

# A WORLD OF SILENCE AND DARKNESS...

IMAGINE living in a world that is completely dark and silent with no hope of change.

For nearly 5000 people living in Scotland that is their reality - one where they might never see their friends or family's faces or hear their voices.

In the first of a series of articles, CATRIONA STEWART reports on the work of the charity Deafblind Scotland.

**D**EAFBLIND Scotland works with hundreds of people across the country suffering varying degrees of hearing and sight loss.

With members aged from 16 to 104, the charity aims to make life easier for those who need support.

Ruth Dorman, chief executive of Deafblind Scotland, said: "I have been in my post for five years and I am surrounded by a staff group and members who believe in what we do.

"I love working here. I love the fact we are shaped by deafblind people.

"Our charity is important because the number of deaf people and the number of blind people are growing year by year, and so we need to be saying that deafblindness is something we all need to be paying attention to."

Deafblind UK set up in Scotland in 1989 in Barrowfield, before moving to its home near Lenzie railway station.

In 2001 Deafblind Scotland was set up as an independent charity, providing support and specialist services to deafblind people.

These include a guide/communicator service that matches interpreters with deafblind people to help them achieve everyday objectives - such as going to the shops or a GP appointment.

Suzanne Abbate has been with the charity for 12 years and is the operations manager,

communicators across Scotland provided by Deafblind Scotland.

She said: "The role of guide/communicator is a very specialised, highly skilled individual who becomes the eyes and ears of a deafblind person.

"They impact on an individual's access to information and ability to live a full life. They can do anything, from take them to a GP appointment to read them their daily newspaper or access the football scores.

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**There was nothing for deafblind people when I started. Often people can't understand**

started. Imagine living in a world without sight or hearing. Often people don't or can't understand.

"For all our deafblind members their experience is different and so we tailor what we provide to all their individual needs."

Mahri Nichols and Vijay Khanna are both health project officers with the charity, responsible for organising exercise and health access for deafblind members.

Mahri said: "It's partly about making sure deafblind people have access to the latest information.

"If you think about how you know about, say, exercise classes, it's walking along the street and seeing a sign. Or

for health information, it's seeing posters at your GP clinic.

"Deafblind people don't have that access so we make sure they know the latest information about their health."

Among a raft of health projects, Mahri and Vijay run a variety of exercise classes, such as breathing exercises, relaxation and chair-based exercise.

Vijay is also a guide/communicator and interprets for speakers of other languages, such as Hindi and Urdu.

Some 60% of the board of Deafblind Scotland is deafblind, including vice-chair Michael Anderson, who has been involved with the charity since 1997.

Michael has Usher syndrome, a genetic condition that causes hearing and sight loss of varying degrees, and is helped to have independence by his hearing dog Ferris.

The 74-year-old was born hearing impaired, although this was not diagnosed until 1945.

At the age of 13 his vision began to worsen and he had tunnel vision - meaning he could only see straight ahead.

It wasn't until he was 29 that he was diagnosed with Usher syndrome.

"I don't know what it is about me and how I cope. I would use the word 'pragmatic'.

"One just accepts this is happening. I don't feel angry - what's the point of being angry?"

"I miss seeing peoples' faces to interact with them and



Michael Anderson, vice-chairman and fundraiser for Deafblind Scotland, with his guide dog Ferris. Picture: Stewart Attwood

normal conversation with people. Social interaction is quite difficult.

"I find women are quite good at making the effort to communicate but with men it's a little bit more difficult.

"Another thing I miss is that I go to church every week, but I can't sing along with everyone else because I can't remember the words and, of course, I can't see the hymn sheet."

Michael worked for Edinburgh University as a technical assistant before having to give up work.

He now gets around with help from his guide dog Ferris, who is 10.

Michael added: "Having Ferris means I don't have to rely on my family for mobility, I can go to the shops with

him or to the station to come here to Lenzie, or to church.

"When I do training I try to make people understand what it's like not to be able to hear well or to see, but it's hard because they have the advantage of being able to go back to their normal lives.

"I like the element of being able to help other deafblind people. I'd like to be involved with educating the general public. Deafblind Scotland gives me a lift in my own life and helped to take me out of my shell."

Michael relied heavily on his wife, a nurse and midwife, until she died in 2004 after 25 years of marriage.

Recently Michael completed the Eyemouth Triathlon - a 400metre swim, 10.88km cycle

and a 2.33km run - in two hours and 21 minutes.

His fundraising efforts are for the latest chapter in Deafblind Scotland's history - a purpose built community facility for deafblind people that has been dubbed the Field of Dreams.

The new project will cost £1.3million and the charity is looking for fundraising support.

Ruth added: "This is an exciting next step for us and will make a mark for deafblind people in Scotland and in the UK.

"It's been more than 10 years in the planning but we know we can make it a reality."

To donate to Michael's Way see [www.justgiving.com/MichaelsWay](http://www.justgiving.com/MichaelsWay)



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RUTH DORMAN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE



Health project officers Mahri Nicholls and Vigay Khamma organise exercise and health access for Deafblind members



Suzanne Abbate, the operations manager for Deafblind Scotland

**TOMORROW: Find out more about Field of Dreams and how**