

## Tributes to Ken Davis (16/5/1934 - 21/12/2008)



Ken Davis will be remembered as one of the most important and influential unsung heroes in the on going struggle for equal citizenship and social justice for disabled and non-disabled people the world over. A passionate and committed socialist, he was a true pioneer and key figure in Britain's disabled people's movement. His politics and activism have had an unprecedented impact on disability policy and practice both nationally and internationally.

A former miner in Morton Pit, Derbyshire, Ken became quadriplegic from a diving accident while doing national service with the RAF in Aden in 1961. In 1972 he, along with other disabled people, formed the *Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation* (UPIAS) in 1972. This was a small group of disability activists that rejected the then orthodox personal tragedy view of disablement in favour of a more socio/political account, the social model of disability, now the driving force behind policy development in Britain and across the world.

Also in 1972, operating from a tiny cloakroom in Cressy Fields residential Home, Derbyshire, Ken established Britain's first telephone *Disablement Information and Advice Line* (DIAL). This triggered the development of a nationwide network of similar local services that formed DIAL UK. At the same time he and his disabled activist wife Maggie, were deeply involved in the creation of the UK's first integrated housing complex. The Grove Road housing scheme opened in 1976 comprising six flats, three of which were fully accessible for wheelchair users. This breakthrough project enabled Ken and Maggie to leave the Home and live alongside non-disabled people within the community in a mutually supportive environment. The Grove Road project provided an important example for similar projects throughout Britain and Europe.

In 1981, the *International Year of Disabled People*, Ken was the principal architect of Britain's first grass roots organisation of disabled people: the *Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People* (DCODP), and later, the *Derbyshire Centre for Integrated Living* (DCIL). DCIL is an organisation controlled and run by disabled people. Since 1985 it has provided a county wide range of services for disabled people clustered around what is generally referred to as 'the seven needs for independent living': information, peer support, housing, technical aids and equipment, personal assistance, transport and access. The first of its kind in the UK DCIL pioneered the idea of disabled people running their own services. All of which is now enshrined in government policy statements in Britain, the European Commission and around the world.

A life long committed campaigner against all forms of social injustice Ken was a long term supporter of CND and Amnesty International. He was a voracious reader with a

love of literature and poetry and his many writings have inspired disability activists and scholars across the UK. A proud father, grandfather and great grandfather his passing will leave a gaping hole in many people's lives. His warm hearted, quiet dignity and wisdom was and will remain a constant inspiration to all who had the good fortune to know him.

Colin Barnes

---



**Ken Davis** is and shall remain one of my greatest unsung heroes. To me and others who knew him, he was first and foremost an ardent activist. As the photograph shows, he was forever on the campaign trail, with his megaphone<sup>1</sup>. But he was also a canny politician; an innovator of ideas and services; an organiser of people, projects and events; an inspirational leader; a teacher and mentor: but, above all, one of my best and dearest, everlasting friends.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ken with others campaigning against a pedestrianisation project in Chesterfield

A former miner, Ken sustained a spinal chord injury from a diving accident while doing national service with the RAF in Aden in 1961.

In 1972 he, along with other disabled people, formed the *Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation* (UPIAS). This was a small group of disability activists which rejected the then orthodox personal tragedy view of disability in favour of a more socio/political account, the social model of disability, now the driving force behind major mainstream socio/economic policy developments in Britain; and across the world.

What made Ken, 'Ken', was his unstinting humanity; his love for his fellow man; his identification and empathy with all who suffered oppression, degradation, poverty or exclusion – especially those who were in such positions due to society's reaction to their physical, sensory or mental impairment; namely, disabled people.

Although Ken often argued against the misuse of the term, 'care', by health and social service providers, I believe he showed the true meaning of the word – that social interaction between equals of love, respect, understanding and support, which true caring really means.

Ken was not just my boss, my mentor; he was a very close friend, who got to know both me and my family. He, with his wife, Maggie once stayed with my sister, Moira, in Morecambe. At the time, Andrew, my nephew, was four. Andrew was totally unfazed by disability and wheelchairs. They were just part of normal family life. Indeed, as this tale will tell, he saw their real advantages.

Andrew looked up at Ken when he arrived and immediately asked him to come out to play with him. Ken was a little unsure, so Andrew turned to Moira and said:

“That’s ok, mum will push the chair.” Once outside, it became clear Andrew had an ulterior motive.

