

A MISSION TO CHANGE PERCEPTION



Keith Oliver and Chris Norris talk about how dementia has inspired them to improve services for others.

Keith Oliver's world changed when he was diagnosed with early onset dementia, also known as Alzheimer's, at the age of 55.

When he was diagnosed he was enjoying a career in teaching and was Head Teacher of Blean Primary School. He wasn't aware that dementia could affect people in their early 50s (or younger) until he was diagnosed. To him, and of course to many of us, he thought dementia or Alzheimer's happened to an elderly person. This is one of the things that prompted Keith to put so much of his time and effort into raising awareness and dispel some of the myths around the disease.

Since his diagnosis, Keith has worked tirelessly as a dementia envoy for KMPT, worked alongside the Alzheimer's Society and has even contributed to a book about dementia called 'Welcome to our World'. The book was written and launched in 2014 and brought together seven other writers who, with the help of University students and the Alzheimer's Society, wrote about their stories, the perceptions and their hopes for the future.

Keith said: "I am so proud of the people involved – we have a

carpenter, a policeman, a lifeboat man and people from other professions. Some have never written stories before in their lives. We're showing what we can do in spite of our diagnosis and, with the students' involvement, it's a true inter-generational project."



Fellow writer, Chris Norris, first noticed that he was experiencing problems with his perception of the world while working as a driving examiner. The 62-year-old former army musician said: "I was aware that I was finding it difficult to process the sequential order of driving test car journeys and placing events in their correct order. This difficulty became particularly pronounced when I had to write a report and de-brief the learner about what happened in the journey and its significant events."

In 2012, Chris went to see his GP, who referred him to a memory clinic, where he was diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia – a relatively unusual type of dementia that affects roughly 16,000 people in the UK. "When I was diagnosed, there was almost a sense of relief," said Chris, who added: "I felt that at last I knew what was wrong with me. Before my diagnosis, it was suggested that I could have depression, because the symptoms can sometimes be similar but I knew that it wasn't that. There were mixed feelings, but whether you've

been diagnosed or not, you're still the same person and that doesn't change."

Chris' pragmatic approach is shaped by strength of character and a focus on what he can do, rather than what he can't. "Reading music isn't as easy as it used to be," he said, "and these days I have to read each note because recognising the patterns is difficult now, and this slows things up. I'm not a Pollyanna and I can't ignore my dementia, but at the same time I have to live for the moment."

And for Chris that has included an array of activities, including a helicopter flight over London and driving a Chieftain tank. He said: "Those experiences also help with my dementia because they give me clear memories. I always refer to the phrase used by Winston Churchill, 'Never, never, never give up!'"

Quite soon after his diagnosis, he became involved in the Forget-Me-Nots in Kent which led onto him becoming a Dementia Service User Envoy to work alongside Keith. Between them they liaise with numerous organisations at a local and national level to improve services for people with a dementia diagnosis through education within the NHS and wider society. It is their mission to ensure that people with a dementia diagnosis have a voice that is heard in all things that affect them, using the slogan of 'Nothing for us without all of us.'

The book that Keith and Chris contributed to, 'Welcome to our World', can be obtained from Waterstones book shop or the Alzheimer's Society.