachel Boyd.

# One Year, Ten Stories

Welcome to this first anniversary publication of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. We wanted to give people a flavour of what we do by highlighting the stories of 10 unique people whose lives have somehow been touched by the Commission. Some of the stories are inspirational, some funny, some just plain fascinating. Whether it's the single mother wanting a fair deal for herself and her disabled child; the sports club bringing young footballers together; the father looking at how to make work more flexible or the organisation fighting for those who suffer domestic violence – we hope that *One Year, Ten Stories* gives an insight into what we believe the Commission is here to achieve. Real change for real people.

With pictures by the award winning photographer Suki Dhandra and words by reporter and columnist Tanya Gold, *One Year, Ten Stories* can also be viewed on our website, alongside the rest of our work, at [www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com).

We hope you enjoy it.



Sharon Coleman  
East London

Story One

‘As soon as I had Oliver,  
everything changed.  
It’s endemic, the way  
people are treated  
if they’ve got caring  
responsibilities. And  
that made me fight on’

Sharon Coleman sits in her bright East London flat, slowly sipping a cup of tea. Her son Oliver races around the polished wooden floors, wrapped in a Chelsea FC flag.

Sharon, with the help of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, has changed the law. Thanks to her determination Britain's three million carers in the labour market now have new protection against discrimination in employment.

Her story comes out in breathless sentences, punctuated by laughs, and, sometimes, tears. In January 2001 Sharon started work as a legal secretary at a firm of solicitors in London. She took pride in it – she says she was fast, efficient and never cut corners. In 2002 she took maternity leave to give birth to her son Oliver. And suddenly she was faced with new challenges.

Oliver was born deaf and had respiratory problems, including a rare medical condition called apnoeic attacks. He would, without warning, stop breathing, up to 60 times a day. Sharon would have to resuscitate him. When Oliver was three months old, Sharon split up with his father. It was just her, and Oliver, and the attacks.

'I was scared,' she says, looking at me with faintly exhausted eyes. 'I was scared of being a first time mum anyway. And I knew four minutes [without breathing] and Oliver's brain was damaged. Four minutes without oxygen.' She repeats it a few times. 'Four minutes.' It's imprinted on her brain – a mantra.

She said she had to return to work. Why? 'I will not bring up my son on benefits,' she says, sticking out her chin. She found a suitable carer for Oliver but at work she alleges a campaign to force her out began. She says she was denied flexible working hours and the right to work from home while colleagues with healthy children got both.

'I'd come home and cry my eyes out,' she says. 'I was thinking, "I can't leave the job, I'm not giving in."'

And she trails off, and tears well up. Then she begins again: 'I was thinking, "please don't be sick today, Oliver, please," and I felt it was better to go in and be called out if he was ill, rather than not go in. I was thinking, "If he dies at that child minder's and I've taken him in knowing that he isn't well..." I felt, "I'm not good enough any more. I'm not a good mum, I'm not a good employee, what am I good at?"'

Did you really think you were going to lose him? She brushes away a tear and says, 'Yes. I felt I was starting to pull back from him in case he did die.'

'I thought, "don't love him too much because if he dies what are you going to be like?"' She says she was terrified of falling asleep and waking up to find him dead. 'I thought, "I'll take him to hospital and make them look after him... if they can keep him alive, I'll take him back."'



'I remember someone saying to me, "At least you have a break when you go to work."' And she laughs, bitterly and long, recalling how one day at work a colleague shouted and swore at her about Oliver and his condition.

Eventually she took voluntary redundancy. The company said they needed to cut staff and, she sighs, looking around, 'I knew they meant me.' She felt she didn't have a choice because all the other secretaries were suffering from the atmosphere. 'Everyone was getting stressed,' she says. 'I felt betrayed because until I had Oliver it was fine. But they forced my hand.'

She left, she says, 'a wreck'. But she immediately got a temping job, under a woman boss who, she says, 'was wonderful'. Then she mentioned her experience to a friend, who suggested she approach a law firm who suspected potential discrimination and helped her take her case to an employment tribunal. 'I didn't want anyone to be treated the way I was,' she says. 'Before I had Oliver there was no issue with me whatsoever. But as soon as I had that baby, everything changed. It's endemic, the way people are treated if they've got caring responsibilities. And that made me fight on.'

When lawyers at the Equality and Human Rights Commission heard about the case they immediately saw its wider significance for carers across Britain. The case would establish the right of carers to protection against discrimination by employers. The Commission helped take Sharon's case to the European Court of Justice. The ECJ ruled that Sharon had a case that she had suffered from 'discrimination by association'. In other words by being 'associated' with a disability (her son's) she had been discriminated against. She will now return to the employment tribunal in Britain to have her case heard.

The Commission's Legal Director John Wadham was delighted with the ruling. 'Sharon has been very brave in taking her case all the way to Europe. She has helped create new rights for Britain's millions of carers, 60 per cent of whom are women. In this day and age people increasingly have to balance caring responsibilities with work and it is vitally important that they are able to do so without being discriminated against or even forced out of the workforce.'

Employers will now have to give equal consideration to requests for flexible working hours from carers of the disabled. They cannot be discriminated against. How does she feel now? She sips her tea again and looks astonished.

'You know when you think that's where you want to go,' she says, 'but you never ever think you're going to get there.' And Oliver, she adds, is now in good health although he remains delicate. We watch him race past the doorway, still wearing the flag, and laughing.

## 'Britain's three million carers now have protection against discrimination in employment'





**Duncan Fisher**  
The Fatherhood Institute

**Story Two**

**‘So long as mostly  
women care  
for the family,  
mostly men will  
get to the top’**



**D**uncan Fisher helped create the Fatherhood Institute after his daughters were born. There was an assumption, he says, 'that my wife would look after the children and I would just carry on like nothing had happened'. It sounds like an idea out of the 1950s – he works, she cares, they both stand under a rainbow, smiling. But it didn't satisfy them. In fact, it angered them. 'We wanted to share,' he says.

The Fatherhood Institute partnered with the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Mumsnet.com and Dad.info to create a survey exploring how parents currently juggle their lives and whether there are alternatives. It is an important contribution to the Commission's Working Better initiative – a major consultation to explore how flexible ways of working can help groups like parents, carers, the disabled or older workers. The Commission believes the great 21st Century challenge is to create agile, modern workplaces that make the most of everybody's talent. Forty-eight per cent of the men who responded to the survey, Duncan says, want to spend more time with their children, but they can't because British law has 'got it wrong – uniquely wrong'. I ask him how and it pours out of his mouth in exasperated sentences. It begins with the way we structure maternity and paternity care.

