Her Edit

QUARTERLY

Issue Twenty-four
Spring/Summer 2018

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thank you

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Front cover picture
Courtesy Andy Burnham

Welcome to Her Edit

This is something of a landmark issue as we feature our first man on the front cover of Her Edit. We have shared the stories of campaigners Julie Hambleton and Nicole Lawler in previous issues. Former MP Andy Burnham is the common link between them and as an indefatigable support of the ongoing fight for truth and justice, we wanted to acknowledge him.

Of course, Her Edit was always meant to be about women, and for women, and as ever we're honoured that Jennifer Kavanagh, Helen Swift, Amy King and Suzy Lishman have generously given their time to share their thoughts and stories.

I write this on the day the Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, Ben Broadbent, has used the word 'menopausal' to describe economies ' as past their peak and no longer so potent'. If we can learn anything from this juvenile, sexist language, it is that women continue to be judged on different terms to men.

I believe the intelligence, achievements and humility of the women in this, and all our other issues, act as a rejoinder to those who persist in peddling the myth that women are defined by their age and biology.

In April I watched the unveiling of the statue of Millicent Fawcett in Parliament Square. I believe it repesents, not just the victories of those in the past, but women's continued struggle for equality in all areas of our society.

On a lighter note, our next issue marks five years since we launched Her Edit. If you would like to contribute, then please contact us - we'd be delighted to have you celebrate with us.

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IMAGES

Left to right clockwise: Andy Burnham, Helen Swift,
Jennifer Kavanagh, Suzy Lishman, Amy King

Speaking up for the underdog

Amongst the various causes and campaigns we have featured in Her Edit, two have stood out. Justice for the 21 by the families of victims of the IRA bombings in Birmingham in 1974, and The Truth About Zane, Nicole Lawler's campaign to find truth and justice for her son who tragically died in 2014.

Linking these two is former Labour MP, Andy Burnham. Now Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy talked to us about Hillsborough, his disillusionment with Westminster and speaking up for victims of the state.

Andy is the first man to feature on the front cover of Her Edit.

IMAGE
Courtesy Andy Burnham

A Liverpuddlian and passionate Everton supporter, in 2009 Andy Burnham was Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and gave a speech at Anfield Stadium marking the 20th anniversary of the death of 96 football supporters at Hillsborough Stadium. He was interrupted by the chants of 'justice for the 96' from a large number of the 28,000 strong crowd.

Andy says if he hadn't been the Minister, he would have been one of those on the KOP jeering. He says he expected the heckling and it was almost a relief when it came.

'I can remember the moment the then Lord Mayor of Liverpool said to me, 'It's the 20th anniversary of Hillsborough - you are going to come aren't you and represent the government?' and I remember my blood running cold because it was where my professional and personal life came into complete collision. I knew what everyone felt about Hillsborough and the Labour government hadn't helped or actually it had hindered. I knew as Minister I had nothing to say to them.'

His sense of conflict is palpable as he talks; his heart clearly lies in the north west.

‘I’m always championing the north south divide bit; had it been London or a city in the south east crying injustice instead of Liverpool, I don’t think it would have been ignored in the same way.’

Andy raised the issue in Parliament which eventually led to a second inquest which in 2016 returned a verdict of unlawful killing. A meeting in Parliament for Hillsborough families attracted people from other campaigns and although they were coming from different angles and parts of the country, they had common cause.

‘...had it been London or a city in the south east crying injustice instead of Liverpool, I don’t think it would have been ignored in the same way.’’

‘They approached me I think because they wanted legal funding and they knew I’d be raising the issue. One of the reasons Hillsborough went wrong in the first place was that the families had never been given funding for the inquest, so in that way people had seen what I’d been doing and felt a resonance in their own situation and started to contact me.’

Julie Hambleton, whose sister Maxine was killed in the IRA bombings, has been at the forefront of the Justice for the 21 campaign. She says,

‘We're having to continue to solicit from the public to raise funds so that we can have equal legal representation, because the Legal Aid Agency have refused to give us legal aid six times.’

As Shadow Home Secretary, Andy made this the focus of his work.

‘I was saying there are parallels here between these campaigns, big and small. What they all have in common is that they have the might of the state basically turned against them, even though they are victims, and they struggle to get truth in the current legal system.’

