

## Personal Story- SH

Sheila's story:

Sheila's life was full of battling against achievement and refusing to accept the word no. She first graduated in 1991 with a Bachelors in Arts and Social Sciences. It was the first of many degrees eventually receiving a Masters in Childhood Studies, a law degree and a Post Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice.



Her charisma and skills were so meaningful that she has served as a local councillor.

She joked, "I can persuade 12,000 people to vote for me, but I can't persuade an interview panel to employ me".

She had just received numerous rejections for legal traineeships and her confidence was low when she applied for the Professional Careers Programme.

She shared with us: "I wanted to show my three children who have inherited my condition that it is possible to get employment despite the awful statistics for visually impaired people."

Despite her achievements Sheila consistently experienced barriers to employment. Before applying to the Professional Careers Programme, she had been unemployed for 2 decades.

Sheila was employed as an Inclusion Facilitator in her board, where she worked on guidance, advice and training on all matters that promote equality.

During her placement, Sheila at times experienced barriers relating to getting equipment to allow her to access the role, through the Access to Work service of the Department for Work and Pensions. She had to strongly advocate for herself with her placement organisation, and with Access to Work. Issues such as compatibility of technology, and the awareness of IT departments around technology that provides access to disabled people continued to present themselves.

She reflected: "When something is important to your own accessibility but in the scheme of things has very low priority, managing expectations

is important. I needed to decide which issues were worth pursuing and what wasn't."

However the Equality Academy, and the peer support group, were there to support her: "...I'm now proud of what I've achieved but could never have done this without the programme and the support of Equality Academy staff and fellow peers on the scheme..."

Despite the barriers that continued to present themselves, Sheila shared that she was treated fairly and equitably by her colleagues. She had this to say about her experience within the NHS workforce: "...the biggest revelation for me was the number of allies that were around in my Board. Often what had been lacking was a lack of appreciation of potential difficulties, however, once issues were highlighted and potential solutions suggested, it was fantastic to start seeing some of the barriers fall or at least minimised..."

We were delighted, though not surprised, that Sheila's achievements were recognised when she was offered a permanent contract to support the work of her health Board's Public Sector Equality Group.