'When two working people have a child together,' he explains, 'the mother gets nine months paid maternity leave, and the father just two weeks. The law flings child rearing at the mother, and breadwinning at the father, as if it were legislating in an Ealing comedy. There is three months parental leave for each, but no one takes it because it isn't paid.'

'Men's working hours go up when they become fathers, not down,' he says, a fact which initially shocks me, and then I realise makes perfect sense. 'So mum stays at home. And you've suddenly got a mother who has got all the skills of looking after the child and you've got the guy who's working all the time. You split the parents up.' He thinks it isn't good for children. 'Early involvement with a child by its father predicts later involvement,' he explains. 'There's a correlation between the amount of time that fathers spend early on with their children with the time they spend later on with their children. For many families the sharing of roles has a positive impact.'

I ask him why? 'I don't know. But you cannot achieve genuine equality for women without addressing the issue of men and children. You can't get equality for women in terms of pay and career prospects unless you address the caring agenda. So long as mostly women care for other family members, mostly men will get to the top. I predicted the pay gap would rise three years ago and it has.'

So what does he propose? At the moment, he says, the government is considering giving women an extra three months paid maternity leave, bringing their allowance to 12 months. Duncan wants the extra three months pay to be allocated to paid parental leave instead so each parent gets their own three months. He also wants more encouragement – and less punishment – for parents who want flexible working hours.

'I think people will be happier,' he says. 'The more flexibility, the more opportunities there are to share, to spend time with children, the happier parents are. It's a universal instinct. It's actually wonderful looking after children. It's when you have to do it all the time, and there's no remission, or if there's a problem and you've got no support, that it becomes a nightmare. We've got to stop talking about looking after children as if we are victims of them, and think of them as opportunities.'

He is speaking in the polite, polished language of a politician now, but beneath there is the awful unspoken reality – many men don't get to know their children.

Many women are thwarted in their career ambitions. Children don't know their fathers. It's a cycle of dysfunction and what the cost is – who knows?

# ‘48 per cent of the men we surveyed want to spend more time with their children’

But our working and caring culture – which he won’t call discrimination against men because he believes it is discrimination against men, women and children – even spreads into our language. He tells me about a recent newspaper article on the discovery of a new nerve in the human body. One line was, he says, ‘skin seems to be sensitive to the stroking and cuddling that a mother would give her child’. He wrote a letter to the editor, asking, ‘Do the nerves discriminate between mothers and fathers?’

He is joking, but I can tell he is frustrated. He lists the problems, which he is trying to address by working with government agencies – NHS literature about pregnancy does not address both parents as equals; they have an extra section for fathers, like an afterthought, or an appendage. Fathers of newborns do not have flexible visiting hours at hospitals and mothers do not have the right to request that their partners stay with them overnight. When his wife was booked in to give birth, he adds, she was asked only one question about him: it was, ‘Does he have any genetic abnormalities on his side of the family?’

‘If a mother has a mental health condition,’ he continues, ‘she is rightly given assistance by the state; but if a father has a similar condition, he isn’t. It’s [considered] better if he’s out of the picture,’ Duncan says. ‘The fundamental assumption is mothers are essential for children, and that fathers are icing on the cake.’

He mentions a working group he attended, where a group of young black fathers from Hackney talked to senior civil servants about childcare. ‘One of them said there was no expectation from any source to be responsible, to be engaged. Another said it’s too easy for young men to walk away from their responsibilities. It’s like the door is open. We’ll have a moan about them and about how irresponsible they are, but we’ll hold the door open and let them walk out as quickly as they can. A lot of young men get babies because they want something to love, just like young mums do.’ He wants support for them to find jobs and information about how to care for their children. ‘The men respond remarkably to this – for example they pay more child support in later life – and the very assumption that they won’t, I think, is close to prejudice.’ He sighs.

The role of fathers and the relationship to family wellbeing is something the Commission is investigating as part of the Working Better project which reports in 2009. ‘The entire role of caring for babies is a woman’s role in our society,’ he says. ‘It’s structured in our institutions, in our work entitlements, our public services, and our conversations. And it just isn’t true, it’s an ideology, the reality of what is important for children is completely different.’

When I ask him about his daughters, he won’t name them. He doesn’t want to use them in his campaigns. But he does say, ‘the whole of the rest of my life is now re-centred, until I die, it has to be’. He sounds very happy about it.



**Matt Kendal**  
Aston Sports Club

**Story Three**

**‘It’s football to  
break down the  
barriers. You need  
to mix to survive’**

**M**att Kendall is driving me around Aston, a suburb of Birmingham, pointing out deserted parks and battered council estates. He is a former football coach and one of the 19 UEFA Hat-trick Officers who work with deprived communities in Britain. 'And Aston,' he says, pausing to show me the dull looking site of a recent shooting, 'is one of the most deprived.'

Three years ago there were riots in Lozells, a neighbouring suburb. They began when unsubstantiated rumours were circulated that a gang of Asian youths had raped a 14-year-old Black Caribbean girl. This part of Birmingham has high levels of unemployment, crime, gang violence, inequality in healthcare provision and one of the largest ethnic minority communities in Britain, a growing number of them asylum seekers. One cool night in October 2005 the fault lines split open. There were two deaths and five attempted murders. Birmingham awoke the next day to ask – what can be done?

'There are islands of young people around here, who, because they have nothing better to do, form gangs,' Matt says quietly. He stares out over the steering wheel and into the street, and shrugs. 'It's not Beirut,' he adds. 'It's not that bad. But my job is to try and find a solution, to make Aston a better place, to stop guns and drugs and badness.' How? 'By using sport,' he replies. 'It's football to break down the barriers. You need to mix to survive. We're trying to give young kids without hobbies something to do and trying to make sport more accessible for them. We want to offer a place where boys feel relaxed in a social environment.'

Birmingham Council instantly commissioned a report into the riots. One of its findings was that lack of positive communication between the black and Asian communities helped to cause the violence. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has provided £10.9 million of funding to grassroots organisations promoting equality and human rights across Great Britain as part of its grants programme this year. £18,000 was given for Matt to establish the Madrassa Link project, an outreach programme designed specifically to persuade young Muslim boys to play football, first with each other, and then with kids from other ethnic communities.



An hour later, I am in Matt's office in the eaves of Aston House, a Jacobean mansion that is owned by Birmingham Council. Outside, it is all brown brick and scowling gargoyles; inside it is institutional with a sporting twist – there is a cricket coach manual on the shelf, a megaphone and a picture of Paul Gascoigne crying. From the window I can see the beautiful sports facilities of Aston Sports Club rising and spreading in the grounds – a gleaming cricket pavilion, a smooth and shining cricket pitch, an emerald green football pitch. For now they are empty and under construction, but Matt wants to fill them up. I can also see the imposing shadow of the enormous Aston Villa Football Club down the road, but few of the locals can afford to go there.