He first encountered Nicole Lawler at a meeting in Westminster following the Hillsborough inquest at which Margaret Aspinall, a leading campaigner whose son James died at Hillsborough spoke. Nicole recalls that Andy Burnham, ‘wanted MPs to confront a simple question: what changes to the law did we need to make inquests fairer for the bereaved?

‘Listening to every word Margaret Aspinall said, I knew that I had one chance to get heard before the press and others took over. So with my heart beating fast and my voice shaking, I was first to put my hand up at question time. Holding back the tears, I explained to Margaret that, ‘the injustice you faced is still happening today. My son’s inquest is due to start in a few weeks. Public bodies are involved and they have got QCs to represent [them], but we have been denied legal aid.’

Slightly warily, Andy suggests that one thing these campaigns have in common is that it’s often women who come to the forefront. Along with Julie and Nicole he lists Barbara Jackson, a key figure in the Orgreave Truth and Justice campaign and Eileen Turnball, secretary of the Shrewsbury 24 campaign which he believes is ‘unfinished business’.

‘I think they [the government] took them [the construction workers] on because they saw them as a softer target than the miners or the steel workers. They absolutely turned the full force of the state against them.’

Eileen says of Andy, ‘He gave us a lot of help and support when he was Shadow Home Secretary.’

Increasingly disillusioned with Westminster, in 2016 Andy secured the nomination for the position of Mayor of Greater Manchester. Knowing his time in Parliament was coming to an end he was keen to leave a legacy and presented the Public Authorities and Accountability Bill - popularly known as the Hillsborough Law - as a 10 minute rule bill.

‘They still don’t have anything like justice...there is now a contaminated blood inquiry, but it moves forward at a glacial pace.’

One of the provisions is to guarantee funding for bereaved families for representation at an inquest where the state is represented.

For Julie Hambleton, the issue of legal aid underlines the apparent determination of the establishment to protect itself from accountability.

‘Seemingly oblique decisions to grant legal aid, only serve to deepen our sense of inequity.

‘David Duckenfield - the former South Yorkshire police chief superintendent at the time of the Hillsborough disaster - reportedly received £7.6m in legal aid when faced with a private prosecution for manslaughter. Convicted rapist John Worboys has received over £166,000 in legal aid since his arrest, despite reportedly having significant property assets. Of course it is right that everyone should have access to legal representation, but our experience, and that of the Hillsborough families and others, demonstrates that this entitlement does not apply if you are challenging the state, even in the name of the indisputably innocent.

‘The Hillsborough Law would redress this inequity ensuring that all citizens are able to pursue justice.’

Andy’s last speech in the House of Commons was an impassioned plea on behalf of haemophiliacs and others who were infected with hepatitis C and HIV from blood products during the 1970s and 1980s, hundreds of whom have since died. He spoke of the parallels with Hillsborough describing it as ‘a criminal cover-up on an industrial scale’ and cited missing medical notes and the way people were denied treatment because they were ‘diagnosed’ as chronic alcoholics as evidence of a ‘deliberate, provable cover-up.’

He said, ‘[I] wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I left here without putting it on the official record.’

‘It was like all the learning from all of the other campaigns writ large. They still don’t have anything like justice and because it happened to thousands of people, there was no centre of gravity for the campaign to be based. I think that’s allowed the system to completely ignore

many of those people; there is now a contaminated blood inquiry, but it moves forward at a glacial pace.'

Elected Mayor in 2017, Andy now feels he has more political agility and is enjoying the freedom to build a different sort of politics.

'It's quite liberating leaving Westminster. Here's my take on it. You get there and you want to change the world. You're immediately under the yoke of the three line whip so in effect you're just rubber stamping government policy and most MPs don't have the maturity to question it. You get into the Westminster system and because your energies can't go into changing the world because you have the whip, the energy goes into the point scoring, and that becomes the currency of the place.

'You see it with more clarity in the end when you've left, but if there's one thing people hate about it, it's the idea that people put tit for tat ahead of the bigger issues.'

