

Like my view of life, I would describe the 2009 ELSA youth meeting in Giggleswick, England as an epic holiday that changed every thought I had about stuttering. What started out as an opportunity to go abroad and meet other people from all across Europe who stutter turned out to be a major turning point in my self-acceptance of the fact that I have a stutter.

It all started with an early start on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> of August, Myself and Chris had booked a very early flight into Manchester, and as we boarded the plane we had no idea what to expect, but by that evening we were having a ball, making new friends and discovering ourselves more and more. The meeting kicked off proper with an interesting task; to stand up in front of a map and say a little bit about ourselves and where we had come from. I started out by saying I was shy and that people should come and talk to me rather than the other way around. Little did I know that as the course progressed, my apparent shyness would disappear, to the point where people were saying I defiantly wasn't shy, thus proving a long standing ideal that I've always had; that if you truly believe that you can see yourself differently, you can affect the world around you, and if you can affect the world around you, then you can affect the world itself. In other words, being a stutterer should not be a stumbling block to anything a person wants to achieve, a point well raised during the meeting.

The theme of the meeting was "the right to speak." - Human Rights Education and Intercultural Dialogue. As we were all stutters at the meeting, this was a very important aspect to discuss as we found out about the legislation that sets out the rights that we have as stutters. The major legislation can be found in the European Union treaties and Directives, however, one of the more important pieces of legislation can be found in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights; "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood". Thus, job interviews and job entitlements should not be discouraged just because a person stutters or not. People are all different, but this does not mean that one person can do a better job than someone else with the same qualifications, but is disabled. For example, I met a person at the meeting who worked in a tech support call centre for a phone company in Britain. This may shock some people as it is a common consensus that people who stutter cannot possibly do a better job answering phones as someone who doesn't stutter. This is absolute nonsense, as stereotypes rarely live up to their fictional fact, and to go against such a stereotype, and be successful is a huge step in the right direction towards a positive outlook for people who stutter. Another huge piece of legislation that was discussed was Article

13 of the Amsterdam Treaty. As a law student I was aware of the provisions that this treaty laid out; "...to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation." However I was not aware of the fact that by its definition, stammering or stuttering, is a disability, and can avail of this legislation where a person feels that they have been discriminated against. Thus in order to be in compliance with this Article, it is perfectly reasonable for a stuttering person to ask for extra time in an interview, or an oral exam, or not to be given a job as a result of their stuttering. This is a huge relief to learn, as the above situations are daunting at the best of times, but for a stutter, they can be incredibly stressful and may result in loss of sleep or other ailments.

Another aspect of the life of a stutterer that was raised is the raising of awareness of the problems facing a stutterer to the wider society of the world. It is widely known that 1% of the world's population stutters, but to use the iceberg analogy, the stutter is at the tip of the iceberg, but there are much bigger problems lurking beneath the surface, and which part of the iceberg sunk the titanic? Raising awareness of the problems facing stutters is quite difficult, as most people either don't accept it as a problem, or don't want to talk about it. Thus an excellent point raised was to show the short film "To Speak" in classrooms across the world. We were shown this film, and I can be absolutely certain that all of us were moved by it, as it told a story all too familiar for a stutter, that school can be a very difficult time, and that that time can continue into adulthood if it is not changed.

However, there was also fun to be had during the meeting, with drama workshops, a presentation and an improvisation performance to occupy us for the week. I feel that these were the most important part of the raising of self-awareness of stuttering, as they offered an opportunity to do something that wouldn't ordinarily be appealing to a stutterer. These were led by some of the leaders, who also stuttered, so they knew what to expect of us. The group was split into 4 smaller groups, and we were free to choose whatever angle we wanted to take on both the drama presentation and the presentation of an idea to raise awareness of stuttering to "bill gates". Of course they had to be about stuttering, but there was lots of fun and laughter, as there was a spirit of being in it together, so there was no pressure, as everyone would have to do something at some point. A result of this was that there was an air of complete calm and understanding, as well as patience among the group. Everybody was encouraged to speak and give their input. Therefore it was very easy to make friends, most of which I will always be in touch with as a result of the meeting.

In conclusion, I cannot praise the efforts of the organisers, Edwin and Anita, indeed the whole ELSA organisation for their planning and efforts in creating such a wonderful opportunity. I would highly recommend attending these meetings to anyone who stutters as they are a fantastic opportunity to do something that you wouldn't normally have done, and make new friends and have a lot of fun along the way. It will change your outlook on your life and open up new possibilities that you wouldn't normally have associated as something achievable, personally, I feel that once I accepted the fact that I stutter, but lost the idea that I thought I was shy, I realised that the future can't just be different, it has to be better. I don't know how to explain that, but I just have to go do it, stuttering and all. Thus I say, go forth and stutter, it's who you are, be proud of it and don't be afraid, because life is nothing more than one big epic holiday, go live it and don't let stuttering be a barrier to it!