Matt has had hurdles to overcome. 'Local parents aren't necessarily interested in encouraging their children to play sport,' Matt tells me, waving the megaphone, presumably at the invisible local parents. 'It isn't a priority for them. Information is also an issue; at least seven languages are spoken in Aston and it is hard to break through the language barriers to even invite the kids. Young people don't feel comfortable outside their communities,' he says.

And so, when Matt first established the Aston Sports Club, 'there were lots of small groups squabbling to do football on a small scale'. There were Kashmiri groups and Bengali groups and white groups, but they only played amongst themselves and they were reluctant to use Aston Sports Club. They played on the streets and in the parks. He gives me a soft drink metaphor, a way of explaining that coming together would be better. 'Why make your own cola when you can be regional manager for Coca Cola?'



‘We have all this stuff around.’ He waves again at the glorious facilities and says the kids know the difference between ‘a guy putting two coats down for goal posts and being coached properly. And they appreciate it.’

Altaf Kazi, the madrassa project co-ordinator walks in, gives a small bow and a winning grin. He is 24, and a Muslim, and Matt employed him specifically to persuade the local madrassas – the Muslim after school clubs for 5–14-year-olds – to get involved in sports.

The madrassa children are, he says, ‘a captive audience,’ and persuading their teachers to allow them to play sport was the only way the scheme could possibly work. No madrassa involvement, no Muslim children.

So Altaf started talking to the madrassas. ‘I am telling them that sport is important. That sport offers ways out of certain social behaviours for kids who do bad things. More sport means less hitting, shooting, and selling drugs and the kids work harder at school too. Football is a communal language. Cricket is a communal language. And these guys don’t have hobbies.’ Matt is standing under the weeping Paul Gascoigne poster and nodding. ‘And it’s working,’ Altaf says. He’s already organised a madrassa tournament and 12 teams turned up. There might be a future Premiership footballer in there, he adds. And he has interest from madrassas outside Aston. Word is spreading.

There is also a Women’s Project. And because it is organised through the trusted madrassas, unprecedented numbers of young Muslim women are beginning to emerge to play sport in Aston – netball and badminton – even self-defence classes are being considered. ‘They get to decide what sport they play,’ says Matt. ‘We are making a real difference to real people’s lives.’

His aim, he says, is sustainability. When the Madrassa Link project ends he wants the madrassas to organise their own teams to play with teams from other ethnic minority communities. He wants self-sustainability; when the project ends he wants the kids to continue to kick the balls and not each other. ‘The kids love football,’ he says, and smiles. ‘Sport makes them happier.’

**‘£10.9 million of funding provided to organisations promoting equality and human rights across Great Britain’**







**Pragna Patel**  
Southall Black Sisters

**Story Four**

‘I grew in all sorts of ways, became more confident, learnt not to just take things, thrived and felt empowered’

Pragna Patel is sitting in her office, talking about her school days in the late 1970s. 'It was like, "Why don't you go back to where you come from?"' she says. "'You eat funny food, you dress funny, you talk funny.'" It made you feel unwanted, not quite sure of your place, and lacking in confidence. You couldn't quite understand why you were singled out and why people treated you differently.' When this young girl, whose parents came from Kenya, went for careers advice she was told to go and work at Heathrow Airport as a ground steward. But this was not for her.

Today Pragna is the Chair of Southall Black Sisters (SBS), a support group fighting violence against women in the black and Asian community in West London and nationally. The Equality and Human Rights Commission successfully intervened in support of their case against Ealing Council earlier this year. The council's new funding policies threatened the survival of this highly respected organisation. The Commission argued that Ealing Council had misinterpreted law allowing domestic

violence services to target women who are hard to reach because of barriers like language or culture. SBS battles at what Pragna calls 'the intersection of race and gender and the class system'. This is a dark place, full of misinformation, silence and pain. SBS fights for the rights of abused women in homes, in workplaces, in the immigration system, on the streets. They offer advice in several languages, information, casework, advocacy, counselling and self-help support services. They are indefatigable, and they need to be.

Pragna remembers the very day she first met the sisters of Southall. She had just left university, where she had studied sociology and was trying to avoid the conventional marriage her parents wanted for her. 'They used to sell their newsletter on the streets in Southall, dressed in their funky clothes,' she says. 'All I could think was, I want to be like that. I don't want to sit here covering and thinking, "I'm black and isn't that terrible?"' So she joined them, and she says, 'I grew in all sorts of ways, became more confident, learnt not to just take things, thrived and felt empowered.'

They were different, she explains, to any women she had ever met. Her own family was conventional, patriarchal but the sisters were like angry Birds of Paradise. 'They were trying to tackle both racism and sexism within the community and outside the community,' she says. 'They saw simultaneous struggle on different fronts and they didn't try to prioritise one above the other.' So women's issues were sidelined during the greater anti-racist battles? She pauses. 'It was always "the most important struggle is black people, and we'll worry about the women's issues afterwards."' Anti-racism, it seemed, was a man's game.



As soon as she joined SBS, she laughs, 'everybody left'. But she stayed on in a tiny office with battered furniture donated by supporters and a small grant from the Greater London Council. 'There were women's centres all over the place then,' she says. 'Black women were thinking, "we need our own space away from the wider white racist society, and away from men who think that the only fact is racism". But we didn't have a clue. We didn't have any idea what women were going to come to us with. We just knew that their needs were not being met.'

There have been many famous campaigns: the battles to free Kiranjit Ahluwalia and Zoora Shah, who killed their abusers; the first ever conviction of a husband for marital rape in the Asian community; the first ever annulment of a forced marriage in England and Wales. The victories are splattered over the office walls in photographs; there are women standing outside the High Court, wrapped in banners, laughing, cheering, and hugging each other. But there is more than the legal campaigning. There are the pleading, sweaty late night attempts to find accommodation and food and medicine for women and children fleeing abusive relationships, case by case, victim by victim.

Pragna identifies her enemies as the insularity of immigrant communities who fail to support their victims for fear of racism from outside, and government, she says, too busy, or too scared, to intervene.

What is the case that shocked you most I ask? She pauses, and I see in her eyes there are too many, all dreadful. Then she says, very calmly and slower than usual, 'It never ceases to shock me how there are so many terrible, unspeakable, unimaginable cruelties and horrors perpetrated on women and children. I remember a pregnant women being imprisoned in a flat in which the windows were boarded up and for the first nine days of her enslavement she had no food. She lived on a few lumps of sugar. Some of the stories are of domestic slavery. It's aimed at just completely demeaning them, degrading them, and humiliating them. They are shocking in their intimate little details. And there's this moral panic – "Are our streets safe any more?" Well,' and she pauses again, 'are our homes safe?'