Andrew wanted to go to Morecambe Pier to play the slot machines; but he had two problems. He had no money and was too small to reach the slots on the machine; but he had a plan.

Again, he looked up at Ken.

“Have you any pennies?” he asked.

Ken duly provided the cash and without a by your leave, Andrew stepped onto the footplates of Ken’s wheelchair to reach the slots on the machine, thereby overcoming his second obstacle to playing.

On his return Ken smiled and remarked: “Well, it’s been a long time since I’ve been asked to come out to play!”

That was Ken, the family man; the kind, caring, sharing Co-op man.

Yes, Ken was a co-op man; a socialist to the core; a believer, along with Maggie, in the power and right of self-help and mutual support.

I was privileged to be part of one such co-operative venture set up by Maggie, but which also involved Ken.

Long before Centres for Independent Living and direct payments became the vogue – if they have ever become so – Maggie set up a self-help co-op of disabled and non-disabled people living in Clay Cross. We each paid £1 membership. We each had an equal vote in the venture. But we all helped one another to find the practical assistance we needed to live independently in the village:

the non-disabled member helping the disabled with any personal, domestic, or d.i.y. task which was needed, in return for some financial remuneration.

To me, this co-operative demonstrated just how community care could achieve the principles of equal citizenship and mutual support about which Ken so often expounded in his writings and speeches

However, this wasn't the first co-operative venture Ken and Maggie had instigated. In the 1970's so-called social care was in the iron fist of professional non-disabled people. As Edna Topliss pointed out in her book, the only tangible development, which could be measured after the precedential Chronic Sick and Disablement Act of 1970, was the growth of professional workers to assess need. And the only certain state provision for such need was segregated institutional care.

And so, when Ken and Maggie married, they had to move into a double room in a Derbyshire care home for disabled people. However, from the very outset this was considered to be a temporary move for Ken and Maggie, who had plans to live together in the community, despite the prevailing policies of institutionalisation.

Nevertheless, although Maggie had already experienced the conditions of residential life, for the first time in his life, this move made Ken become acutely aware of the restrictions institutional living imposed on the civil liberties of disabled people.

Civil and human rights for disabled people at that time were unheard of; professionals within the 'industry' were backed by legislation in their belief that it was their 'duty' to 'care' for disabled people by controlling their support systems; and consequently controlling disabled people's

lives and decision-making processes. This conviction rubbed hard against the growing demand among the recipients of institutional care, who were desperate to escape and have more control over their lives.

Fortunately, there were other professionals outside the health and social care industry who were more in tune with the thoughts of the residents. One of them was the Director of the Inskip St Giles Housing Association, later to be the Raglan Housing Association. With his help, Maggie and Ken realised their plans to build the first tenant 'co-operative', providing housing with mutual support.

Three non-disabled families living on the first floor of a block of six flats in Mansfield would support disabled people living in three flats on the ground floor. The 'Grove Road Scheme' thereby liberated four disabled people from a combined 25 years of segregated institutional care. These included Ken and Maggie in one of the flats.

But Ken and Maggie were not the only people fighting the oppression of society's negative reaction to disability and disabled people.

Ken was among the vanguard of the independent living, or disabled people's movement. His pioneering peers rank such people as Paul Hunt, Dick Leaman and Vic Finklestien, to name but a few.

Along with others, these men formed the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation. They were a very small and under resourced group of people, faced with massive organisational and political barriers to overcome. Yet, the Union changed the world for disabled people.

It created a new social movement which redefined terminology and constructs; enabled disabled people throughout the country to establish new systems of social support; and provided them with a collective, which promoted the positive image of disability and disabled people.

As the Union stated in its policy, it encouraged its members to:

***“.... seek pride in ourselves in all aspects of what we are. It is the Union’s social definition of disability which has enabled us to cut out much of the nonsense, the shame and confusion from our minds. It has raised the floodgates for a river of discontent to sweep all our oppression before us; and with it, to sweep all the flotsam and jetsam of ‘expertise’, ‘professionalism’ and ‘authority’, which have fouled our minds for so long, into the sewers of history.”***

Such an onslaught on the authority and control of professionals of the time may seem to be rather excessive; but it is understandable when viewed against the background of oppression the social care system imposed upon disabled people in the late 1970’s.

