

Leonard Cheshire vs. The Disabled People's Movement:

A Review

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1. Introduction

This review seeks to explain the reasons why the disabled people's civil rights movement is opposed to the Leonard Cheshire Foundation. Backed up by a variety of sources, it shows how the residential institutions run by the charity have facilitated in the segregation of disabled people from society.

Oliver (1990, page 39) points out that the post-war 'rescuing' of disabled adults from other unsuitable provision by the Cheshire Foundation may subsequently be reinterpreted as "incarceration" by historians. Although the organisation would argue that in recent years it has changed to an "enabling" approach, the movement maintains that it "continues to appropriate our language as efficiently as it corrupts our image and commodifies our lives to ensure its thriving status as the leading charity provider of services for disabled people in the UK today" (Carr, 2000).

Briggs (1993) describes her first visit to a Cheshire home in which she was to stay for a while: "Whilst there I was introduced to the nearby Cheshire Home and went there for 5 weeks. I hated it. For the first time in my life I was made conscious of not being able to control my own situation." Similarly Morris (1993) relates another personal experience of an ex-Cheshire Home resident: "Linda put her name down on her local council's housing list when she was 16 but in desperation moved into a Cheshire home when she was 20. 'I decided I wanted independence but it was a nursing home and it actually limited independence.'" Carr (2000) states that stories such as these from Cheshire Homes are common: "thousands of disabled people are simply surviving out of sight out of mind in often inaccessible listed buildings situated at the end of a dirt track and / or a dual

carriageway whilst Local Authorities turn politely away from the truth that they are financing our incarceration.”

2. Facts and Figures

- “The main reason you cease to be a Leonard Cheshire service user is death” (Darke, 2000);
- Despite preaching messages of equality in the workplace, out of the 7,000 staff employed by Leonard Cheshire, only 0.8% are disabled (Hermeston, 2001);
- “The Leonard Cheshire service your taxes provide is given in situations (i.e. buildings) which are '80% unfit for purpose' according to a Senior Director of Leonard Cheshire” (Darke, 2000);
- “Disabled people (in Cheshire Homes) struggle to exist with minimal assistance, no locks on their doors, no choice of who helps them with the most intimate of tasks, no power chairs or equipment to aid speech...” (Carr, 2000).
- What a donation to Leonard Cheshire Foundation might pay for:
 - “A £70,000 salary for a Senior Director whilst a resident of a home has £15 spending money;
 - £4,000,000 a year on Public Relations / Advertising;
 - Private Medical Insurance for Senior Directors whilst Disabled victims of charity wait months/years for medical care;
 - 45 pence per mile travel allowances;
 - Trustee/Staff/Management get-togethers costing £10,000 for a single weekend” (Darke, 2000).

3. Group Captain Leonard Cheshire

The first Cheshire Home was established in 1948 when war hero Leonard Cheshire ‘helped’ Arthur Dykes, a friend who was terminally ill. Dykes asked Cheshire for a bit of land, on which to park a caravan until he was on his feet again; it was apparent that nobody had told him that he was dying. Cheshire couldn't maintain the deception and told Dykes the truth, inviting him live with him at Le Court in Hampshire, described by Finkelstein (1987) as “a dilapidated house in the countryside.” Finkelstein goes on to note: “it is interesting, is it not, that of these two individuals caught up in our

society's neglect of disabled people, all public awards given by able-bodied people went to the able-bodied person, who is probably amongst the most responsible for preventing the development of support systems enabling disabled people to live in the community, and that there is no recognition for the disabled person who strove against all odds for the right of disabled people to be part of the community?"

However Cheshire's past was not as squeaky clean as current history would have us believe, and could be seen as indicative of what was to follow. Davis (1986) asserts: "the mentality that made Cheshire a compliant participant in the mass creation of disability at Hiroshima is the same mentality that made him the instigator of the mass incarceration of disabled people in a chain of segregated institutions. In the first case he went over the tops of the heads of disabled people in a B29 bomber, in the second he went over our heads in the name of charity." Carr (2000) concurs: "Leonard Cheshire, the man, influenced and continues to influence many people's lives; not only was he responsible for our mass incarceration over the latter half of the 20th Century but he is also most proudly described on the Leonard Cheshire website as the British observer on the plane which dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima, killing and impairing many innocent people 55 years ago."

Ex-resident Philip Mason remembers: "at one stage he [Leonard Cheshire] came and suggested that we all gave up our Christmas dinner and sent the money to a Cheshire Home in India and he was astonished that we didn't even discuss it... One can understand what he was trying to say but the fact that he felt able to come and make that proposal to the residents was the wrong spirit... It was a totally false proposal and it was based on some really, very, very, grossly misguided assumptions about disabled people. He assumed that we were being selfish and ungrateful and exceedingly uncaring in refusing to discuss it... I feel he's been responsible for misleading society dreadfully" (Campbell and Oliver, 1996, pages 42-43).

Richard Card, an ex-police officer who had personal dealings with Cheshire and created a website to challenge public perceptions of him, describes him as "an evasive character who changed the subject very

quickly to the exorbitant cost of wheelchairs and the shining role of himself in championing the cause of the disabled. It did not surprise me years later to hear on the news that he sent the Moscow Cheshire Home an opening gift ... which was a signed portrait of himself” (Card, 2003).