Why are the cases that Pragna sees so shocking? She explains it to me, again very calmly, possibly because if she allowed it to affect her emotionally she would explode with rage. 'The immigration laws don't help,' she says, 'because the abusers know that there's no redress for these women. Because they're effectively trapped, the kind of violence that they face is of a frequency and intensity that's different to the wider society. Their abusers know that there's nothing they can do, so they take cruelty to a new level.'

If women who come here to marry flee an abusive relationship within two years of arriving, they will either be deported – usually back to a country where they will be discriminated against because they are women – or destitute, because they are not entitled to benefits. 'So even if they find ways of leaving a violent situation,' Pragna tells me, 'they have nowhere to go and nothing to live on.' Pragna believes there are other things that should worry us, the idea that Sharia law should be incorporated into British law; the rise in Islamophobia; the rise in fundamentalism; the way in which the doctrine of multiculturalism ignores the needs of women.

As I leave Pragna shows me a feminist poster from India. It says, 'She is radiant like the rising sun, she lights up the world, she wears sun and moon as her jewels. She is active, she has capacity, she is aware, she is fearless, she is free.'

**'The Commission successfully intervened, securing funding for specialised services'**



Jack Thomas  
Swansea

Story Five

‘We became aware that Jack could have a future as a world-class swimmer but that he wouldn’t be allowed to do the Paralympics, the pinnacle of world-class status’



One Year, Ten Stories



Jack Thomas is sitting on an armchair in his living room in a house in Swansea, clutching his pet snake and a tangled pile of medals. His mother Wendy thrusts a cup of tea into my hands and tells her 13-year-old son to put the snake away. He obeys with a shrug, and goes back to toying with the medals.

Jack's is an extraordinary story for three reasons. He is one of the finest young swimmers in Britain, he has a learning disability and his fight against prejudice has brought a human face to one of the most important discrimination battles of the year.

The battle actually began in 2000 in Sydney when the Spanish basketball team cheated in the Paralympics. They won a gold medal but were exposed for fielding 10 ineligible players claiming they had a learning disability. Their actions have reverberated all the way to this small blonde-haired boy in Swansea. As a result of the Spanish team's actions, all learning disabled athletes were excluded from the pinnacle of disabled athletic achievement – the Paralympics. It was a situation *The Guardian* newspaper described as 'shameful' and the Equality and Human Rights Commission is pressing in partnership with other groups to reverse.

Wendy explains that Jack was two when he was diagnosed with learning difficulties and he has had one-to-one teaching at his mainstream school since he was five. He had a huge amount of excess energy as a small boy – 'he was bouncing off the walls,' she says – and so she and her husband experimented with various sports to help him burn it off. They tried power walking and cycling. Then, when he was nearly four, they tried twice-weekly swimming lessons. 'I used to sit by the poolside and cry,' Jack says. 'I was afraid of the water.'

But he soon discovered he was actually rather good at it. His parents organised a disabled swimming club in Swansea and Jack is now one of its stars. He has broken five British learning disability records and he is the youngest person ever to represent Great Britain as a learning disabled athlete. I ask him if he is the best swimmer in his school. 'Yes,' he says. He trains twice a day and swims up to 20 miles a week. Sometimes, his mother says, he cries when he is swimming. She can see it from the poolside. 'I ask him – why are you crying?' 'Because it hurts,' he says. 'So why do you keep going?' 'Because I want to be fast,' he says.

Wendy says that swimming changed her son. Before he realised his skill in the water, she says, 'he wasn't happy about being different. There used to be a kitchen table there,' – she points at her immaculate kitchen – 'and he used to barricade himself under it and say he wanted to die. He didn't feel he had anything to make him feel good about himself. When the swimming started to develop, his confidence started to develop. It was a positive channel for his energy and it gave him something that he could be proud of.' At this point I ask to see his medals. He slinks off and returns with a huge tangle of ribbons, with gold and silver discs peeking out. It looks like an alien life form, a medal monster.



Jack Thomas

Wendy didn't realise the significance of what happened in Sydney until 2005. 'We became aware that Jack could have a future as a world-class swimmer but that he wouldn't be able to do the Paralympics, which is the pinnacle of world-class status,' she says. There was a campaign to get the learning disabled athletes to compete in Beijing 2008 but the ban was not lifted. This infuriates Wendy; she sips her tea angrily and the liquid spills in the saucer. 'One country cheated and the whole world is banned,' she says, 'it's so unfair. Why penalise everybody? There are more learning disabled people in the world than any other disability.' 'It's ridiculous,' Jack agrees, looking up at me. 'Ridiculous. I'll only be able to achieve my potential at the Paralympics.'

Jack was also excluded from the school competitions that replicate the Paralympics. Because the learning disabled were banned from the Paralympics, they were automatically banned from the school competitions. 'Ridiculous,' says Jack again, rolling his eyes. Following the threat of legal action by the Equality and Human Rights Commission using its powers under the Disability Discrimination Act, this ban was overturned, and as a result over 300,000 young people with a learning disability can now take part in the UK School Games. However, the battle is still to be won, with the International Paralympics Committee expected to make an announcement on the issue in the near future.

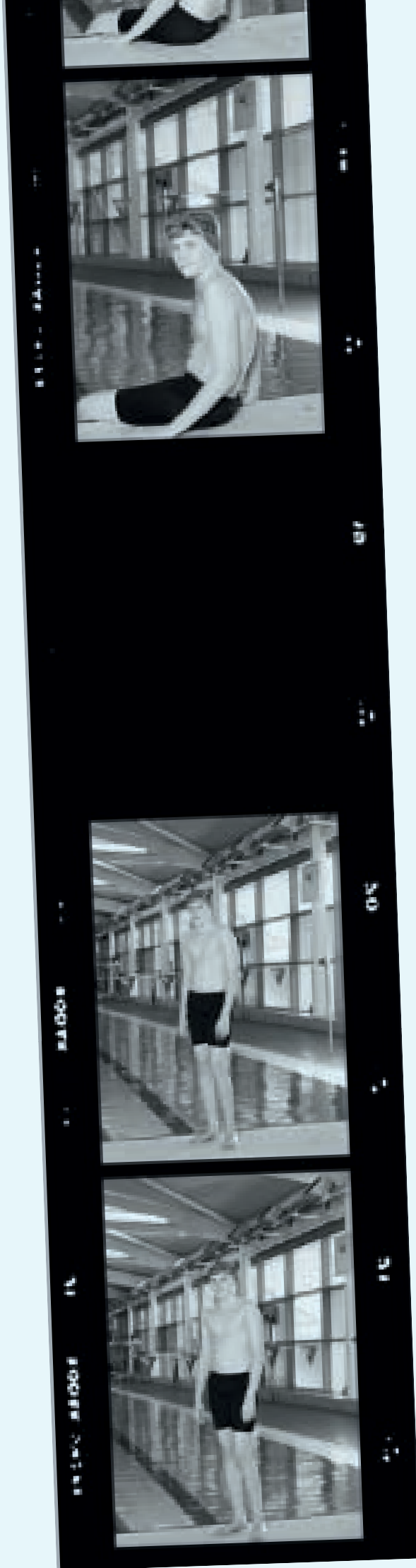
Jack is welcome to swim in non-disabled competitions, but Wendy prefers for him to compete in disabled events. 'It caters better to his needs, there's more understanding, there's a much nicer atmosphere,' she says. 'If you ever go to disabled swimming events the swimmers cheer each other and because they're multi-disability they all help each other out.' Jack might carry another athlete's false leg, she says, while a physically disabled athlete might explain something to Jack he didn't understand. 'In a mainstream competition there are no allowances for his disability,' she says. 'The kids aren't as nice to each other.'