However, Ken’s influence on the Union can still be seen later in its policy statement, when it extols the virtues of ‘co-operation’:

***“.... as a small, weak minority group, disabled people cannot achieve a fully human life by their own efforts alone. We need and welcome the help of sympathetic able-bodied people. But the basic problem we face is our exclusion from full social participation. It follows that this oppressive situation can be put right only by***



***disabled people actually taking a more active part in society. The efforts of professionals and other able-bodied people are therefore really constructive only when they build on and encourage the self-help and activity of disabled people themselves....”***

This principle of ‘co-operation’, or ‘co-production’, as is the term used today: this principle of joint action under the leadership of disabled people was first argued by Ken as far back as 1981.

His legacy is now seen not only in today’s organisations of disabled people who are calling on “Professionals to be on tap, not on top”; working alongside disabled people to change their ways to be more egalitarian, to change society to be more inclusive – but this call is also being heeded by several governmental and non-governmental organisations in their efforts to ‘co-produce’ new policies and services.

As Ken believed, the primary goal for all of us, disabled or non-disabled, must be to ensure disabled people achieve the status of equal citizenship; and that the principles and practices of independent living, first established by the Union, become the cornerstone and embodiment of future mainstream social policy and provision.

Ken introduced me to the movement in 1980, when he employed me as the first Development Officer for DIAL UK; a national self-help network of local groups of disabled people providing information and advice over the phone to other disabled people.

Ken was my teacher and my mentor. As my first task in the job, we worked together to write a paper on “information disability”, using the social model as the basis

of our argument that people were 'disabled' not by their impairment, but by other factors in society, including the lack of information. This exercise was a wonderful "learning by doing" method of teaching me the social model of disability.

Ken sent me to read this paper at the 1980 Winnipeg Congress of Rehabilitation International (RI). There, a dramatic event took place, which created a sea change in the international politics of disability. After the decision to deny disabled people a stake of 51% in the governance of RI, the 250 disabled delegates from the four corners of the world, erupted into a frenzied state of anger.

A hastily called meeting of disabled delegates took place at 9 pm that evening. Delegates were in small groups, or roaming the room, wondering what was going on and uncertain about what to do.

Then suddenly Ed Roberts from California, the originator of the first Centre for Independent Living in the world, took the stage and yelled out over the noise of the room, "Cabbages of the world unite". All became quiet and we set about organising the world-wide network of what is now called, Disabled People's International.

I have Ken to thank for placing me in the most exciting place and moment of my life. I shall never forget it; and shall never be able to thank Ken enough for that opportunity.

I came back from Winnipeg to a new beginning in England itself; and once more Ken was at the heart of it.

1981 was the Year of Disabled People and alongside Garden Parties at Buckingham Palace, the Union decided to call sixteen of the most well established national

organisations of disabled people, one of which was DIAL UK. A new organisation was established called the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People. Ken, although never taking a leading role, was nonetheless more than instrumental in getting the organisation up and running.

But for all his national and international interests, Ken was a Derbyshire lad, through and through. His heart was in its hills; its valleys; its people and culture. As a Scot, I was used to being addressed as “Hoy, Jimmy!” but I could never get comfortable with Ken’s address of “Hey up, Duck!”

And it was to the disabled folk of Derbyshire that Ken’s attention, drive and efforts were mainly directed. Ken set up the first Coalition of Disabled People in England; and in the process kicked me out of my office, to make it his own as its first Director. Granted I got a brand new suite of four offices across the courtyard for DIAL UK’s headquarters, so I wasn’t really complaining.

Later, in 1986, Ken’s influence and pressure forced Derbyshire Council to support the country’s first Centre for *Integrated Living*, run by and for disabled people, as an alternative provision of services designed to support disabled people to live as equal and fully participative citizens; totally integrated within the community at large.

Throughout his political life, including that of a local county councillor, Ken’s main interest lay in the individual disabled person; helping them solve practical issues, teaching and mentoring them in the ways of the social model and independent living. Ken’s strength lay in his ability to empower the individual disabled person to gain control of their own lives as well as participate actively in the life of their communities.

