In our Words: Sixty years of the National Autistic Society and the story of autism in the UK

Oral History Interview with Peter Cullum. May 2024.

00:00:00 Oscar Hilder

I am Oscar Hilder interviewing Peter Cullum for the National Autistic Society's *In our words* project. The date is Friday the 10th of May 2024. So, Peter, can you please confirm your name, how it is spelt?

00:00:15 Peter Cullum

Ah, yes. Peter Cullum. Peter I'm sure you can spell, Cullum C U double L U M for mother.

00:00:22 Oscar Hilder

Excellent. So, we're going to go on to the first topic, which is about your, how your involvement with the National Autistic Society started. So, take us back to the moment your journey with the National Autistic Society began. What inspired or motivated you to get involved with the charity?

00:00:41 Peter Cullum

Yeah. Really, just before that, I suppose I need, because I think this is potentially relevant, going back to my own personal background, I had the good fortune to enjoy a very good education. Come from a reasonably humble background, I suppose, but, sort of, did the Master's degree, the MBA, and PhD, and that was, sort of, for me, quite pivotal in terms of what I was able to achieve in my own business life, I suppose. And, we had some successes in the mid-2000, 2005, 2006, and that generated quite a lot of proceeds from the business, and it was at that point that I agreed with my family that we would earmark

£30 million that, to actually put into the Cullum Family Trust, and we were then going to use those funds to help, what we would regard as, good causes. And the primary theme that we all agreed was going to be children, young people, with particular issues that we felt we could support. So that was, sort of, if you like, just sort of a bit of the background in terms of the, sort of, overarching thinking that I had with my family. In terms of the first contact with the National Autistic Society, was really, the provocation for it was my eldest grandson, at the age of four, was diagnosed with autism. He was on the spectrum. And, I have to concede, that was really my first experience of grappling with the challenges that these, sort of, educational needs bring to young people in a society that, certainly it's changing, but in a society that really didn't seem to fully recognise those challenges. And my grandson, Codey, we were fortunate enough to be able to, you know, provide him with his educational needs, in the earlier years anyway, but we then established that this seemed incredibly unfair that a lot of young people simply didn't get those opportunities for a, if you like, a tailored education, recognising their own, sort of, specific issues. And so it was in 2011, actually, I, and it was in conjunction with Coutts Bank. They had the Coutts Philanthropy Board, and, as a customer of Coutts, I was a board member. And it was, in fact, two people at Coutts who introduced me to Mark Lever, the former chief executive at the National Autistic Society, for an introductory meeting to have a chat about what we might be able to do in terms of supporting the National Autistic Society. So it was some 13 years ago when we had that first conversation with Mark Lever. So that was sort of the beginning.

00:04:18 Oscar Hilder

Lovely, thank you. So, elaborating a little bit more about your, the diagnosis of your grandson, Codey, when it occurred, what was, you know, sort of like, kind of like, on a personal level, what did it mean to you at the time? How did it make you feel and what did it, as in, you've spoken about how it's, that's what caused you to work, the Cullum Family Trust, with the National Autistic Society, but on a more personal level, how did that really, how did that diagnosis make feel?

00:04:45 Peter Cullum

Yeah, we were all very, very concerned. And, I suppose, to be perfectly honest, our knowledge of autism was very, very limited. And, in keeping with his normal habits, my son, Simon, then, sort of, spent many, many hours over many, many days, sort of, researching all aspects connected to autism. And we, literally, decided that it was... a very widespread

sort of issue, and worldwide, not just in the UK, and so that provocation was, OK, what can our trust do, maybe, to try to provide some level of support for these young people. And, again, it was a partnership with my, so, whilst I took the lead role initially, this has always been a partnership with my son, Simon, and the people at the National Autistic Society.

00:05:42 Oscar Hilder

So, elaborating on, a little bit more from, about the, sort of like, the knowledge of autism, and you mentioned sort of researching into it, can you remember much about what knowledge of autism was like amongst the general public and how it was generally perceived in wider society back when you first started working with the National Autistic Society?