Due to Jack's learning disability it is uncertain whether he could ever be a world-class athlete in mainstream swimming. 'It's about the co-ordination,' Wendy explains. 'That's one of the problems he would encounter if he did mainstream sport. He needs to absorb technical information to help him trim those little seconds off.' As he gets older, she says, the learning disability will count against him more.

He will be at an unfair disadvantage. He can take part in the Special Olympics (an international organisation created to help people with learning disabilities develop self-confidence, social skills and a sense of personal accomplishment) but this won't satisfy his ambitions; the feeling in Swansea is the learning disabled shouldn't be restricted to the Special Olympics; they should be allowed to compete competitively with other elite athletes, like everyone else. 'The Special Olympics is about trying your best and that is wonderful,' Wendy says. 'But the results don't matter as long as you try. And the learning disabled need to see that they can play sport competitively – and wonderfully – on a world-class stage.'

As I get up to leave, Jack is still playing with the medals. The snake is back in his tank. Wendy tells me that the family recently went on a holiday to Spain and Jack wouldn't go in the sea. He just stood on the beach and stared. Why not, I ask. 'I would have done if there was a competition,' he says.

**'Over 300,000 young people with a learning disability can now take part in the UK School Games'**



Jack Thomas



Catrina McHugh  
Open Clasp Theatre Company

Story Six

‘I realised then that the theatre I wanted to create is about debate. It’s about making the audience think and question their own beliefs and opinions’







Meet Catrina McHugh sitting in a darkened theatre in Newcastle in front of the empty set of her new play, *A Twist of Lemon*. She is telling me about the true point of drama. Tall, dark and intense, she tosses her hair and her voice booms in the air. 'I think theatre is about speaking for people who don't normally get their voices heard in a truthful way,' she says.

Catrina is the Artistic Community Development Director of Open Clasp, a professional women's theatre company in the north-east, one of 285 organisations that have been partially funded by the Equality and Human Rights Commission through its grants programme this year. Its goal is to give women a voice and let the audience hear that voice.

She left school without A levels, she says, but decided to take a course in theatre at the University of Northumbria in her thirties. There she discovered Bertolt Brecht, the playwright who saw theatre as a vehicle for social change. 'I realised then that the theatre I wanted to create is about debate,' she says.

'It's about making the audience think and question their own beliefs and opinions. I watch a lot of theatre and I think, it doesn't speak, it doesn't tell women's stories.'

And so, nine years ago, she and four other women went to visit women they perceived to be without a voice – young mothers, working-class women, women with eating disorders, women in abusive relationships, lesbians.

They gave each group a starting point – one example was a woman who didn't want to be like her mother – and then wrote a piece of theatre based entirely on what the women said about the topic. It was called *After Her Death* and the response to it, she says, 'was overwhelming'. It is still the template for each Open Clasp show.

Open Clasp spend up to two years working with women's groups to research each project (the actors, however, are professionals) and so when Catrina types the script out onto her laptop, there are hundreds of women's voices in her head, all of them known to her, all of them real.

She is careful to point out that Open Clasp workers are not therapists; everything is done through the prism of drama. And because of this, she says, 'when you're in the audience at an Open Clasp show you can always relate to somebody on stage – what they say, where they are, what they're talking about, what they're laughing about, what they find confusing, what they're crying about'.

'We are just the facilitators,' she says. 'We have the tools to get women to discuss and debate and conclude together. The show itself is only the end of that process. And it is cyclical. We go to the community to make the show, and return it to the community when it is finished.'

And although she is careful to always include comedy riffs – small dogs, weddings, holidays – in the plays, she attacks the darkest recesses in women's lives. *Falling Knives* and *Runaround Wives* was about abusive relationships in the run-up to a performance of an ABBA tribute band. *Stand 'N' Tan* was about racism towards asylum seekers. *Tonic* was about mental illness.



# ‘285 organisations funded by the Equality and Human Rights Commission through its grants programme this year’

Her latest project, *A Twist of Lemon*, is about emotional abuse in a lesbian relationship. Why did she choose that topic? ‘It came from the group,’ she shrugs. ‘If the group hadn’t created it I wouldn’t have put it in.’ The women, she says, didn’t want to be sanitised because they are lesbians. They want the play to reflect their genuine experiences. ‘Some of the women in the group were survivors of domestic abuse and some of them were perpetrators,’ she says. ‘Emotional abuse is everywhere in women’s lives. We find it in everything we touch.’

She says she watches how giving a voice to women transforms them. During the research for *Tonic*, she says, ‘there was one particular woman who was really struggling. She couldn’t make eye contact.’ Catrina worked with her for two months and at the end of the process, she says, ‘I could see how she had grown in strength, she was doing the acting, she was making decisions.’

Another woman later admitted that she had been suicidal throughout the process, and the drama had helped her find the voice to say so, and seek help.

Another woman talked about obsessive-compulsive disorder; Catrina put it in the play, the woman watched it and went home and messed her kitchen up in a triumphal act of catharsis. Other women have ended abusive relationships after working with Open Clasp. Catrina says, ‘We can act as a catalyst for women to change their lives.’

It changed her too. She talks about making *Stand ‘N’ Tan*, the play about racism towards women seeking asylum, and how afterwards, because she had worked with Iranian women in that situation, ‘I could no longer be silent when people were being racist. I could no longer sit on the bus and collude with racism. I would stand up and try to say, “this isn’t OK”’. It was made primarily, she says, for a white audience.