He would like to see reform in Parliament, not least of the whip system with MPs voting independently, like senators in the United States, and the House of Lords,
'It's unforgivable that in 2018 the unelected great and good from the Home Counties are making our laws.'

Andy says he believes Brexit was less about migration or Europe and more of 'a protest against an over centralised London-centric system that doesn't deliver truth, justice and accountability when ordinary people need it; all those campaigns are testimony to that.'

'There's a whole network; the police, media, Parliament, that sometimes can protect vested interests and conspire against the interests of ordinary people. In Grenfell, the echoes of Hillsborough are very loud and disturbing; an unsafe building, a sense of people living very different lives in that borough.'

His election as Mayor of Greater Manchester has clearly energised Andy to pursue what he sees as a new kind of politics, mobilising all sectors of the community and putting power closer to people so they are more involved in designing solutions.

'The old way of dropping policies from Westminster on tablets of stone never did work particularly well.'

There is something quite evangelical and heartening in Andy's advocacy of devolved power and enabling people to take action at a local level. For him, 'It's place first, party second.' At a time when the electorate could not be more cynical about the motivations of its representatives and the veracity of their words, it is refreshing to hear a politician who speaks the truth and genuinely believes in the potential of politics to work for a common good and justice.

His final words in the House of Commons, 'It is never too late to do the right thing.'

Thank you Andy.

'It's been an honour.'

We gave Andy the magic policy wand which would grant him three wishes...

'First would be a social care system fully funded on NHS principles, moving towards one system; so no more means testing. I've always said until we have a system that treats dementia as it treats cancer, we won't have a 21st century NHS. I'm passionate about this.'

'Second, comprehensive education; I think it was allowed - and I blame our own government for this - to become a dirty word. I believe all children should be educated together, all abilities together, seeing life from all sides, and an education which prioritises technical education as much as it does academic. It's one of the things I challenged the Labour Party on - you can't have big policies in terms of spending which are just focused on university students. I would end academies and free schools.'

'What is my third? You've really got me going! Obviously I'd like the Hillsborough Law to come in, but in my current role I think maximum devolution is the future. Nearly all decisions which relate to domestic policy: let's exclude the military, let's exclude counter terrorism, tax policy, but I'd say devolve everything else.

'The closer people are to decisions, the more likely they are to be better decisions. I think this country has been way too over centralised and swishing the policy wand, I would introduce widespread devolution across England.'

We also allowed Andy an extra wish for Everton to win the FA Cup.

See if Andy's wishes come true on Twitter @MayorofGM

Women in history - Christine Pizan

Dr Helen Swift has been Associate Professor of Medieval French and Fellow of St Hilda's College, Oxford, for thirteen years. She first studied the writer Christine Pizan when she was a doctoral student, working on medieval literary defences of women written by men, which, she says, 'was an interesting context to frame thinking about Christine as a woman writing in defence of her sex.'

You can read more about that project and follow her most recent work on Twitter @poulethelen

TEXT
Helen Swift

IMAGE
Courtesy of Helen Swift

Who cared what women thought in medieval France?

It's very easy to pass off attitudes towards women in earlier periods of European history as misogynistic: negative stereotypes abounded that classified women as untrustworthy, fickle, weak… the list goes on.

In particular, there was a strong tradition of associating woman with the body and man with the mind: she was related to the life of the senses and he to the life of the intellect, with the latter being valued high above the former. So the very question of attitudes towards 'what women thought' already needs to take account of a widely held prejudice that chose to dissociate the female sex from the "superior" male's activity of thinking.

There are several views as to why male scholars' theories of the sexes may have strategically distanced women from thought: one posits their general disparagement of women's capabilities as too feeble to undertake any intellectual endeavour; another proposes fear as a significant motivation – they were afraid of what women could do and so they limited their access to book learning. But some women did become learned, and texts survive that attest to their thoughts having been engaged with by men, which presumably means that they cared about them, at least to some extent? Let's look at the evidence of medieval Paris.

Perhaps the most famous learned woman of earlier medieval France is Héloïse, a renowned scholar, who, in the early twelfth century, had a love affair with Peter Abelard, a distinguished philosopher, which ended unhappily and with each of them retiring to cloistered life, as a nun and as a monk.

'...she was related to the life of the senses and he to the life of the intellect...'