00:06:02 Peter Cullum

Yeah, I mean, I suppose to be perfectly blunt about it, I think our limited knowledge was the common situation where, and maybe I, ashamed to admit really, but maybe I'd, sort of, seen these young people as being, sort of, part of the 'Naughty Brigade', not really understanding the big social interaction issues that these young people have. So, and I feel, I feel it's still the same today, where those individuals who have no direct contact with young people on the spectrum, or friends or family members, then I think it's quite difficult to really fully understand and appreciate those challenges. Where I've been in, sort of, in situations where, to us, it was obvious that this young person had the, sort of, autistic issues, but, actually, the majority of the people in the gathering probably didn't, and just saw it as a rude little chap, who ought to be disciplined by his parents. Which is a, sort of, terrible thing, but that's how we saw it at the time. And, no, we did spend quite a bit of time talking to a lot of people who were well connected with the whole subject of autism. And it wasn't just the National Autistic Society, there were individuals that we met who provided us with some great insights. And personal experiences, as well. And this is something that I admire about the people within the National Autistic Society, was, with Mark Lever and Caroline Stevens and her senior colleagues, that they all have, or it seems, that they all have very close connectivity with the challenges, personally, that autism brings to families. And I think because of the empathy, the very strong empathy, that enables them to, quite frankly, become more effective in terms of what they do within the National Autistic Society.

00:08:23 Oscar Hilder

Great, thank you. So, going on, so on to the last question of this topic, obviously you have quite a big career in, sort of, insurance and philanthropy, how much did, if at all, did this career in insurance influence your involvement with the society, going on from what you were speaking about earlier with how well you did with, in, sort of like, in your earlier life?

00:08:44 Peter Cullum

Yeah. Again, it stems back from the... the moment when we sold part of the business and it generated some large sums of money. And, it wasn't me imposing stuff on my family, it, we all had the same view that we had a responsibility to try to use some of those funds to actually provide help and support to people who'd been dealt a poor hand. That, again, that sounds a bit corny, but that's, sort of, our thinking. Did we immediately attach ourselves to the National Autistic Society? No, we didn't. It was young people, and probably a specific, sort of, poverty connectivity, I suppose. But, before that, we had a, when I was running Towergate, we charged customers a small fee, and part of that fee we would donate to four, four or big five specific charities, and that was several million pounds a year. And the charities didn't include the National Autistic Society, they were Great Ormond St Hospital, Help the Hospices, Cancer Research, Childline. And those charities, it was interesting, because it was a foundation within our organisation, it was the staff who elected which particular charities that they wanted to support, so it was, sort of, a democratic decision. And my direct involvement with a number of these charities made me realise how desperately important it is that they receive the right level of funding in order to continue to do the marvellous work that they were doing.

00:10:38 Oscar Hilder

Great, thank you. So we're moving on to the next topic now, which is more specifically about the Cullum Family Trust and the Cullum Centres. So, you've told us a bit about your aims with the creation of the Cullum Family Trust about 15, 10, you know, about 15 years ago. Can you remember any of the specific challenges that you faced when it came to the establishment of the trust and how you overcame those?

00:11:02 Peter Cullum

Yeah, yes, I mean, we had to take a lot of legal advice to make sure that the foundation itself was properly constructed. When I say properly, that it effectively ticked all the boxes as far as the Charities Commissioners were concerned. We had a very clear mandate in terms of how the charitable funds were going to be used. We had to define within certain guidelines as to the support that we were looking to provide. We weren't in a, wasn't a straitjacket, as such, but it was important that we became quite specific in terms of those causes that we were seeking to support going forward. And, as always, HMRC also want to make sure that, you know, the charities are, if you like, doing what they set out to do, because there are, I guess, some charities that maybe get, go close to the wind in terms of some of their activities, and I'll say no more on that. So, we had to satisfy the Charities Commissioners, make sure the lawyers got everything properly documented. I guess we now live in an evidence-based society, so the documentation was very important. And, at that moment in time, the National Autistic Society were not specifically included within our definition, albeit education was one of those themes that we'd adopted within the trust. And it was very important to me that my children were actively involved because I needed to make sure that they were on the same page as me in terms of understanding that giving is good. And you have to be responsible with giving. It's not just, never just writing a cheque. I've always recognised that, clearly, the money is important, of course it is. But it, to me, it needs to be much more than just writing a cheque. You know, there needs to be the involvement, there needs to be the commitment to be as actively involved as possible, given all the other constraints that we have as individuals, to work with those charities. And this has been one of the highlights for me personally, and for Simon, in working with the National Autistic Society, that there are some extraordinarily good people within the organisation who have a big heart and are hugely committed to make a difference.