‘We take the audience to the point where it’s disturbing but we don’t take people too far. We want the audience to say, “God, that’s not OK”. We want the audience to be angry.’

During the show’s last night, she adds, there were two girls in the audience nattering; semi-heckling. ‘Every time two women kissed on stage,’ she says, ‘these girls would go, “ugh, that’s disgusting, ugh, I’m going to be sick, it’s so disgusting”. But by the end of it, they’d followed the characters through their journey and they were behind the characters that needed to be supported.’

And I leave Catrina, digging around in the boneyard of women’s psyches, and looking for truths. As I open the door she turns to me and says, with an enormous grin, ‘you know, I could write for *Casualty*. But what would I gain from doing that?’



Ahsan Khan  
Dumfries

Story Seven

‘People tend to  
appoint people who  
are like them. You  
know? The system  
perpetuates itself’

# ‘Ahsan Khan’s case is one of over 1000 cases the Commission has been involved in this year, supporting individuals to fight discrimination and seek a fair outcome’

In 2005, Ahsan Khan applied to be head of housing at Angus Council in Scotland. He was, he explains, in his crisp, Scottish burr, expertly qualified, perhaps even over-qualified for the job, but he wanted to move to Angus to be close to his elderly parents. A few weeks later a standard refusal letter arrived.

‘I was very surprised,’ he says. ‘You don’t apply for a job if you think you have no chance of getting it.’ And so began one man’s determined campaign to address what he saw as an unacceptable act of discrimination. With the support of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, who believed he had a strong case, he successfully took Angus Council to an employment tribunal for racial discrimination.

Initially, he decided to ask why he hadn’t been selected for an interview. ‘I wanted to know what the problem was,’ he says. ‘There could have been valid reasons.’ He continues, ‘I didn’t want to start questioning myself or my own abilities. I hadn’t questioned them for many years. And I was at a stage in my career where I didn’t have to worry about the consequences [of taking action].’

Ahsan was told there was an exceptionally good standard of applications for the post. So they had decided to change the person specifications of the job to include recent experience in Scottish local government. ‘The alarm bells began ringing in my head then,’ Ahsan says. ‘All good practice says this is a no-no. It is just something you don’t do.’ He had experience in Scottish local government anyway, he adds.

Ahsan checked out the council’s equalities policy and decided they may have broken it. So he wrote to them and politely offered to provide further information about his application. They brushed him off. ‘I got a response saying they had investigated the process, spoken to the shortlisting panel and that no further action was required,’ he says. How did he feel about their response? ‘Angry,’ he says, simply.

He went on digging. He submitted a Freedom of Information request to the council, to find out more about the shortlisting process. Were notes taken by the shortlisting panel? Were emails exchanged? What exactly had happened during the shortlisting process? Why had a man so qualified been excluded in the early stages? A long silence, and then another response arrived. No independent notes had been made in the shortlisting process. No emails had been exchanged.

The practice was flawed, he decided.

He believes he was denied an interview to stop him impressing the interview panel.





Ahsan is British and of Bangladeshi origin. Does he believe that this was part of it? He pauses, and then he answers me carefully, as if he is tired of the question. As if it exhausts him. 'People tend to appoint people who are like them,' he says. 'The system perpetuates itself.'

After the Freedom of Information disclosure, Ahsan wrote to the council. 'I wanted an apology,' he says. 'I wanted something.' He was told the council weren't prepared to discuss it further. It was, from their point of view, the end of the matter.

So Ahsan approached the Commission for Racial Equality, whose functions have since been taken over by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. They advised him to serve a discrimination questionnaire on the council, the first stage towards taking them to an employment tribunal for racial discrimination. 'It was an exhausting and humiliating process,' Ahsan says. 'You have to go cap in hand to people to ask them to give evidence and to give up their time and energies and go on the line to speak up for you.'

It was painful, but it worked. The Equality and Human Rights Commission decided Ahsan had a strong case and decided to fund it; if they hadn't, he would not have been able to afford to do so. Ahsan Khan's case is one of over 1000 cases the Commission has been involved in this year, supporting individuals to fight discrimination and seek a fair outcome.

But they warned him that even if he won, the case could damage his career. 'People said in taking this case on you are committing career suicide,' he says. 'That I would be perceived as some kind of troublemaker.'

In the spring of 2008 he went to an employment tribunal and after several days' evidence spread out over a six month period the tribunal found there had been direct discrimination due to the change in the council's shortlisting process, and awarded Ahsan £26,000 in compensation.

Lynn Welsh, Head of Strategic Litigation for the Commission in Scotland, stated: 'This is a resounding victory for Mr Khan who has been discriminated against because of his race. Mr Khan was a strong candidate and should have had the opportunity to go through the full interview process.'

Angus Council responded to the judgment by saying it strived to be an equal opportunities employer and refuted any suggestion of racial discrimination.

Ahsan sees it differently 'They should have just held up their hands at the beginning, and apologised.' For the first time he smiles. 'It was a wonderful judgment. I felt completely vindicated.'



Dakota Blue Richards  
Our Space summer camp

Story Eight

‘There’s so much pressure to be what people call perfect. I don’t really understand it because if everyone looked the same it would be odd. It takes all of us to make the world’

**D**akota Blue Richards is the gifted actress who, as a 12-year-old, played Lyra Belacqua in the film adaptation of Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass*. But instead of the shimmering red-haired child star I was expecting, I find a slender, dark-haired teenager, knitting her thumbs together and haltingly telling me about how much she loathes discrimination.

This summer, she explains, she went to the Lake District, with 86 other teenagers aged 14 and 15, to take part in the first Equality and Human Rights Commission's Our Space summer camp. It was designed to bring people from different backgrounds together, get them talking about themselves and identity and see how equality and human rights affects their lives. They practised leadership skills and confidence building, went kayaking, camping and orienteering, and at the end they left, hoping to take the message to their friends and communities, a small army of ambassadors to spread the message that fair and equal treatment should be expected and demanded by all. The Commission will build on the Our Space project next year as part of its wider strategy on engagement with young people.

Dakota wanted to go to Our Space, she says, because it chimed with her upbringing. 'I was brought up to believe that you shouldn't judge people by the way they look or by their background and that if they choose to do something which is different, like a different religion or a different sexuality, as long as it's not hurting anyone else it doesn't matter.'

She talks slowly and very seriously; but sometimes a huge smile – or a giggle – escapes from her mouth. 'My mum would always say to me, "no matter what happens you are lucky that you've had so much goodness in your life and you shouldn't take things for granted, like a good education, a home, food, or clean water";' she says. 'Sometimes I think people don't really know what they've got.'