We know about them in part from their letters, which, far from being a purely romantic correspondence, had a strong intellectual dimension. They write to each other, for instance, about the interpretation of scripture. He clearly cared about what she thought, and her intelligence, he later said, was what attracted him to her.

Moving forward a few hundred years, we find another set of letters being exchanged between a highly educated woman, Christine de Pizan, and a number of male intellectuals, but in a very different context.

At the turn of the fifteenth century, Christine worked hard to establish herself as a professional writer after her husband's premature death. She took issue with a work of medieval literature that was hugely popular and had established the status of "masterpiece": The Romance of the Rose.

This was a bold move, not least because she addressed her concerns about it – alleging that it was an immoral, corrupting work – to men of high status, including the Chancellor of the University of Paris. Her correspondents' attitudes to her opinions, and to the very fact that she was writing to them, may be seen as "mixed": on the one hand, we see her being patronised, which suggests they dismissed her thoughts, but, on the other, they clearly engaged with her, which indicates that they were actually bothered by her views.

It's tricky for us to evaluate the evidence that survives, since it's inevitably partial. Héloïse and Christine were exceptional women – their life situations can't be viewed as representative of women more broadly; Christine's father, for instance, was physician at the court of the King of France.

And we also need to consider how the letters as "source material" got transmitted to us: Christine herself edited some of the correspondence about the Rose to present to the queen of France, so does that show us how much a woman cared about what she thought, or how much she cared about men caring about what she thought…?

IMAGES
Left: Abelard and Héloïse in the Musée Condé, Chantilly, France, MS 482/665

Right: Christine Pizan lecturing from compendium of Christine de Pizan's works, 1413, The British Library Harley 4431, f.259v

Jennifer Kavanagh

Jennifer Kavanagh is a former literary agent, who spent nearly 30 years in publishing. She now sets up micro-credit programmes, mainly in Africa, and is a facilitator for the conflict resolution programme, Alternatives to Violence project. Jennifer lives in London, England.

She is a Quaker, a retreat leader, an associate tutor at the Quaker study centre, Woodbrooke, and she writes and speaks regularly on the Spirit-led life. She is the author of seven books of non-fiction, and one novel.

She writes for Her Edit about making dramatic changes in her life and following her heart. Her latest book, Heart of Oneness: a little book of connections is published by John Hunt Publishing. Follow Jennifer on Twitter @jenniferkwriter

IMAGE
Courtesy of Heather Martin

Just before he died, my father looked at me and said, ‘Well, at least you’re successful.’

I knew what he meant. I had followed the expected path and was still running my business as an independent literary agent; still on track in my chosen profession. The following year, everything changed.

For a long time I had loved the work, and then I didn’t. The celebrity culture, the bottom line mentality created an ethos that I could no longer sign up to, but since I had no idea of what else I could do, I stayed with it. And then, in 1997, came the huge realisation that I could simply let go of it. I didn’t need to know what I was going to do – it would be shown to me.

So, with appropriate safeguards for my authors, I sold the agency. And indeed, within a few weeks, I received a phone call asking me to start up a community centre in one of the poorest wards in the country. It was a call that changed my life.

I had let go of the need to know. The sense of freedom was wonderful. How had it taken me so long to understand that this was the way to live my life? With it came a recognition that my life was not about making decisions, but waiting for clarity.

‘How had it taken me so long to understand that this was the way to live my life?’

Hard as it is, waiting, listening, creating a spacious consciousness in which I can hear the voice of my heart, have become central to my life. In doing that I become clearer about some of the things that get in the way – for me. For what blocks us is a very individual matter.

Some of the things that I have needed to let go of are: fear, certainty, expectation and the need to control. We don’t know what will happen so I need to make space in my life for grace and the unexpected.

We make judgements about others that are generally proved false if we get the chance of deeper acquaintance. So I continually need to let go of assumptions about groups or individuals.

And realise that what matters is more about who we are than what we’ve done; not status or success but relationships, not only with those close to us, but with the whole of humankind, and the rest of creation. Celebrating both diversity and the unity from which it comes. Acknowledging the oneness and mutuality at the heart of the universe.