In one of his writings on the disability movement, Ken agrees with Mike Oliver that the legacy of the movement will only be seen when the social structure of society changes to enable disabled people to be full and equal citizens; and this can only be achieved once the disability movement moves closer to the centre stage of mainstream social policy and provision. This legacy, started by Ken, Paul, Dick and Vic, along with the others in the vanguard of the movement, all those years ago, is still to be revealed.

It will be up to others who follow in the gigantic footprints of these pioneers to create these new forms of social relations and instruments within the mainstream of society, which Ken and his fellow compatriots heralded in the 1980's.

Ken's work is now in the hands of others; others, like me, who have been inspired by his ideas, conviction and teaching; and have taken up the Union's challenge. Ken, and his UPIAS colleagues, originally had the challenge of raising the awareness of people, both powerful and powerless, to the understanding of the empowering nature of the social model and the principles of independent living. Now it is our turn to take up that challenge and turn that awareness into the reality of everyday life for disabled people and everyday practice for those professionals and services which support them.

But what of Ken's legacy? That is crystal clear to me. He has made his indelible mark on the history of disabled people's liberation from the Poor Law minimalist philosophy of social welfare and the domination of authoritative professionalism. He has shown disabled people how we can change our role from that of a

dependent client to that of an empowered pro-active citizen.

We disabled people not just in Derbyshire, but throughout the entire country, have much to thank Ken for: he was a galvanizing leader to all of us: and a wonderful warm-hearted, steadfast friend to those who had the good fortune of knowing him and sharing in his congenial company.

James Elder Woodward

---

My last guru, my dear friend, Ken Davis passed away on 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2008

Mere words cannot describe the sorrow I feel about his passing, to know that he is no longer in the world on the end of a phone or available to pop over for a cup of tea and some dinner. What I remember most about Ken is the twinkle in his eyes.

That twinkle was there the first time I met him in 1986 sitting at the back of my first Derbyshire Coalition Meeting, my first encounter with the disability movement which he was instrumental in founding in the UK.

The twinkle was there on my first action campaigning with him to get parking spaces for disabled people in Chesterfield town centre. The rueful smile was there as they tried to lift him and his wheelchair up the courthouse steps after refusing to pay a parking fine.

The twinkle was there in my many visits to his house in which I always felt a power of love much more memorable than warm bread in the oven.

Ken was a pioneer, he founded the disability movement in the UK founded the first coalition of disabled people founded the first centre for independent living. He was a towering intellect, a brilliant writer but also prepared to go the distance from theory to practice from social model to social organization to campaigns. What ever he took on, (and he was circumspect about this), he followed it though to the very end. You could take his commitment to the bank. Most of all he was loved by everyone he touched and respected by all. When we founded DAN the disabled people Direct Action Network I begged Ken to chair the meeting that would create it. There were going to be just too many egos in the room and some sensitive negotiations with people from the Campaign for Accessible Transport CAT who had launched a London wide campaign for accessible public transport. DAN had plans to make this nationwide. Only Ken had the stature, the wisdom, the person, and group skills to chair this meeting and bring about the birth of DAN. Without Ken we would have been meeting till doomsday.

The twinkle was there when he spoke at the telethon demonstration in the UK articulating for us the politics of rights not charity.

Ken was not a fan of awe. I remember many times people being in awe of Ken right there in his and Maggie's house if he couldn't charm them out of it (often with the support of his fantastic partner Maggie and how they met and got married is still the stuff of legend)! He would start talking about his bowel program which usually worked or at least got him out of what would be an awkward conversation for him.

In his later years he is still a model for me when I can no longer travel or have the wish too. He became a counselor a listening board careful of the fact that just because you talked to him that you wouldn't use this to advance your own agenda. Still writing, still creating new theory and supporting all the young guns to go on and do it. Ken's sense of humor was gentle and kind sometime ironic, sometimes gallows.

Knowing him made me and countless others a better person, When I lived in Chesterfield near him he became my last guru, the last person that I would take what he said as gospel. I knew at the time he was my last guru and the result was the Johnny Crescendo the Alan Holdsworth that you know. The result was DAN and my commitment to see it to the end, the telethon demos, 2 daughters, my commitment to ADAPT in the US and my self discovery as a disability rights activist. Babs Johnson and Mike Auberger, then of ADAPT, stayed in Ken and Maggie's house on a visit in 1990 and thought they were the most real people they met on the tour.