And she says something astonishing. When her hair was dyed flaming red to play Lyra Belacqua she was teased at school.

She is making a point about how people respond to difference. 'People in school call other people names because of their hair colour, their skin colour or their nationality,' she says. 'The bullies,' she adds, 'used to call me names and I found it quite hard because they were trying to hurt somebody else based on the fact that they look slightly different. There's so much pressure to be what people call perfect. I don't really understand it because if everyone looked the same it would be odd. It takes all of us to make the world.'

There were two types of people at Our Space, she says: 'the people who were quite interested in human rights and equality and the people who initially thought, "it's a free holiday!"' Our Space was a combination of physical and mental exercises,' she says, smiling, and she tells me a horror story involving a rope and a bin, and having to move the bin using a piece of rope. 'It was to teach us leadership and how to work as a group,' she says, 'because it made us think about everybody in the group and to listen to everybody and to let everybody have a say.'

'The person might not be the leader in the group, or know anyone else in the group but they might have a good idea and it didn't matter who they were.' By the end of the week, she says, prejudices were dying like flies. (And the bins had been moved.)

An exercise that really touched her, she adds, was when the teenagers were given a list of discriminatory acts on cards, and had to grade them in order of seriousness, from teasing someone about having red hair to a physical racist attack. 'People looked at the cards that they'd got and said, "Oh God, this could potentially be what I would do, teasing people for being ginger and wearing glasses." It made them think.'





She believes that most teenage discrimination comes from thoughtlessness, rather than malice. But she is particularly disturbed by the current use of the word 'gay' meaning stupid by teenagers. 'I just don't see the point in using that word because a lot of people who use it don't even mean it in that way. So why use it when it can be offensive to people?' She has made all her friends stop using it, she says, and if they do use it she won't respond to them. 'People often don't understand when they're being discriminatory. They don't understand that they can be being offensive to other people. And if you're feeling a bit unsure, a bit insecure about something, the tiniest little remark it can really affect you. I think it's unnecessary.' The week, she says, 'made me think we should try to teach other people to stop doing things that are offensive.'

'I try to influence my friends and if they do say something that is discriminatory I'll explain it to them.' Recently, she says, a friend said something thoughtless about the homeless, and she tried to make the friend imagine what they would do in the homeless person's position. 'It's about trying to get them to look at things from somebody else's perspective,' she says.

Our Space, she adds, has inspired her. 'It taught me that I should try and do something to challenge discrimination in my community.' And she knits her thumbs again and tells me, 'My Mum and I have a favourite quote. I'm not sure who said it, but it is, "Never think that a few committed individuals cannot change the world as that is all who ever have."'

**'The Commission will build on the Our Space project next year as part of its wider strategy on engagement with young people'**





Coryton Primary School  
Croeso project

Story Nine

‘We wanted to make  
the bully look weaker  
than the bullied,  
because the bullied  
are strong enough  
to be different’





This autumn a 30-second cartoon about prejudice will be shown in cinemas across Wales and the West Country. It is called *Your Choice* and it is about a bully who runs around a playground abusing everyone around him – it doesn't matter why – disabled, unfashionable or foreign. 'Wrong colour,' he sneers at his cartoon victims. 'Wrong country. Wrong size. Wrong body. Wrong label. Wrong shoes.'

It is a brutal and brilliant piece of polemic but it didn't spring from the brains of ad-men in Media Land. It was conceived by five 11-year-olds from Coryton Primary School near Cardiff, as part of the Equality and Human Rights Commission's 'Croeso' project to challenge discrimination in Wales. (Croeso means welcome in Welsh.) This astonishing film was the prize-winning entry in a competition where Kate Bennett, the Equality and Human Rights Commission's Director of Wales, said: 'The standard of entries was exceptional,' and it was written by children.

I am sitting in the staff room at Coryton Primary School with Hanne Reid, who organised Coryton's entry, and the head teacher Hillary Bassett. They both have the calm, beneficent I-can-cope-with-anything-even-a-meteor smiles of experienced teachers of children; they are sipping coffee and eating home-made cake. Outside, 180 children of 17 different nationalities – who speak 17 languages between them – are tearing up and down the playground. Their screams are oddly musical.

There is a reason, I realise as I speak to Hanne and Hillary, that Coryton's 11-year-olds won a competition that was open to anyone up to the age of 26. The understanding and discourse about difference in this bustling school is amazingly sophisticated, because Hillary and her team consider teaching respect for difference as vital to a child's development as learning to read.

Each year, they have an anti-bullying week. 'Each year groups will cover a different element of anti-bullying,' Hanne explains. 'It could be drama, artwork, or a PowerPoint presentation – anything visual that will get a message across.' Last year, she adds, one older group role-played a bullying situation, and its successful resolution. At the end of the week the classes present their work to the rest of the school in assembly.



There is also an annual multicultural week, where children experiment with food, language and customs from different ethnic groups. During this week Hillary invites parents in to tell the children about their own cultures. Her pupils may eat curry during a visit from an Indian mother, or smash plates while looking at photographs of a Greek father's wedding. 'And so,' Hillary explains, 'the children's understanding of prejudice and respect is very high. They've had plenty of practise discussing abstract and quite complex ideas.'

They also have a weekly 'circle time' session in each class, where the teacher and the children bring up difficult issues. 'All sorts of sensitive issues can be brought up within the circle,' says Hillary, 'including bullying and respect for others. It teaches them to take turns in conversations and to listen to other people's opinions. Everybody gets the opportunity to speak. It's something we're constantly talking to the children about. The youngest children,' she adds, 'use a teddy bear to ease the anguish of public speaking.' They can only speak, she explains, when they are holding the teddy bear. There is also a buddy system, pairing younger children with older children.

# ‘Over 1000 entries received from across Wales for our Croeso animation competition’

‘All the children in the school,’ Hillary adds, ‘know each other by name. It is fertile ground to make a film about prejudice.’

Initially, each child in the school entered the animation competition individually. Experts from the Croeso project visited the school, and showed the children how to make cartoon storyboards and caption them appropriately. But Hanne was intrigued by the concept and decided to ask five of the oldest children in the school to do a group submission. She chose them, she says, because they had different skills and outlooks on life. Some had experience of being bullied, for example, while others were sporty, bookish or creative. She ended up with Imogen Buckley, Cameron Hunter, Ben Davies, Sam Willson and Mathew Johnson. Together they were a crack squad of anti-discrimination warriors; a sort of Famous Five to tackle prejudice.

In a series of meetings Hanne’s five ‘interesting and thoughtful children’ decided to focus on bullying. ‘We discussed what forms of prejudice there are and then tried to relate it to a school environment,’ she explains. ‘They knew about different cultures, they knew about disability and obesity and people who are not good at certain things. We then did research purely on bullying and tried to find out why children are bullied.’