Of course it’s the work of a lifetime to put all this into practice. Quakers have a saying, ‘Think it possible that you are mistaken.’ That’s a good start!

So, what will matter on my deathbed? I think it will be to have fulfilled my potential, to have made a difference, to have lived an authentic and compassionate life. And to have loved, and been loved.

Under the microscope

Suzy Lishman CBE is a Consultant Histopathologist, Immediate Past President of the Royal College of Pathologists and only the second woman to be elected president of the Royal College of Pathologists. In its 2013 inaugural list of the 50 most inspirational women in healthcare, the Health Service Journal described Dr Lishman as the ‘public face of pathology’.

She is also Trustee of the Association for Art History, the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and The Royal Veterinary College, University of London. On Twitter she is, of course, @ilovepathology. She spoke to Her Edit about her extraodinary career and shares some insights into her fascinating job.

TEXT
Ann Clark in conversation with Suzy Lishman

IMAGE
Courtesy of Suzy Lishman

What led you to your career choice and how did you get there?

I have wanted to be a doctor for as long as I can remember. The only other subject I seriously considered studying was art history. Luckily I realised that I could study both so I took several Open University art history courses while I was a medical student and junior doctor.

As a medical student I enjoyed almost every specialty I studied and it wasn't until I started working as a junior doctor that I considered specialising in histopathology. I enjoy the academic challenge, the variety and unpredictable nature of the specialty, as well as working with several teams of colleagues to make sure that patients get the correct diagnosis on which to base decisions about their future care.

What does a histopathologist do?

Histopathology is the study of disease by examining tissue samples with the naked eye and under the microscope. If a patient has any tissue removed in the clinic or during an operation, it is sent to a histopathologist to examine.
I look at specimens ranging from tiny biopsies through to whole organs such as a breast or kidney. If you've had your tonsils or appendix out or had a mole or skin tag removed, a pathologist will have examined them.

We also see a lot of biopsies taken for suspected cancer. As well as making the diagnosis, we can provide information about the likely behaviour of a tumour, such as what treatment it is likely to respond to.

What do you most look forward to in your working day?

After 25 years as a pathologist I still love sitting down at my microscope with a big pile of slides to look at. I never know what I'm going to see and there is often something unusual or that I've never seen before. An hour or two's uninterrupted reporting is a rare treat.

I also look forward to our daily multi-headed microscope meeting. All the pathologists, including trainees, meet to look at interesting and difficult cases on one microscope with multiple heads, so everyone can see the same slide. It's a great opportunity to catch up with colleagues and share expertise.

'I enjoy the academic challenge, the variety and unpredicatable nature of the speciality.'

What motivates you at work?

I never forget that behind every slide there's a patient, anxiously waiting for my report. Knowing that the diagnosis I make could have life-changing consequences for the patient and their family is a big responsibility, but producing an accurate and useful report is also what gives me a sense of achievement and fulfilment.

An American article in 2015 suggested that women made up most of the graduate pathology trainees at 54.6%. Is this the case in the UK?

Yes, there are now more female trainees in pathology than male in the UK. Pathology has always been a fairly family-friendly specialty, typically with fewer evening and weekend commitments and the ability to work flexibly. I hope that both men and women will take advantage of the good work-life balance that a career in pathology allows.

What barriers exist to career progression for women in the sector and what measures would you like to see taken to tackle them?

It can still sometimes be difficult for women to work flexibly, particularly when training, although I think pathology is better than many medical specialties. It can also be difficult to move from one regional training scheme to another, making it harder for families to work in the same area if one is appointed a long way away.

Women sometime find it easier to drop out of training, particularly if childcare costs are more than they can earn. I would like to see more support for men and women with families to enable them to continue to work, while recognising that they have other commitments.

Tell us three words that sum up your attitude to life.

Care for others, be *kind*, it should be *fun*!

What advice would you give to your younger self setting out on her career?

Worry less about what people think of you. It's ok to be scared, just do it anyway. If people underestimate you, that's their problem, not yours. Almost everyone suffers from imposter syndrome at some point – you're not alone. You can achieve more than you ever thought possible so aim high.

Who inspires you in your work or personal life – or both?

My mother was my first, and most important, inspiration. She taught me many things, including that academic achievement isn't everything and the importance of writing thank you letters.

