

Founders speech – GDA 10th Anniversary Ball

Rob Platts MBE, Saturday 5th August 2018

Thank you all so much for coming tonight to support the GDA's 10th anniversary fundraising ball. Tonight is about celebrating the achievements of the GDA and its membership and about raising some money to help us carry on with our work and, importantly, it's about having a good time. I'm guessing you are all hungry, so I shall try to be brief.

Many of you have a good understanding of why the Guernsey Disability Alliance exists, and, while there **is** some information on each table, I thought it would be useful if I fleshed this out a little for those of you who don't know so much about the organisation. It may help to explain why it is so important that the GDA continues its work.

So, generally, governments hold the keys to many of life's essentials – those things that are vital to our life chances. These essentials include things like education, employment, transport, housing, health and information services, and even access to justice - These are all controlled, in one way or another, by government.

Historically, however, access to all these essentials has been more difficult for disabled people because they faced barriers that people without disabilities don't face. Those barriers can be physical, procedural or attitudinal.

There are scores of disability related charities and voluntary groups in the island. They are often stretched just delivering services to their members and they don't have the resources, expertise, or a powerful enough voice, to tackle the systemic barriers facing disabled islanders.

So, in a nutshell, the Guernsey Disability Alliance, was formed to be a collective voice of islanders affected by disability, both through direct communication with individual disabled members and through communication with our 40 plus member charities. Our main aim is to achieve equality of opportunity for all islanders affected by disability, and for the inherent rights and dignity of disabled people to be recognised and respected.

We approach these aims in several ways, but the principle way is by working with the States and by being actively involved and consulted in all matters of policy and legislation that affect disabled people.

The GDA, often through its successful "We all Matter, eh?" brand, is also very active in raising awareness and improving accessibility through various other sectors of society. For example, with employers and service providers, with industry bodies, with schools and with other voluntary organisations.

We also work closely with our sister organisation, Access for All, on many access projects.

Since 2008, the GDA has been responsible for putting and keeping disability firmly on the political agenda in Guernsey.

The GDA's achievements are remarkable; but I can't pretend our work has been plain sailing. The challenges of working with the States and trying to achieve changes in attitudes, culture, policy and law are enormous. We have worked with three States assemblies since 2008 and have had to educate a new crop of politicians before and after each election!

On the positive side, now that the Committee for Employment and Social Security has been given responsibility for the Disability and Inclusion Strategy, we are seeing much improved planning and empathy and greater application of resources.

We **are** seeing progress and we are cautiously optimistic that some of the major Strategy projects, such as the discrimination legislation, the awareness raising, and the Equality and Rights Organisation, are at last gaining traction.

The GDA's role, back in 2008, was all about getting disability on the agenda - getting the government to realise the breadth and scale of the issues and challenging the States to formulate a plan to tackle those issues to improve the lives of all those affected by disability, including the 13,000 islanders with long term impairments and the islands 4,000 carers.

We have achieved that, but we have a continuing and vital role to play in ensuring that the plan is implemented correctly.

Guernsey was a long way behind many other places in the world with regard disability issues, but, the upside to this is that we can learn from the mistakes and successes of others.

In other jurisdictions, notably the UK and USA, disability organisations similar to the GDA, thought their work was done once discrimination legislation was promised. At the time, they were so elated that discrimination legislation was being developed and so fearful of upsetting the apple cart, that they did not question or resist the detail of that legislation. The result is that their legislation is frankly awful. It is wholly because of the GDA that Guernsey has not simply copied UK legislation.

There are many strands to Guernsey's Disability Strategy and many matters which disabled people should be consulted on, but I make special mention of the legislation because it confirms the legal right for disabled people to access, without discrimination, all those essentials I talked about earlier and because it's a good example of why our work is so important.

Well, I said I'd keep it as brief as I could, but I hope my "in a nutshell" explanation has been helpful.

Before I finish, I must give thanks to some important people and organisations.

My first thank you, and it's a huge one, is to the Nicholas Hall Group for sponsoring being our main sponsor tonight. A big round of applause please to show appreciation to the Nichols Hall Group.

The pre-dinner drinks were sponsored by Specsavers and the table arrangements were supplied by ALP flowers. Let's raise a glass and give a cheer to Specsavers and to ALP Flowers!

The St Pierre Park hotel has supported the GDA in all sorts of ways over the years and their assistance with the ball has been fantastic, I must also thank them for their contributions to the raffle and auction – a big hand please for St Pierre Park.

I must say thank you to all those who have had a hand in organising the ball. But, tonight wouldn't have happened if someone hadn't volunteered to take the lead in organising the event. That someone is Cath McCook. Cath please come up to accept a small token of our appreciation.

Now, many people have been involved, over the years, in making the GDA a success, I don't have time to mention them all tonight, but I would like to mention a few people whose contributions have been particularly special.

The first being the late Dave Purdy. Dave injured his spine in a swimming accident in Herm when he was aged 18 and used a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Dave, who was Vice Chair of the GDA, passed away in 2010. He was a lifelong campaigner for disability rights. Next time you use the ramp in town – the one which goes up to the market, look out for the plaque, halfway up, dedicated to Dave. Few people have affected me so profoundly as Dave did and his spirit and influence live on in the GDA. I'd like us all to raise a glass in his memory.

Last year I was surprised and humbled to be recognised for my work relating to disability. In truth I felt there were many others who were more deserving. The next person I'm going to mention tops that list. That person is Shelaine Green. I'm so pleased Shelaine is here tonight. Shels did more than anyone to establish the GDA, to coax it into shape, to give it life and an identity, and then to nurture it and be its backbone for an extraordinarily long time. Shelaine was chair for, I think 8 years. The truth is, without Shelaine there would be no GDA, we probably wouldn't have a Disability and Inclusion Strategy and disabled islanders would be facing a less optimistic future than they do now. Please come up here Shels, to accept a small token of our appreciation.

Finally, I have to thank Karen Blanchford. Karen's contribution and support can only be described as extraordinary. Last year was a particularly testing year for the GDA financially and operationally. Without Karen's support, sacrifice and determination, the GDA would not have survived. Please come up here Karen.



Well, it just remains for me to thank you all again. I hope you have a wonderful evening. Thank you.