

## An invitation to parents and carers

In July 2023 Social History of Learning Disability (SHLD) Conference will take place at the Open University in Milton Keynes. This is a great opportunity to take part for the first time, especially if you are a family with a child with learning disabilities with high support needs.

I used to go to Milton Keynes with my daughter Johanna, who had extremely severe cerebral palsy. She had epilepsy, visual impairment, learning difficulties and was a wheelchair user. We both really enjoyed going to the conference and went for a few years together. We had experience of doing presentations together before we went for the first time. We were motivated to try going, because we were interested in the theme, which was friendships and people with learning disabilities. We really wanted to share our experiences of making friendships in our community. When we got to the conference we spoke together - with Johanna interjecting opinions, with facial expression, body movements and vocalisations.



Although we were nervous about speaking, the audience were so lovely - a mix of people, some with learning disabilities, some family members, and a range of academics from undergraduates to professors - with research interests in learning disabilities and inclusion or archiving life stories. The delegates could not have been kinder when we finished talking - they came and made friends with us. We felt we had found a new community of people who shared our interests. Some of those friendships continue to thrive. The Open University and the other delegates did all that they could to make the experience accessible to us too. People understood that at times my co presenter, Johanna, may not be able to take part due to an event like a severe epileptic fit.

Our involvement with the SHLD conference led to Johanna and I being invited to take part the inclusive archive project with Sue Ledger and Liz Tilley, of the Open University, and to the contribution that we made to the book 'Belonging for People with Profound Intellectual and Multiple Disabilities', edited by Mel Nind and Iva Strnadova (2020).<sup>i</sup> In a chapter in this book we describe, using multiple voices, the experience of belonging in our community. In a later chapter, Sue, Liz

and I build a case for why participation in history and heritage matters to people like Johanna.

Some of the best bits of the SHLD conference were the evening meal out together, having breakfast in the hotel with our new friends, and catching up with people in the breaks. The Open University feeds its delegates well. There was so much fun and laughter. It was such a good experience for us that I would like other people to have this opportunity. If you are thinking of going do contact me and I will share with you, the nitty gritty of the ways around the difficulties of travel and staying away from home in Milton Keynes.



Johanna died in 2019. Few people with high support needs attend the conference. It maybe you know of a family who would enjoy the experience together as much as we did. If so do pass this invitation on to them. They can be assured of a warm welcome.

**Catherine de Haas**

**January 2023**

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.routledge.com/Belonging-for-People-with-Profound-Intellectual-and-Multiple-Disabilities/Nind-Strnadova/p/book/9780367202958>