Professor Dame Carol Black, Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge and former President of the Royal College of Physicians, is an inspirational role model and has been a generous mentor to me for over a decade. She supports and encourages women and leads by her tireless example.

What has been your biggest triumph?

National Pathology Week (NPW) is probably the achievement of which I am most proud. I introduced this annual celebration of the contribution of pathology and pathologists to healthcare in 2008. Since then over 3000 events have been held in hospitals, schools and communities to get pathologists talking to the public they serve.

Feedback from audiences has been hugely positive, with many young people saying that they were inspired to study pathology and older people gaining a better understanding of what happens to their samples. NPW has been so successful that we introduced International Pathology Day in 2014, since when pathologists in over 60 countries have taken part.

And your biggest disappointment?

I had the privilege of serving as the president of the Royal College of Pathologists from 2014-17. One of my priorities was to support the implementation of a national system of independent medical examiners, as recommended in the report of the Shipman Inquiry.

These senior doctors will investigate all deaths to ensure that the correct cases are referred to the Coroner and families receive answers to any questions they might have. Medical Examiners will help improve the accuracy of death certification and highlight opportunities to improve the care of future patients.

Unfortunately implementation has been delayed several times and didn't happen during my presidency, which was a great disappointment. The latest plan is for implementation to be rolled out from April 2019.

We notice that you have diverse interests in e.g. being Trustee of the Association for Art History and the Royal Veterinary College. So when you've had a difficult day at work – how do you restore your equilibrium and raise your spirits?

I love to spend time with my family at home in Rutland. I enjoy meeting friends for meals and a chat and visiting art galleries. I also try to read every night, although I often fall asleep before I've got very far.

Your top tip for managing difficult colleagues.

Communicate, preferably in person. Many disagreements escalate because no one took the time to sort things out at an early stage. Emails can easily be misinterpreted. People often don't appreciate how much their actions impact on others – so an early and open discussion is always a good place to start.

What are your ambitions for the next decade?

I am enjoying getting back to routine diagnostic work at Peterborough City Hospital but I would also like to build on the skills and networks I have developed to support the organisations of which I am a trustee, including the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, Royal Veterinary College and Association for Art History.

I also chair the Scientific Advisory Board of Bowel Cancer UK and am excited about the research they are funding into the early detection of bowel cancer. From experience I know there'll be plenty of new challenges, many of which I can't predict. I look forward to finding out what the future holds!

The appliance of science

Bullied at school and living with a crippling chronic condition, Amy King is an exemplar of a woman with a dream and the tenacity to realise it. Dismissed by her teachers as unlikely to achieve anything academically, she has negotiated her own way through education to get a degree, win the Young Adult Learner of the Year Award, study for an MA and found her own charity, GlamSci. Amy's on Twitter @GlamSciAmy

She shares her remarkable story and tells Her Edit about her passion for science and fighting the gender bias which still exists in the discipline.

TEXT
Jayne Phenton in conversation with Amy King

IMAGE
Courtesy of Jayne Phenton

Amy says, ‘I can’t remember a time I wasn’t interested in science. It was always my thing.’

Her mum, Nickie, was a hairdresser and as a child Amy was fascinated by how her mum made women’s hair change colour or go from straight to curly, all science of course even if she didn’t know it at the time.

When people asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, Amy would reply, ‘A thinker’ usually getting the response that no-one would pay her to think.

Her mum says, ‘She wanted to know the ins and outs of everything’, so when Amy was six years old, Nickie bought her a chemistry set.

Amy was not a well child enduring frequent joint dislocations around the age of nine and having to have surgery on her legs when she was 12. Much later, the pain, fatigue and multiple dislocations were diagnosed as Ehlers Danlos disease, a condition arising from the body’s inability to produce collagen. Consequently, Amy missed a large part of primary school and two years of her secondary schooling.

Despite the profound discomfort and enforced absence from school, Amy was a keen student.

‘I was trying to study at home and, when I was well enough, go into school part-time. I sat my exams and I managed to get all As and Bs, but my school accused me of cheating. I tried to leave that school to do my A levels elsewhere, but because they’d predicted me such low grades, I couldn’t actually leave. I wanted to be a doctor so I needed A-levels to go to university.’