00:13:48 Oscar Hilder

Great. So going on a little bit more about that from the Cullum Family Trust, can you tell me a little bit more about your role in the trust, both in the present day, and also from when it started, up until now?

00:14:02 Peter Cullum

Yeah, yeah, yes, no, good question. Initially, I guess I was the main driver, because I, sort of, created it, but, over time that has changed. The day-to-day, sort of, relationship with

the National Autistic Society is now managed by my son, Simon. And he empathises with the National Autistic Society, given his own, sort of, family connectivity with them, with those issues. And I have my daughter, Claire, who is the, effectively, chief executive that looks after... all other aspects of our work, outside of the National Autistic Society. And that's principally, we work quite closely in partnership with the Sussex Community Foundation. And we provide annual donations that go to support local causes. Most of them quite small, so the donation is maybe £5,000, £10,000, so they're not huge, but to these very small charities it does make a difference. And we've become, without wanting to sound as though we're bureaucrats, but we... we like to be able to verify the outcomes. We want to convince ourselves that it was worth making the donation and it has made a difference. Without being too intense and too encyclopaedic about it, and that's what Claire does, and my other daughter, Abby, sort of assists Claire in that work. And it has, I just know, it has helped them recognise the importance that helping those who, as I said earlier, have been dealt a bad hand in trying to make a difference, albeit our, the difference we make may be relatively small, but we do our best.

00:16:06 Oscar Hilder

Good. So, just to elaborate a little bit further on, you've spoken at quite length about, of course, the role that your children have played within the trust, can you name any, sort of, specific, just briefly, sort of, any specific projects or activities or movements that they have contributed to or led, sort of, themselves? You know, whether that be Simon, Claire, or Abby, or anybody else.

00:16:28 Peter Cullum

Yeah. Well, Simon, now, is the main point of contact with the National Autistic Society, and he remains very passionate about the work we're doing in terms of the Cullum Centres. And... we have a number of discussions ongoing with local education authorities with the aim of agreeing to build more centres. And, again, I'm still involved, but Simon takes the lead, and it's important because I'm not getting any younger and, therefore, it's quite important that he's the man who, sort of, leads the charge from the Cullum Family Trust perspective. Claire looks after the relationship with the Sussex Community Foundation, and she liaises with them to select those local charities that we're going to support each year. And, again, the people at the Sussex Community Foundation, they're impressive people, and they understand what we're trying to achieve. And so, again, they don't provide us with specific proposals that they know are out of scope, so that works quite

well. Claire also has a, one of her passions is the supporting of the Rocking Horse Foundation in Brighton. And we, I say we, Claire organises, we provide ventilators for the, in the children's wards, which makes a huge difference to a lot of children with serious breathing issues. We've just established, or Claire has just established, the Cullum Wellbeing Centre at the Brighton Hospital, which is there to help young people who've been involved in self-harm. There's some brilliant consultants there who tell me that they can stitch up the wrist, but they can't fix the mind, and therefore we provide the counselling services for these young people to try to get the, sort of, mental health support that is so necessary for them. So we're not a one trick pony in terms of what we do, but, clearly, young people is, and continues to be, at the heart of what we're trying to do. We also, couple of other charities that are, one in particular, Little Gate Farm, which is a, as the name suggests, it's a farm, which provides education in agricultural terms for young people that enables them to then seek local employment. And, again, some lovely people that do that, and we are, we are in, we provide the funding to have an employment officer who seeks to get employment for these young people in the local community, and that's proving to be very successful.

00:19:27 Oscar Hilder

Great, all sounds excellent. So, you mentioned, you're sort of doing my job for me actually, you've mentioned the Cullum Centres, which brings us very well onto the next topic, which is, can you tell me about the development of the Cullum Centres in partnership with the National Autistic Society? How did the idea begin, how was it established in the first place?