Ken founded out of nothing the models for the British disability movement and the British Independent Living movement. His seven action steps to independent living are as true today as they ever were.

We have lost a true hero, to me a true saint, a warrior, a person who loved us so much it changed our lives and the lives of millions of disabled people who never even had the privilege to be touched by him.

We have lost Ken but not his legacy. We are all his children working in the world he dreamed within the structures he advocated and created. Ken was always down in the dirt dealing with the sometime tedious day to day issues of people working together and he was a

master of the biggest trick of all which is how to stay together and win.

Ken my dear friend I am going to miss you more than you probably want me too. I will try my best to come as close as I can to you and how you lived your life. I will pass on everything I have learned from you to other people and try to do it as close to how you did it to me as I can.

Maggie I don't know what to say except that I love you and that Ken would not be the Ken that I know without you. I know that the love that you and Ken created spreads wide and I am sure that in the world of what goes around comes around you are due a lot of love.

Every time at Ken's house he would always make sure whoever he was talking to that you took equal credit. But I also learned from both of you what true love meant and how to live it and mean it.

All I can say is like myself and everyone else who knew Ken hold on to the memories like the treasure trove it surely is. It's too soon to think about the future, its time to grieve and remember the twinkle.

Alan Holdsworth, aka. Johnny Crescendo

---



In 1972 the late Paul Hunt had a letter published in the Guardian in which he called for the formation of a consumer group to challenge government policies which were segregating many disabled people in institutions all over the country. Many disabled people responded and an organisation called the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation which became known as UPIAS was formed. Effectively this led to the emergence of the disabled peoples' movement in Britain which went on to challenge the institutionalisation of disabled people and the discrimination they experienced. Ken Davis responded to the letter and became a member of UPIAS when it was established.

Ken will be remembered as one of the most important and influential figures in the democratic movement which came after the formation of UPIAS and which went on to promote disabled peoples' struggles for equal citizenship and social justice in Britain and the world over. A passionate and committed socialist, he was a true pioneer and key figure in the movement. His politics and activism have had an unprecedented impact on disability policy and practice both nationally and internationally.

A former miner, Ken became paralysed from the neck down in a diving accident while doing national service with the RAF in Aden in 1957. *After spending many months in hospital, he quickly learned how inappropriate and inadequate existing policies and services were and his personal experiences of segregation and discrimination gave him a good grounding for the collective struggle. Both his personal experiences and his socialism led him* with a small group of other disability activists to reject the then orthodox personal tragedy view of disablement in favour of a more socio/political account, the social model of disability, now the driving force behind policy development in Britain and across the world.

*Ken was both a thinker and a doer. He wrote articles and papers for disability magazines and professional journals and he talked at conferences and training courses. His talk was rooted in his personal experiences and his socialism. Hence he was always very clear that the American model of independent living was not transferable to Britain and argued for a more comprehensive approach which he called integrated living. But he always knew that if things were to change, action was needed as well.*

From the residential home he was living in at the time, he established Britain's first telephone *Disablement Information and Advice Line* (DIAL). This triggered the development of a nationwide network of similar services. At the same time he and his disabled activist wife Maggie, were deeply involved in the creation of the UK's first integrated housing complex. The Grove Road housing scheme opened in 1976 comprising six flats, three of which were fully accessible for wheelchair users. This breakthrough project enabled Ken and Maggie to leave their residential home and live alongside non-disabled people within the community. It was also an important example for similar projects elsewhere.

*In 1981, Ken became the principal architect of one of Britain's first grass roots organisation of disabled people: the Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People (DCODP), and later, the Derbyshire Centre for Integrated Living (DCIL). The twin nature of this development recognised the need for both political activism and reliable service delivery and recognised the tension that often exists between the two. Ken was never afraid to put his body on the line and was a key participant in direct action campaigns locally and nationally, opposing the pedestrianisation of the centre of Rochdale and he*

*demeaning television programmes that were the Telethons.*

A life long and committed campaigner against all forms of social injustice Ken was a long term supporter of CND and Amnesty International. He was a voracious reader with a love of literature and poetry. A proud father, grandfather and great grandfather his passing will leave a gaping hole in many people's lives. We will miss his warm hearted nature, his quiet dignity and his sense of humour. His wisdom was and will remain a constant inspiration to all who had the good fortune to know him.

Mike Oliver