‘You’re wasting your time; you’re wasting our time. Even if you do pass, no-one’s going to hire a cripple. You’ll end up on disability benefit.’

Alongside, or perhaps in part because of, her health issues which meant she was using sticks and a wheelchair, Amy endured bullying including physical violence such as being knocked down stairs, pushed into walls and on one occasion having her hair set on fire with a Bunsen burner. The school refused to acknowledge there was a problem and seemed intent on ridiculing Amy’s ambitions.

‘They said, ‘we don’t know how you did your GCSEs, but you’re not going to pull that same trick again at A Level. You’re wasting your time; you’re wasting our time. Even if you do pass, no-one’s going to hire a cripple. You’ll end up on disability benefit.’

The situation came to a head when Nickie found a large quantity of tablets and a bottle of vodka in Amy’s room that she had intended to use to take her own life. Despite her profoundly challenging time at school, Amy wanted to continue her education, so she and Nickie developed a five-point plan.

Amy explains,

‘The first step of the plan was to do my maths A level. I was still going through surgery and physiotherapy at the time. So I did that at home and through adult education. Then I had to do two years of science A levels. The end goal was to get to university.’

Several colleges wouldn’t take Amy because she was now 20, but she went to an open evening at Bromley College and ‘completely fell in love with the place.’ After pleading, ‘I’m desperate to do my A levels, I just need someone to give me a chance’, a chemistry professor found provision for her and she was in. He also nominated her for the regional Young Adult Learner of the Year Award which she won.

By 2014, now aged 23, Amy was studying for a masters at the University of Greenwich and

was presented with the national Young Adult Learner of the Year Award at the Grand Hotel in central London. In a blog for the Royal Society of Chemistry, she wrote,

‘All the hardships I had faced and all the times I had struggled had been vindicated, and all the work I had done to help those who were struggling like I had, had been recognised. I was over the moon, as well as shaking like a leaf!’

However, Amy was to meet a different kind of prejudice from the taunts she had faced at school over her disability. As a child Amy says she was, ‘the little fat girl with glasses’. In her late teens, doctors told her that if she didn’t lose weight, she would be in a wheelchair by the time she was 23, so she lost seven and a half stone and adopted a more ‘glamorous’ persona.

Her appearance, with immaculate hair and make-up, attracted derision from fellow male students who deemed her ‘too glamorous’ to be a scientist. Feeling the undertones of the bullying she had experienced at school, Amy again looked at her options.

By chance she saw a documentary about the Open University. It immediately appealed to her.

‘The only thing they could identify me by was with a number and my academic achievements. Not a woman, not a disabled woman. I could enjoy studying and not have the politics of university.’

‘The only thing they could identify me by was with a number and my academic achievement. Not a women, not a disabled woman..’

The Open University had the added attraction of flexibility. In 2016, Amy formally established her charity, GlamSci, in memory of her late grandmother, which through events in schools encourages young people into STEM subjects and promotes more diversity in science. Amy says,

‘Open University has been a life-saver. It’s allowed me to do what I love, studying and teaching and I am my own boss. My ambition is for GlamSci to be recognised like WISE and Stemmettes which do great work to broaden participation in science, but I think we are like the mop and bucket to scoop up those who’ve fallen out of education or become disillusioned.’

Amy runs GlamSci with her mum and banks of volunteers from around the country; is currently finishing her Masters degree and aims to do her PhD. The same preconceptions about gender and science persist and Amy is clear she doesn’t see any need to make science more ‘attractive’ to girls by skewing it towards stereotypically ‘female’ interests.

‘Someone asked if I was a L’Oreal scientist. They assumed because of my make-up; I said, no, my background is in cancer. There’s no point in dumbing down a subject with a slightly warped view that it will make it more interesting for them. You just put the gender bias back in.’

Given her passion and enthusiasm for her subject and relentlessly busy schedule, it’s not surprising to hear that Amy rarely takes any time off, but I’m keen to know how she does unwind.

‘I think of experiments. I’m always thinking of new things we can try and do. I never totally switch off. We’re paid to be big kids basically.’

Her Edit

QUARTERLY

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