00:19:47 Peter Cullum

Yeah, good question. I mean, it was really a conversation that took place in, crikey, it was in 2011. Again, with Mark Lever. And it was really his thinking, in terms of, could we consider creating, building a separate centre specifically for young people on the spectrum. And we had... quite a number of discussions with education authorities. Clearly, you have to be on side with the local education authority, otherwise nothing much changes. And, I must confess, I think they were rather suspicious to start with as to why would we want to do this? And it was almost, maybe, maybe it's a bit unfair, but, you know, we were perhaps muscling in on their patch. You know, what do we know about education? And, in fairness, probably wasn't unreasonable response, in some respects. But, of course, the National Autistic Society had their own schools and, at Radlett, in

particular, and also quite close to where I am in Kent. So the National Autistic Society had a lot of experience of running schools for young people with special education needs, so they were, you know, coming from a state of knowledge as... And, I think, yeah, there was a good rapport with the local education authorities, but, and life has taught me, that when you are dealing with such large organisations, progress is slow. And it did take a, you know, a huge amount of time to convince the key people in those education authorities that this was worth a pilot exercise. And, eventually, we got the go ahead and the thumbs up to develop our first centre, which was Salesian school, which you may have all the details, in Chertsey. And, again, I know I, sort of, keep talking about the remarkable people that I've had the good fortune to meet, but the headteacher at Salesian, was a brilliant leader of young people, he really was. And he was extremely supportive, so we worked quite closely with him. Because without the headteacher's full support, then these things don't happen. And it was, in many respects, it was, sort of, it was innovative, but we were working from a, sort of a, if you like, a blank sheet of paper to start with. And we created the centre, which we were all very proud of, but we learned quite a lot on the way. When I say we, more so the educationalists, rather than me and my family personally. But, no, we pressed ahead, and the feedback over the past, crikey, what, five years? Six? No, more, seven years, has been exceptionally good.

00:23:06 Oscar Hilder

Excellent. So, elaborating a little bit further on what you said, sort of, at the beginning, you mentioned it was, sort of, in 2011 with Mark Lever, is that correct? Who, sort of, was helping with the development. So, what was, sort of like, the inspiration for the creation of the centres, and what was specifically the aims of the centres? What were you trying to achieve with them when the idea was first proposed and you decided to go ahead with it?

00:23:29 Peter Cullum

Well, I suppose the general, sort of, precept at the time was that a lot of the young people on the spectrum were lost in the mainstream, sort of, educational environment, and that was very detrimental to their own personal progress. And they were often, well there was a lot of bullying going on, they weren't well understood. And by that I mean, not only their own peer group, but also the teaching fraternity were, had some quite serious limitations in terms of their understanding of, sort of, special education needs and how they can work with and help young people on the spectrum. So, we took the view that we'd like to provide a safe environment, safe's not the right word, but a supportive environment where

that would be their own particular space where they can have their own, again, I don't mean solitude in its natural definition, but literally a non-threatening environment which was specifically designed for those young people on the spectrum. And that was the, essentially, that was created by... by a firm of architects, who had an understanding of these requirements. If you just give it to a, if you like, a normal bunch of architects, then they will come up with what you might regard as a bog-standard, sort of, functional design, but we were really keen to make sure we had sensory environments where people could relax. And that proved to be a successful formula. But it was, no, there were risks attaching to it, because we hadn't done this before, so, therefore, anything that's new will potentially have, maybe, flaws in part of the overall design. Which was the case, by the way, we did learn from Salesian, and the future Cullum Centres are a little different to the first one. And I'm so pleased that the key people at the National Autistic Society who were dealing with this particular project didn't take any criticism personally, they saw it as part of their own learning. And so, the second centre that we helped create, we wanted it to be within the mainstream environment. So it was still a separate unit, but it wasn't, with Salesian, it was a unit that was detached from the main school, so there was always this danger that those young people would be seen as the, you know, the odd kids over the way, and, therefore, that got in the way of their integration, if you follow me. So making it part of the main building, it may sound a bit trivial, but it did make a big difference. And I was blown away by some of the sixth form, can I call them that? I'm old language, sixth form. But the more mature students, particularly at Rodborough, they took it upon themselves to buddy up with these younger people to help them. And that was very, yeah, it was a lovely thing to see. Where they wanted to help them, as opposed to they're just the odd kids who seem a bit, sort of, strange, in terms of their behaviour.

00:27:08 Oscar Hilder

That sounds very, very good. So you've mentioned with the, that you had particular challenges with the local education authorities and how you overcame those, can you remember any other sort of challenges that you faced with the development and also the running of the Cullum Centres and how you overcame those challenges?

