The Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP)

The Accessibles cartoon comic

Our time is now

This contains reading and description of the comic called the Accessibles.

The comic is a mix of text and drawn images

Front cover shows two smiling faces, the young woman wears a green and purple poncho and holds a white cane. On her right arm is a young man with a green pork pie hat using a brown wheelchair wearing a shiny black jacket and behind his lapel a shiny timepiece peeps out.

The inside cover gives information about why and how the comic came about and says:

UK Disability History Month 2015:

Portrayal of Disability in Media: Are we there yet?

This Comic Book has been produced as part of Manchester City Council’s programme to mark UKDHM 2015, in partnership with the Central Library, Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People, and coordinated by MCC Disabled Employee Group.

This is the 2nd year of Manchester City Council’s participation in UK Disability History Month, and our aim for this year’s programme was to involve young disabled people in a project that would support them to explore the history of disabled people. Our focus was on the stories of Manchester’s community of disability campaigners, activists, thinkers, artists, politicians and organisations, who have influenced and shaped developments and understanding about disabled people’s lives and inclusion at local and national level. We partnered with GMCDP who as part of their remit coordinate projects specifically targeted for young disabled people.

We met with their young group in summer 2015 to explore ideas, and consider best way to approach the project aims. The young people came up with the idea of designing and producing a comic book, with members of their group as the key characters. Using time travel, they could observe key events and visit people who had contributed to the understanding and portrayal of disability today. We appointed a local artist Jim Medway, experienced in working with young people’s groups and comic books. Jim held four workshops with the group in October and November at Manchester Art Gallery, teaching them how to draw characters, speech bubbles, and supporting them in converting their ideas into a comic book format.

The group also met frequently at GMCDP offices to undertake research, and decide what to put into the comic. They were supported and mentored throughout the project by Louise Hollingworth, Brett Savage and other members from GMCDP. We hope this project will help inspire the next generation of disabled people to continue the work of their forbears in campaigning for disability equality and inclusion.

Lorna Young, Chair of Manchester City Council’s Disabled Staff Group  
  
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**Comic Begins...**

It is night, the young woman from the cover stands with one hand on her hip smiling with the young man beside her.

Hannah says: “Come on, Josh, we better introduce ourselves… I’m Hannah.”

“And I am… Professor Accessible!” says Josh.

Hannah says “Stop mucking around, Josh! I know you are mad for Dr Who, but...”

Pointing at a watch hanging on a chain around his neck Josh says, “But check it out, round my neck it’s my … travelling timepiece! See, this here is where you set the year, - oops!”

The timepiece vibrates in Josh’s hands while his wheelchair speeds through time. Hannah is lifted from her feet firmly hanging on to the handle of Josh’s wheelchair with one hand.

Hannah says “Woah! What’s going on Josh?”

Josh replies “We’re travelling through time! Not sure where we are heading… … But we are witnessing how disabled people have been depicted throughout the ages. Look, there’s Tiny Tim from Dickens, a pathetic object of pity if ever there was one!”

Writers often make their villains to be disabled people.

The faces of Richard III, Tiny Tim, Dr Strangelove and Darth Vader flash past.

Media representations are much better these days, -

Tyrion Lannister in Game of Thrones is a great example of a positive disabled character.

“Love you! Big fan of your work!” says Josh

Professor X was pretty cool in the x-men

“He and I go way back” says Josh.

Parents thought young children would be afraid of Ceri Burnell, but she is amazing!

And what about Liz Carr as Clarissa Mallory in Silent Witness?

Izzy from Coronation Street

Nabil Shaban was a real pioneer for disabled actors, but TV producers thought he would scare children!

Hannah says, “He was great in Dr Who”.

“Hold tight, Hannah, says Josh - we’re coming in to land!”

Hannah and Josh reach solid ground.

“Where are we”? Says Hannah

“Good old Manchester” replies Josh

“Manchester phew!” Says Hannah

Looking at his timepiece Josh says “yes, but the real question is WHEN are we? Josh comments, Gosh! It’s – 1970

The 70’s were when disabled people began to get organised for themselves, isn’t it? Some say it was Paul Hunt’s letter to the Guardian that got the ball rolling…

Hannah comments “and what looks like very dull meetings are actually the start of a hugely significant movement!”

Josh and Hannah look up at a group of disabled people at a meeting, Josh says “This here is the UPIAS (Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation) round table, hammering stuff out”.

Individuals like Mike Oliver worked on formalising the Social Model of Disability. This separated out ‘impairments’ which are personal and individual issues, from ‘disability’ which was explained as the barriers created by society: Here are some of the examples of the barriers that society disables us with.

Attitudinal – people’s attitudes can be a barrier by making assumptions about disabled people and their lives.

A man in a suit wags his finger at Josh and says – “Don’t get your hopes up, the handicapped can’t do anything!”

Josh thinks… What about Peter Dinklage, Stephen Hawking, Dame Tanni Grey Thompson, Sir Terry Pratchett, Ade Adipitan, Ian Drury, Francesca Martinez…

Environmental – such as stairs, heavy doors, inaccessible information and much more

A Dalek halts at the foot of a staircase… “AARGH – steps” it says!

“I feel you bro!” says Josh

Organisational – things organised in an obstructive way

Hannah bobs in a swimming pool, a man blows a whistle and beckons from the poolside – you can’t swim here without a carer, health and safety!

“Things were going swimmingly until you stuck your beak in” says Hannah.

Josh’s timepiece vibrates. He and Hannah are lifted again and swirl through time.

“Here we go again Hannah” says Josh.

Hannah says “Bit of warning would be nice!”

Hannah shivers and says “I almost enjoyed that! So where, and WHEN are we? I can tell it’s not Florida!”