We asked other children in the school about it and we realised that the majority of bullying happens because someone is different. We wanted to get the message across that it’s actually cool to be different. We wanted to make the bully look weaker than the bullied, because the bullied are strong enough to be different.’

They wanted to cover a wide age range of children, ‘because they knew that people are bullied from adulthood to old age,’ Hanne explains. Eventually they chose a fashion-themed concept, because it’s colourful, modern, interesting and direct. They wrote captions and designed storyboards to illustrate the film, and sent the project off. The punchline they chose is ‘All together or all alone – it’s your choice’. It’s a killer line, and it won.

The children went to the studios in Cardiff Bay twice, to watch *Fireman Sam* being made, and to discuss their ideas with the experts from the animation company Calon, who would turn their concept into a cinema standard film, and to watch it being made. The winning idea was chosen for the simplicity of its message and for including different aspects of equality and diversity. After the children learnt of their victory – over 1000 entries were received for the project – they were told live on camera, for a segment on ITV news and were, Hanne says, ‘over the moon’ – Calon took the concept and made the film. Then came the launch day in a cinema in Cardiff, attended by the Welsh education minister and local celebrities.

Hillary shows me the award. It’s a small wooden model of the nameless bully, who is humbled by the other children’s strength. He has spindly arms and spindly legs, and a big, angry face. She passes it from hand to hand, weighing it up. ‘We had an inspection this year and they said that the children’s respect for others was outstanding,’ she says. ‘By the time they leave school these children are able to talk knowledgeably about different cultures and accept lots of differences in life. And from this early groundwork came this astonishing achievement.’





Rachel Boyd  
Equality and Human  
Rights Commission

Story Ten

‘Working here has taught me that you can actually make things better and work towards an equal society where difference is celebrated’

Rachel Boyd took the first ever call to the Equality and Human Rights Commission helpline in Scotland.

‘It was from a disabled woman asking about better access to her workplace,’ she says. As one of three helpline operators in Scotland, Rachel is the first point of contact between the Commission and the people it serves. ‘A lot of it is listening to people,’ she says, ‘and making them feel acknowledged.’

Rachel sits in a small, glass-fronted office overlooking the streets of Glasgow. After studying International Relations at university and a series of what she calls ‘rubbishy’ jobs – she applied to work at the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

‘Human rights and equality are important to me,’ she says. ‘I come from a very political background. My parents are both activists. My grandmother was a Jew who fled Austria and my other grandparents were from a mining village in Scotland. So I grew up recognising that people aren’t treated equally, and that for some people there’s an endless struggle.’

Rachel’s job is to discover what people want, what their rights are and what help is available to them. The helpline, which has had over 75,000 contacts in its first year, is at the heart of what the

Commission is here to achieve; promoting fairness for everyone in Britain and protecting people from discrimination. A lot of her work is explaining to people what their rights actually are; employers call, to check they know the law and are implementing it correctly. It is a vast, 21st Century learning curve. ‘People might phone up who have got it completely wrong but at least they get it explained to them,’ she says. She also ponders the people who don’t call in – the gypsy and traveller communities, for example – and wonders what they want and how to help them. She calls them ‘the hidden communities’ and says she hopes they will emerge to seek out their human rights. One of the Commission’s jobs is to reach these ‘hidden’ people.

The telephone calls are initially divided into two areas – employment and services in places like shops, restaurants, schools and hospitals. The calls also cover all areas of discrimination. She counts them off on her fingers – they are race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, transgender, religion and belief, and age. They often cross over, she explains. People can experience gender discrimination, racism and ageism for example. The queries range from the very simple and easily solved to the complex and potentially law-changing. She

particularly likes ‘the interesting cases,’ but the simpler ones are easier to solve. ‘A lot of the time it’s just about saying, “Go and speak to your union representative”,’ she says. Sometimes she is happily surprised that the anti-discrimination legislation is working; at other times she feels like she is living in a 1970s’ sitcom. Gender discrimination, she says, is a painful example.

‘A lot of women come back from maternity leave and their jobs are gone,’ she says. ‘One woman called who had worked hard, got responsibility, got the trust of her colleagues, then got pregnant and came back and had been effectively demoted. Nobody would explain to her what was going on.’ And this, Rachel says, is happening 30 years after the legislation was put on the statute books.

She knows she is living in a work-in-progress society. She also gets calls about unequal pay, the desire for flexible working hours – from as many men as women, she notes – and, more commonly than you would think, about the reluctance of certain golf clubs to admit women. ‘But there is nothing we can do about that yet,’ she says. ‘The gender law doesn’t cover private members’ clubs, but it soon will.’



Individuals frequently contact the helpline about disability. Many people with mental health conditions, she says, don't know their rights. 'People very much think of physical disabilities when you talk about disability. A lot of people who are covered by the legislation don't think of themselves as disabled. We try to explain that people are disabled by not having access to society. They're disabled by not having the right support mechanisms in place and not having understanding from their employers.'

One of her particular interests is discrimination against children. The Commission's parliamentary team sent her some minutes from debate in the Scottish Parliament. 'Something came up about people saying they're sick of children,' she says. 'That seems quite clearly an act of discrimination.' I'd love to have a lot more young people accessing our service and being assured of their rights. I think there's an uncertainty about young people. I think they're used to being treated badly.'

I ask her what she means and she becomes very animated. She says she worked with young people in Nottingham, years ago. 'They lived in this really poor, deprived area and I worked in a school with people who had a lot of potential that wasn't being met because they were in failing schools. I feel quite defensive about young people. Things happen that are out of people's control and you need to protect them. If you're really going to talk about a meaningful kind of participation and people having confidence then you have to help children and young people.'

She tells me other stories about the calls she has taken – such as the Polish restaurant workers who are not allowed to speak in their own language at work. I wonder if she is ever hurt by what she hears on the telephone and I ask her about it.

She replies slowly. 'At first I found that quite difficult,' she says. 'We do get quite a lot of people who are upset by things that have happened to them. I think I should have done more, said something better, said the perfect thing.'

But as time's gone on I've realised it's really important just that people have somewhere to go.'

And working for the Commission has changed her, she says. 'It's really important for me to see that there are committed, passionate people who are working for equality, who believe that people deserve to have rights and don't deserve to be treated badly.'

'It's all about asking people to reflect on themselves and to speak, to be open. It's about being able to participate. Working here has taught me that things change and you can force those changes and you can guide other ones, and you can actually make things better and work towards an equal society where difference is celebrated.'

# 'Over 75,000 contacts to our helpline in our first year'

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ISBN: 978-1-84206-082-7

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