00:27:28 Peter Cullum

Yeah, I mean the, still remains today, one of the big challenges is, and will continue to be, I'm sure, the budget. So, essentially, in partnership with the National Autistic Society, we were providing the funding to actually physically build the centres, but the ongoing running

costs were essentially taken on by the local education authority, and that was a challenge. Continues to be a challenge, I suppose, because, as we all know, government and local government budgets are always under the cosh, for obvious reasons. So that in itself was a barrier, initially. I guess probably still is. But the experts at the National Autistic Society were able to put forward some very compelling arguments that, actually, over time, they will actually save money. And that was quite a pivotal moment, because, particularly today, because budgets are all being squeezed, and we know that in the overall, sort of, economic environment as it is today. So that was a big challenge. But also, and which sort of disappointed me at the time, but we had push back from some of the school governors... who'd, and I sort of partly understand it, I suppose, where they were, sort of, driven by their league table position and the examination scores, etcetera, and had the view that having these, sort of, strange centres for people with educational challenges, that would actually lower their league table. So, and, in fairness, one or two literally declined to participate because they just saw that as too much of a negative. What they overlooked, was that many of these students are very bright. Bright, so, and, ironically, we think they would potentially enhance their league position, but we failed to convince a number of these governors who had a mindset that, was of the view that this was not something they were going to recommend to the school. So, and it was hard work on a number of occasions. But, happily, we found more enlightened school governors and headteachers who were keen to run with the model. And, in fairness, Salesian was a very good, sort of, experience for us in terms of the evaluation. It's, you know, it's all very well, sort of, creating these new centres, but we were very keen, as a family, to have very objective evaluation, good or bad, to provide the evidence that these centres work, or they need to be modified to improve their overall effectiveness. And we have scholars from Goldsmiths at the University of London, who continually to do the evaluation programme, and it's both qualitative and quantitative. They're using all their usual techniques in terms of, sort of, interview questionnaires, and they focus on not just the pupils, but they focus on the pupils, the families, the teaching fraternity, and it's, the reports are very interesting. And helpful. Because, you know, you don't have to be ill to get better, and we continually want to try to improve the delivery within these centres, and I think we're achieving that.

00:31:17 Oscar Hilder

Fantastic. So, of everything that we've, that you've discussed so far, in terms of the, sort of like, the history of the Cullum Centres, so to speak, what sort of particular moments, you know, one or two, would you say would be the sort of the defining moments of your work with the National Autistic Society?

00:31:34 Peter Cullum

Crikey. I'm not sure there was a defining moment. I suppose it's continually reinforced by the interaction that we have with Caroline Stevens and her team. And, we, the evaluation is important because we want to take on board the, if you like, the negatives. And there are negatives, in terms of some aspects of the delivery. Probably the thing that alarms me the most is the recent report that's sort of identified that, I can't remember the exact figure now, but something like 67% of all teachers have had little or no training in how to handle and how to help young people with special education needs. Which, I think that that's terrible, really terrible, because that almost feels as though, you know, government have abdicated responsibility, and maybe this is not a vote-catcher. So, particularly in the present environment with an election coming up later in the year, it becomes even more difficult. And, also, the, sort of, the alarming feedback is that something like 70% of all young people on the spectrum are very unhappy at school, and I think that that's a dreadful situation. Without sounding like a geriatric, I believe, you know, school days should be days that you cherish and, developing your life, making relationships, you know, enjoying all aspects of education, not just academic, that's obviously very important, but all the other social aspects of having a great educational experience. And with more than two thirds of young people not enjoying it, I think it's very sad.

00:33:43 Oscar Hilder

Excellent, thank you for the insight there. So, perhaps on a more lighter note, do you have, sort of, any memorable experiences or stories that you would like to share from, sort of, any time within the Cullum Family Trust and its involvement with the National Autistic Society? Can be anything at all, really, that you can remember?