Such little-known facts did not stop Cheshire being voted the 31st greatest Briton in a large BBC internet poll in October 2002. This high ranking is largely due to the high advertising budget of the Leonard Cheshire Foundation (£4 million per year according to Darke, 2000), whom in recent years have gone to great lengths to create a benevolent media profile for their founder.

4. Representation of disabled people

Despite claims to the contrary from the organisation itself, it is widely established amongst the disabled people’s movement that the Leonard Cheshire Foundation is not representative of disabled people (Hasler, 1993). This is because there are no democratic, accountable ways in which disabled people can have influence and control over the organisation. For example, Carr (2000) describes from first-hand experience how Leonard Cheshire’s ‘user-led’ groups actually operate: “the Disabled People’s Forum... actually led many more people to become dependent on the charity for their new found 'empowerment', creating a vested interest in working within... User-involvement therefore allows the organisation to appeal to local authority purchasing criteria and any changes which are made as a result of it ensure that residential care becomes an appealing option which is said to be responsive to and supported by the disabled people involved”.

From the discontent of disabled residents in the first Cheshire Home, Le Court, sprang the modern-day disabled people’s civil rights movement. Resident / activist Paul Hunt organised strikes, management takeovers, and initiated a project to enable the residents to leave the home. On 20th September 1972 he published a letter in the Guardian calling out to disabled people who “find themselves in isolated, unsuitable institutions, where their views are ignored and they are subject to authoritarian and often cruel regimes” (Campbell and Oliver, 1996, page 65). He proposed

that they form “a consumer group to put forward nationally the views of actual and potential residents of these successors to the workhouse.” This letter led to the formation of the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), a national, representative organisation that formulated the social model of disability on which the present-day British civil rights movement is based (UPIAS, 1976). This stated that disabled people are those people who experience barriers within society related to their impairment. Therefore the formation of our disabled people’s movement was a direct response to the oppression experienced by disabled people in Cheshire Homes.

However Leonard Cheshire repeatedly fail to see that their institutions actually disable people. “Their recent report ‘Committed to Inclusion: the Leonard Cheshire Social Exclusion Report 2000’... raises the following question ‘what does stand in the way of much greater routine interaction between disabled people and the non-disabled world?’ Since the focus group didn’t include those most excluded of people, those living in residential care, it’s no surprise of course that nowhere in the report does Leonard Cheshire actually take an inward glance and blame its own existence for the exclusion of disabled people” (Carr, 2000).

Campbell and Oliver (1996, page 57) relate the story of a Le Court resident who joined a disabled people’s group after getting disillusioned with trying to change Leonard Cheshire Foundation from within: “...within a year of his death he’d resigned from RADAR and resigned from the Cheshire Foundation and very tearfully admitted that he hadn’t achieved what he thought he could achieve.” They go on to state that his “experience was, and still is, a very common one for those who strive to change traditional ‘caring’ organisations from within...”

There have been attempts in recent years by disabled people and their organisations to protest against the actions of the Leonard Cheshire Foundation. In 2000 ex-Cheshire employee Paul Darke launched ‘leonard-cheshire.com’, a website "about the Leonard Cheshire Foundation, and all that it represents socially, politically and economically in the lives of disabled people" (Hague, 2001). The site contained a variety of facts and figures gathered during Darke’s time working for the organisation. The

charity took expensive legal action, eventually taking their claim to the name to the World Intellectual Property Organisation, who rule in their favour and ordered Darke to relinquish the name. The website is still accessible at: www.outside-centre.com/lc.

In October 2002 the Disabled People's Direct Action Network (DAN) organised a protest in Manchester outside a Leonard Cheshire charity fundraising ball, to raise money for a new home. One protestor said that the charity should be: "listening to disabled people, using the money that goes into their services to provide services that are run and controlled by disabled people" (Disability Now, 2002). The charity responded by stating: "It is sad that people were so angry, but they have got a very outdated idea of what Leonard Cheshire represents and stands for" (Disability Now, 2002). However the fact that the ball was raising funds to build another residential institution would suggest that the protestors views of the charity were far from "outdated", since they have been running such homes since they started.

Cases such as these suggest that the Leonard Cheshire Foundation does not represent disabled people, since the organisation has no mechanism through which disabled people can democratically express their own views, and any form of protest is stamped down on. As Carr (2000) states: "our organisations run and controlled by disabled people will all too often have to watch from the sidelines as Leonard Cheshire steps in to claim its prize by offering purchasers what's best for us."

5. Conclusions

This review has highlighted a variety of sources that argue that the activities of the Leonard Cheshire Foundation have had a detrimental effect on the lives of disabled people. This has been realised through the segregation of disabled people in residential institutions, and by speaking on our behalf with no mandate from disabled people themselves.

Oliver (1997, page 52) believes that Cheshire Homes "deny some disabled people the right to live where they choose, not necessarily maliciously but because to live in such an establishment means that

individuals are regarded as being adequately housed; consequently there is no statutory duty on the housing authority to house them.” In order to rectify this situation, they would have to abolish all of their residences and effectively put themselves out of business. Carr (2000) points out: “Leonard Cheshire continues to create and promote our dependency as its existence depends upon it.”

Such a dilemma raises the question: whose benefit are Leonard Cheshire there for? If, as they maintain, they exist to “enable” disabled people, then this would require them to close down completely.

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