Josh looks down on Victorian roofs and chimney stacks and says “Manchester again, I’m afraid, but now it’s 1896! Characters like Mary Dendy promoted ‘residential colonies’ that took ‘cripples’ and ‘imbeciles’ (that’s how they used to describe us back then) away from regular schooling. Dendy didn’t want disabled people and non-disabled people mixing together”. That was a bad thing!

Josh and Hannah talk under a Victorian street light

“Yes”, Hannah says because this is essentially segregating and ghettoising disabled children…

“Like just removing us from society so no-one has to deal with us, out of sight out of mind” Josh says.

Hannah says “it’s incredible that it wasn’t until the 70’s that there was a move towards integration. There are still ‘special schools’ of course, and there is still lots of debate about that”.

“Hey, I know what we should take a look at hold tight!” Says Josh

Josh and Hannah arrive at a stadium full of fans

“The 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester” says Josh

Hannah comments “The first ever integrated games! Manchester can be proud of this massive event”.

“Even the stadium had accessible seating throughout, rather than segregated enclosures” says Josh.

“There’s Neville Strowger, Manchester City Council’s access officer… good work Neville!” Shouts Hannah.

Josh says “And for the first time, disabled and non- disabled athletes were competing at the same time, rather than separate events, and all those athletes! Real life positive role models”!

Hannah starts to tuck into a chocolate bar and says “a lot to live up to!” … Yum!

Historically, disabled athletic events have attracted more athletes than spectators!

Three disabled athletes look around. They seem disappointed

Athlete one says “Where’s the crowd”.

Athlete two comments “I think Mum’s gone to get a cuppa”.

Hannah says “And actually, major athletic events since then haven’t always matched this level of accessibility”

“Or participation. Come on, next stop” says Josh.

Josh and Hannah arrive at their next destination.

Hannah says “Right, don’t tell me – Manchester”.

“Well, this is time travel, not a teleport!” Says Josh

Welcome to the 1980’s

Hannah says “Cool, let’s get some Madonna on!”

Josh and Hannah look on as people protest outside Manchester Town Hall. People with placards saying access for all, Equality now, and let us in! A wheelchair user holds a sign reading disabled people, don’t leave it to others, get involved GMCDP.

Hannah says “Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People”

Josh interrupts “GMCDP”.

Hannah continues, “Came together in the 1980’s, most visibly in a campaign to make the Town Hall fully accessible. Protests got a lot of coverage and attention, and campaigners finally won the battle! Manchester led the way in listening to disabled people’s voices”.

GMCDP became a positive voice for disabled people on disability rights and equality rather than others speaking and making decisions on our behalf.

Later in the 90’s, ITV’s charity Telethon event, along with other charities became a target, when they began portraying disabled children as a powerless, pathetic objects of pity, pulling heartstrings for spare change.

Josh reads the signs pinned to the wire fence at the telethon demonstration. Telethon TV apartheid, Telethon is the biggest tragedy in a disabled person’s life, rights not jelly and ice-cream treats.

Josh thinks “How about rights AND jelly and ice-cream?”

Charities often still portray us in these terms and this fixes these ideas in many people’s minds. At the same time, disabled people were taking direct action.

Hannah watches a march in 1920 carrying a banner reading justice not charity and says “you can trace this protest movement back to 1920 and the national League of the Blind’s pre-Jarrow march to London”.

Josh comments “WW1 was a real catalyst for social change, having created so many disabled people and even now in 2015 we are fighting more than ever as austerity bites”.

Josh and Hannah continue their journey and join a meeting with only three people, Kevin Hyett, Neville Strowger and Ken Lumb.

Josh says “what’s amazing to see is how small the Coalition started out so small back in 1985”.

Josh and Hannah pop up in a picture of the GMCDP offices where staff work at computers, make phone calls and greet visitors. Josh continues to say “then grew and evolved into what you see today”.

Hats off to Cathy Avison who pioneered disability action training, Alison Blake and her ground-breaking young disabled people’s projects, Sue Napolitano’s powerful poetry and Ian Stanton’s rousing protest songs (he also started the Coalition magazine).

Josh and Hannah join a protest with a crown of disabled people. Hannah waves a placard saying nothing about us without us and Josh holds one saying together we are strong others say equal rights now, access for all, rights not charity, access for all and equality.

Josh says “You know sometimes we feel we are not making huge progress, having to battle the closure of Independent Living Fund, benefit cuts”…

“But together we are stronger than ever” says Hannah.

A picture shows a close up of Josh and Hannah with Josh’s timepiece displaying the year 2015.

Hannah says “So though we are always looking to the future…”

“Our time is now!” Says Josh.

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A view of the project by young disabled members from GMCDP:

“We’ve learnt all about disability history, stories we didn’t know before. I liked research on where disability has come from, how it used to be viewed 100 years ago”

“The workshops made us debate, reflect and consider things from different perspectives”

“I didn’t realise how much eugenics influenced politicians and government in 1940’s, - seeing it again with the Assisted Suicide Bill”

“Amazing how the comic book has all come together and seeing it take shape”

“I loved the idea of a time travel theme and being a character in the book, I have really enjoyed this project.”

“The team spirit has been great, and good how the comic book story has

reflected our own personalities and ideas ... I’ve learnt so much”

“I find history fascinating, so I’ve really enjoyed the research, especially the Victorian era and its use of language to describe disability. So different from today which is good.”

Created by the Young Disabled People Taking Action Group:

Daniel Lawless, Qaasim Ali Safdar, Hannah Day, Louise Hollingworth, Audrey Stanton, Josh Coy, Mathias Warrington, Sarah Lord, Brett Savage, Linda Marsh, Maggie Griffiths, Rebecca Legowski, Louise Crowley, Caron Blake all working with Jim Medway.

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