00:34:02 Peter Cullum

I remember, and I always get a, sort of a tear in my eye, it was Salesian school and we, and the headteacher, two things. We had a tour of the school, and it was, I can't remember, it's more than 1000 pupils. So as we were walking through the school, he addressed every single pupil by their Christian name, and always had a message. And he couldn't, he could not have rehearsed that, because that was not stage-managed. And I thought, 'Wow, he really is so well-connected with these people, with his students.' And then we went into a classroom, and, sort of, met the teacher and said hello to the students. And as we were just leaving, the teacher sort of came and said, 'Look, sorry, would it be possible, could you

all come back just for two minutes because a student had been rehearsing what she'd like to say all morning and it would be great if you'd give her this opportunity.' So, of course, we go back in. And the headteacher, he wasn't quite sure what was coming, by the way. So we went in, and she was a very 'core blimey', South London young lady, but I won't do the accent. But her message was, 'Right, I have not been the person I should have been over a number of years, and I've been excluded, I've been expelled, and here I am, in this school,' and it was quite a strange, sort of, moment, she pointed at the head, 'Because of him.' And I thought, 'Crikey, she's going to start having a crack at the headteacher.' And she said, 'No, because he had faith in me. He encouraged me. And I'm taking five GCSEs. Most people take a lot more than that, I know, I know, I know. But I'm only, I'm taking five, and I'm going to be a hairdresser.' And it was, sort of, it was just a lovely, yeah, a lovely moment.

00:36:06 Oscar Hilder

It sounds it, yeah. It sounds very, very, sounds like a very touching moment. And, then, sort of, that made you, did that make you feel that this, that that school was specifically the right place for a Cullum Centre? The sort of place where?

00:36:18 Peter Cullum

Yeah. No, no, no, absolutely. I am, it was the, it was my faith in the headteacher then. I thought, well, you know, he does connect. He's connected. He empathises, and he's not just, sort of, if you like, giving his message of the day for us, I think it was his whole approach was to help these young people.

00:36:41 Oscar Hilder

So, the last question of this topic about the Cullum Centres is, looking to the future a lot more, what do you want to see more of with the future of the Cullum Centres? What do you want them to go on and achieve further on?

00:36:53 Peter Cullum

Well, we are, we're con-, we are close to completing another one in Canterbury, we're opening that in July. But we have the funding to do further schools. The long term aim for

me has always been that we convince government that these centres actually work, and they have a responsibility to actually, if you like, take over the model and essentially start to use it on a much wider scale throughout the UK. Because, I'm on my soapbox now, but, literally, making sure that these young people have the right level of education where they can go on to meaningful employment and, literally, have their own self-worth, sort of, exceed where they are right now and become very important members of society. And it will save a fortune because otherwise there could be, sort of, social services dependency, huge amounts of money that has to be expended on supporting these people. But if we give them the right level of education, and I don't mean A* students, I don't mean going to Oxbridge, but giving them a very, very firm foundation will provide them with A) a much more satisfying life, and will actually save the country money. And the maths are overwhelming. And that's, that would be my dream, anyway.

00:38:34 Oscar Hilder

Sounds like an absolute win-win solution for everyone, really, yeah.

00:38:37 Peter Cullum

Well, I think it is.

00:38:41 Oscar Hilder

Good. Yes, as do I. So, great. So, going on to a more general level, how do you feel, linking sort of back to one of the questions at the beginning, how do you feel public perception and awareness of autism has changed in recent years?

00:38:54 Peter Cullum

I think it has improved, has improved over time. OK, I'm a research sample of one so I'm invalid, but if I look at my family's knowledge, that then we are much, much more attuned to the challenges. And the opportunities, by the way. I, there are a lot of young people who are very smart, but have the, sort of, the social interaction challenges that make it very difficult for them. And we need to be able to address that. But, still, going back to 67% of all teachers don't have any training in terms of special education needs and 70% of pupils are unhappy, that says we've got a lot more work to do, and we're still way off

where we need to be. However, we had the 60th anniversary celebrations of the National Autistic Society last year, and I believe, certainly the people I know who were involved in those celebrations, are far more aware of the challenges. Being aware of the challenges and finding the solution may not necessarily be one and the same, but we have to continually, sort of, maintain and improve the overall communication programme we have. And that's not just to parliamentarians, but that, obviously that's important, for people to understand and change the rules, but also to society as a whole, and become more supportive of these people. Because if you look at the, there's over a million people who are touched by autism in the UK. Over a million. And, by that I don't mean there are a million people on the spectrum, but families who are directly connected. And that, that's a big number. And we do need to keep banging away at our politicians to get them to understand what they need to do.

00:40:54 Oscar Hilder

Sounds like a good plan to me. So, and then, so going on from that, what role do you think the National Autistic Society can play in these changes that you've been talking about?

