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**"I'm proud to have been there at the very beginning of The Disabilities Trust."**

[intro]

**As The Disabilities Trust's 40th anniversary year draws to a close, co-founder and former chair Stephen Love talks about why he's proud to have helped set up the charity. Here, the 86-year-old great granddad of four** **explains how he met joint founders Barbara Besant and Norman Thody and shares his memorable moments from the early days.**

[main copy]

"Being involved with The Disabilities Trust is one of the best things I've done in my life. A lot has changed since I helped set up the charity but treating people with respect remains at the core of its work. Just because someone has a disability doesn't mean they should be treated differently to anybody else. That guiding philosophy is still there today.

The Disabilities Trust was the first organisation to do what it does. When we set up the charity in 1980, we had no idea how much it would evolve in 40 years. We had small ambitions to build somewhere disabled people could live. But we couldn't raise enough money. Then we received money from Burgess Hill Town Council and the Ernest Kleinwort Charitable Trust which made this ambition possible.

After we built our first home in East Sussex, we were able to spread the word in other areas. It was about meeting the needs of people around the country as they became evident.

[subheading] **Providing support to disabled people**

I was a headteacher of a school in Lancing, West Sussex in the late 70s. One day, Barbara Besant, the mother of two boys at the school, came to my office. She had been to a talk at Chailey Heritage School for disabled children. The headmaster there explained that when young people left the school they had nowhere to go because England lacked provision for older disabled people. Barbara was shocked about this and thought I might be able to help.

I'm a do-gooder. I think the two best words in the English language are ‘we’ and ‘yes’. In other words, my philosophy is: ‘Be positive and work together to make the world a better place.’ What Barbara was saying fitted in with that. I thought: ‘If we can do something to help these young people, we should.'

Barbara and I met regularly to talk about how we could help. We heard about a group in North Sussex which was looking to do similar work. The group was led by Norman Thody. We contacted him to see if we could link up. When we met, the three of us got on well and decided to set up The Disabled Housing Trust, as it was then known.

[subheading] **Highlights of the early days**

We invited our friends and contacts to join a committee and had regular meetings in my school office. I was elected to be the chair. I remember making coffee for everyone halfway through the meetings. It was a small outfit at that stage.

We didn't have much money, so started fundraising. I pushed a young disabled girl in a wheelchair from Lancing to Burgess Hill. It was around a 20-mile walk and a good way to get some publicity.

The Ernest Kleinwort Charitable Trust put us in touch with the Duchess of Norfolk who became a patron of the charity. I would visit her once every couple of months at Arundel Castle to keep her up-to-date on the latest news about The Disabilities Trust. We would sit and have tea, and I would give a report.

The Duchess introduced us to Princess Diana. One of my most memorable moments is when Diana came to open our second home in Eastbourne. I remember that during the opening ceremony she asked me to hold her handbag while she put the plaque on the wall. There's a picture somewhere of me holding her handbag while she declared The Disabilities Trust property open.

[subheading] **Life president**

After I stepped down as chair, I became a life president of The Disabilities Trust. I don't play an active role in the charity anymore, but staff and trustees keep me up-to date, so I know what's going on.

The charity works with people with different needs now, not just those with physical disabilities. The two biggest challenges are competition and lack of funding. Other organisations have come along and are doing similar work. The Disabilities Trust has adapted its services using the latest technology and clinical innovation to continue providing a high level of care to the people it supports.

[subheading] **Reaching thousands of disabled people**

I am proud to have played a part in setting up The Disabilities Trust and to have been there at the very beginning. It's a great source of satisfaction to know that the thousands of people who have been helped were reached because of what Norman, Barbara and I did all those years ago.

Personally, after Covid-19, my wife Heidy and I can’t wait to see our family together again in spring 2021. We will continue to oversee the work of the orphanage in India that we set up, the Love Trust for Indian Children in Need. It has saved the lives of around 1,000 children. Love is quite a handy surname for this kind of work.

I hope to stay involved with The Disabilities Trust which is still important to me.”

**[Find out more about the history of The Disabilities Trust](https://www.thedtgroup.org/the-disabilities-trust-news-and-media/news/an-a-to-z-of-40-years-of-improving-the-lives-of-people-with-disabilities-part-1)**

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