

Stammering knows no boundaries

Saturday 25th July

The long awaited 7th ELSA Youth Meeting had finally arrived. I was so excited and apprehensive before my arrival at 3.15pm.

The location, Giggleswick, England was fantastic. The school where we were staying was steeped in history, some of which I would learn about that night. I met a fantastic group of people upon my arrival - initially the atmosphere was tense, but that wouldn't last.

After tea everybody met in the school conference room, called the Dutton room. The organisers, Edwin, Anita and Richard* introduced themselves; the floor was then open to us to give a short introduction about ourselves.

We were presented with our 2009 ELSA Youth Meeting t-shirts and it was time to get to know each other. The room had a snooker table, table football and sofas, which presented us with a great environment to relax and get to know each other in an informal way.

Sunday 26th July

After breakfast everybody was split up into groups. My first session was with Bob Adams, a curious character whose approach to stammering was spot on in my opinion.

Bob doesn't believe in speech manipulation techniques but in effective communication. This can be achieved with or without a stammer, and can be enhanced with performance skills, such as circus skills.

Bob's session was indeed performance skills. We used various apparatus for circus skills such as diablos and devil sticks. This gave us the opportunity to relax and get more comfortable with each other in the group.

Also in this session we did the 'trusting' exercise when in our pairings one person had to close their eyes and be guided by the other. We also played with plastic bags, the 'Buddhist bowl', bed of nails and even had the opportunity to play a didgeridoo, most entertaining.

The plastic bags were to show you can communicate without words. To link it to stammering, a repetitive flick of the bag meant you have gotten stuck on a word and are repeating it etc. This little exercise was also to show people that look, "you have just given a performance." This is because a lot of people who stammer feel that every speaking situation is performance, and a big deal is made of "what if I look like a fool during this performance?" So OK let's really give a performance, and go through that fear of looking a fool.

During this session we had to come up with ideas for our little performance in front of the group, Bob guided us thankfully.

After lunch we had a short presentation from Edwin about the work of national stammering associations and ELSA, including a brief summary on legislation.

Irina Papancheva from the European Disability Forum was also in attendance at the 2009 ELSA Youth Meeting. Her attendance was invaluable; she was the backbone behind all the discussion on human rights issues, which was the next session on the agenda. The session covered things such as gender equality and 'suppression techniques', and included some interesting topics.

Tea time. I enjoyed meal times for one reason; everybody met in the same room which made it feel like one big family.

After a quick rehearsal we had to put on our little performance we had been practicing in the morning, it went down very well. Everybody had a great time and as each session progressed it was chipping away at our shyness.

Monday 27th July

After breakfast my group met in the Dutton Room for a lecture on 'the workings of a national stuttering association' with Richard and Anita. During this lecture we were informed about what they do and why, we were asked what we think.

After morning tea we all went back to the Dutton Room for a talk on 'My stuttering life story' by Richard, Anita and Irina. The speeches were inspiring, people with a difficulty facing their biggest fears head on and how they have given something back to the stuttering community.

After lunch it was time for the biggest challenge, for me at least, drama class with Gudda. A very funny class, any inhibitions were left at the door, everybody chose to let go and commit to the class as best they could. I'll never forget the drama classes; so much fun was had by all.

After tea Bob gave us the chance to play with his performance equipment again and before his departure threw on a fire show for us all using all his skills - fire-eating etc. Bob your contribution to the meeting was most appreciated.

We then had a presentation by a local speech and language therapist who has a stammer.

Wow, tonight was a complete transformation for everybody. Finally everybody started to relax. Suddenly there was a big group huddled around the sofa talking and stammering, talking about stammering, stammering whilst talking, it was great to see,

Table football provided us all with many of hours of fun, inter-nation rivalries and all. Everybody came up for a little dance too.

Tuesday 28th July

We had a day out today, visiting a local cave, carved out by years of rainwater flooding through. The ELSA contingent then headed back to a town near Giggleswick called Settle, to have a look at the local market where some people stayed to browse, and others went their own way to explore or off for a quiet drink and conversation.

The school also allowed us inside their very own Chapel, completed in 1901. What a wonderful sight to see.

Some of us then went for a swim and a game of football before meeting back in the Dutton room for a short video about stammering. Anita decided we would play the truth game - thankfully it turned out ok and everybody had fun.

Wednesday 29th July

Another drama class after breakfast, this certainly woke us all up. We were split up into groups to come up with an idea for a drama performance for Thursday night.

After lunch our group met in Style House to discuss the presentation we had to do about a large cash investment to ELSA, what would we do with the money? Our idea of a radio station and utilising modern internet communication methods was interesting to be involved in.

We had to cut tea short so we could squeeze in some more practice for our presentation. The presentation went really well, everybody had the opportunity to speak and by the end of it we were all beaming. The other groups also had great ideas and the contest for first prize was tough, the judges disappeared upstairs to decide.

The evening entertainment was so enjoyable. People were so relaxed now and our true characters could come out, everybody enjoyed this opportunity.

An entertaining early morning fire drill proved to be the topic of conversation the following day.

Thursday 30th July

Another short drama class after breakfast and then we split up into our groups to prepare for the evening's entertainment, a drama production. We spent the whole day preparing for this.

The evening sun greeted us for a barbecue, and the feeling of sudden emptiness hit me - this was our last night together.

What a fantastic evening's entertainment, it was hilarious and everybody had shown a huge transformation in their character, showing a different side of them. A few small gifts were presented to the organisers, a small token of our appreciation to you all for giving us this fantastic opportunity.

A large sheet of paper for each participant with their name on it was left on the tables upstairs for us all to sign and leave a personal comment for that person. I enjoyed this process of personalising my message; this really was the end of a great week.

We stayed up late talking, signing papers and dancing.

Friday 31st July

I said my goodbyes to those who had made it to breakfast, I was glad to get this process over with. Goodbye is so final; I prefer 'see you again'. I drove two participants to the airport and then it was back to our own lives again.

Final Word

What a fantastic opportunity this was. I met so many great people, participated in drama classes, played sport, understood more about stammering and human rights, had some great conversation, and learned about different cultures and regardless of age, race, nationality or sex everybody was there for the same reason.

'Stammering knows no boundaries.'

Thank you all

Cameron

*Youth Meeting organisers:

Edwin J Farr MBE (UK) is Chair of the European League of Stuttering Associations.

Richard Bourgoudien (Netherlands) is a Board Member of Demosthenes, the Dutch Stuttering Association.

Anita Blom (Sweden) is Chair of the Swedish Stuttering Association and Vice Chair of the European League of Stuttering Associations.