00:41:04 Peter Cullum

I think that they are the, sort of, pivotal communication stream, really. And, I suppose, that one of the frustrations that they will always have, I suppose, is, you know, we have a political system that continually sees role changes within ministerial positions and, therefore, trying to have a consistent long term relationship with individuals becomes very much of a challenge because they're constantly changing their roles. And I imagine right now that Caroline and her colleagues are looking at the political scenario and presumably having to think through with a, direct their communication over the next few months, given that there may well be the possibility of a change of government, and then a change of personalities. And so it's a continual, sort of, change. But they, they have huge persistency, and I do admire them for that. But, it's a continuum. There is no relaxation. We can't just suggest that, you know, problem solved, because we're a long, long way away from that.

00:42:18 Oscar Hilder

So, handing the torch over to you, so to speak, are there any other matters specific or general or anything at all that you would like to discuss or bring up at this moment?

00:42:29 Peter Cullum

Actually, I think we've covered a lot of ground. I mean, there's a huge amount of, sort of, background stuff that I'm sure you have, in terms of the various centres and the people involved. We have managed to get parliamentarians at the, sort of, the opening ceremonies, which has always been good. And, in fact, I do remember Jeremy Hunt, our current Chancellor, and we have reminded him that he was there, so maybe he'll get his chequebook out and help in a more tangible way. No, no, I feel privileged to work with the National Autistic Society. I admire what they do. There are huge challenges. And with any charity the funding is pivotal. And it's a continuum. And I know they do huge amounts of work in terms of the fundraising activities. And, no, and as chairman of the Cullum Family Trust, we're delighted to be a partner of the National Autistic Society because we believe in what they're doing and it's very relevant to us as a family, very relevant.

00:43:40 Oscar Hilder

Excellent, thank you so much. So, coming to the end now, as we conclude the recounting of this incredible journey through the history and the evolution of the National Autistic Society, we look ahead to the next 60 years and beyond. So, Peter, what would you like the charity to go on and achieve?

00:43:58 Peter Cullum

Crikey, that's a big question, isn't it? Normally I ban the word evolution in my organisation because evolution means it sort of happens, sort of, almost... by stint of the existing behaviours, but I think with the National Autistic Society, there is an element of, sort of, change over time, and I don't, I just don't think there's a silver bullet. It is continually doing what they're doing, providing all the research that clearly demonstrates that change is required. Change for the good. And change doesn't have to be, sort of, engaging with multiple, zillion pound budgets. You know, change, change is about society. Change is about getting our society to recognise that, you know, young people, or all people on the, because they're now getting more older people on the spectrum, that need the level of

support and consideration that currently is nowhere near where it needs to be. And we need a few change agents. We need our own version of Elon Musk to come along and use artificial intelligence to be able to provide evidence of what a good outcome looks like.

00:45:25 Oscar Hilder

You've maybe sort of changed the wording of my last question, I was going to say evolving, but, so how do you envision society changing, then, to better and embrace and support autistic individuals moving forward?

00:45:38 Peter Cullum

Well, almost going back, really, to this, sort of, this word 'education'. We've continually got to do our best to educate more and more people in our society, particularly those with huge influence, and maybe via social media and all the other mediums that we use right now, to get people to understand that these challenges are, that they're not going away, that there is no cure for autism, but there is, the cure is partly to get society to more fully recognise those challenges and adapt accordingly. I mean, it's quite interesting, the small charity I'm involved in, Little Gate Farm, and I mentioned getting local employers to give these young people an opportunity. That, the, one of the big challenges there isn't so much the employer, it's their employees. Having to educate their employees that they've got a new colleague joining and explaining to them that they have some, you know, special challenges that they need to empathise with. Because, if not, then they'll potentially be seen as, you know, the odd person who doesn't fit in, and then it becomes sadly a self-fulfilling prophecy that it doesn't work. So it's just changing attitudes. And it's a continuum. I don't think we're going to wake up one morning and everybody fully recognises the challenges of autism and then we change our behaviour, that isn't going to happen, unfortunately. But it's people like Caroline Stevens and her team, who keep pushing and literally majoring on those individuals, those organisations, that have great influence. And that's, sort of, a forever campaign, I imagine.

00:47:34 Oscar Hilder

Fantastic. So that concludes the interview with Peter Cullum for the National Autistic Society's *in our Words,* project. Peter, thank you so much for your time and for your very insightful answers.