

Gerald's Story, So Far

Gerald Masterson

My name is Gerald and I am 29 years old and I have cerebral palsy. When I was born the doctor told my family that I would do nothing in my life. I wish I could meet him. Maybe most disabled people feel the same way. This paper is about my life since I was four to the present day.

My Childhood and School Days

When I was four years old I started nursery in a school for children who have a physical disability. My communication at that time was just pointing to things and some signs. This was slow and frustrating. Maybe if I had had a communication aid things might have been different because I could have told people what I wanted, but who knows! When I was thirteen I had to move in to a children's home and that was frightening because I knew nobody at first, and I had to meet people like the staff and the other children who were there. However, the people were nice and it was easy to join in. It was sad for me at the start because I was used to the love of my family, but I had to try to get on with it, and most of the children would have felt the same way. About that time I also changed schools, and started at Secondary School. This is a big change in people's life, able bodied or disabled, but it was good. I wanted to move there to get O Grades and Scotvec Modules which I did in English, Arithmetic and Modern Studies.



Going to College

I did not know what would happen when I had to leave Secondary School but I decided to move on to College. I did not realise this was the start of many changes in my life. Everything happened so fast. Something new was happening to me every week. I had been using a letter board for my communication, but it was no use in College. I wanted to join in able bodied classes. The first thing I had to do was to see about getting a communication aid. I went to the Scottish Centre of Technology for the Communication Impaired to try different communication aids. I liked the *TouchTalker* and while I was at College I used a *TouchTalker* (bought by the College) and got to know the program *Words Strategy*. It was hard to remember everything and it took me about a year. While I was at College I also did courses in office skills and record keeping.

When I went to College I had to leave the children's home. It was time for me to be doing more things like a normal 20 year old does – to be more independent. I went to stay in a hostel for people with physical disabilities.

Moving into My Own Flat

When I was about to finish College I was asked if I wanted to move into my own flat. I said 'yes' immediately. I asked another man if he wanted to move in with me. He said 'yes' and he was a good help to me. Before I moved in I had to organise help; carers to come in the morning and at night to help me. If I did not have my *TouchTalker* I could not telephone for help and that would have stopped me getting my own flat.

Getting My Own TouchTalker

I love football and I especially like a team called Glasgow Celtic. I have been going to see them for about twelve years and I am in a Supporters Club. The people there are nice and help me to go to see all the games. My friends at the football were happy to see me using the *TouchTalker* for the first time and I told them I only had this *TouchTalker* while I was at College. They were not happy with that and they put on dances, a race night and a disco to get the money for me to have my own *TouchTalker*. They raised the money to buy me a *TouchTalker* in seven weeks! If I had not known them I might have had problems getting that money to buy the *TouchTalker*.

This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 1996 ISAAC Biennial Conference, held in Vancouver, Canada and published in Communication without Speech (1996). It was updated in 1998.

Working

I left College six years ago and I had nothing to do during the day until I was asked to be an Ambassador for Liberator Ltd. The Ambassador job involves talking at colleges and schools and at European Minspeak Conferences. I have spoken at many conferences. I like helping people because I know how hard it is for people who do not have a communication aid. Four years ago I was happy to be asked if I wanted to be a typist in a Housing Association for two days. I worked there coming up for two years. I used my *TouchTalker* to help me use the computer at home and at work. Everyone was nice at work and the only problem was that I used to be spoiled rotten because I was the only man with five women – which I didn't like, well maybe sometimes!

Living My Life

I think this next bit of the paper is, to me, the most important thing which has happened in my life. I know to a lot of able bodied people this is just a thing they do every week, but for me this was big. I wanted to start going out to the pub on Friday and Saturday nights. The first couple of weekends my friend went with me. Now I go by myself by calling a taxi. I have met some nice people who help me get my drinks and still meet new people every week. This is good because I have to tell people what my *TouchTalker* is for. The problem is that most places are not good for wheelchairs to get in, which is bad, but I am used to the places I go to.

I think to myself some nights that I could just sit at home all day and watch TV every day because I am disabled - but what is the point of life doing that? People say I do well because I am able to get out myself, but with my *TouchTalker* and my wheelchair I feel I can be just like an able bodied person.

What Has Happened In The Last Two Years?

During this time I left my work at the Housing Office. This was sad, but the Office was taken over by another agency and some of my workmates left as well. I asked the local Community Service Volunteers to find me voluntary work with disabled kids. They found it hard to get work for me. Then one day I had the idea of asking my old school if I could help out. Every Tuesday morning I help the teacher who is working with four children using AAC. Two boys have *TouchTalkers* with *Language, Learning & Living (LLL)*, one girl has a *DeltaTalker* with *LLL* and one boy has a *LightTalker* with *Reach for the Stars*.

I have also got a *DeltaTalker* now instead of my *TouchTalker*. It is much better. The things I like about it are the icon prediction, the way that I can spell in a word and the *DeltaTalker* will show me the icon sequence (if I've forgotten!), the back-lit screen which makes it easier for people to read my screen in the dark if they can't hear my voice (like in pubs – where it is dark and noisy).

I have also got involved in an Advocacy Group, and we aim to run courses to help people speak up for themselves.

At the moment I am still working in my old school with the children. I would like to expand this work to other schools, etc.. In October 1997 I went on the internet and found this to be a great help to me. It has made me more independent, helped to establish links with professionals and to find many new friends all over the world. I enjoy using the World Wide Web and find it useful for getting information. I have also begun to use Chat to talk to people. Hopefully within the next year I intend to move to a flat on my own.

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