

This story was filmed and recorded during early February 2006 for 'Hear all about it!'

This campaign is a wonderful selection of inspiring adult learning stories told by the learners themselves. The highlights from Paul's interview can be watched and read; this is the transcript of the whole interview. The on-line learning champions would be delighted if his stories were used to promote learning in your organisation, college or charity. You can link your webpage to the West Midlands Learning Directory – Hear all about it! page

www.wmld.org/pages/hear_all_about_it/.



Paul's story -

My day-to-day lifespan is I do studying, I do catch up courses that I've learnt to deal with the volunteer work that I do. And on a Friday I try to put all of that into practice when I do the actual volunteer clinic.

The volunteer clinic is a charity called Free at Last and I'm their volunteer debt and benefit advisor. It's done in conjunction with Birmingham Settlements, they've got a community action plan where they come out to certain areas of the city and work with the organisations in them areas. Like, they work with the Vietnamese people, the Somalians, the Indians and the Pakistanis areas. They work with all of the charities that are associated with them people with debt and benefits and immigration advice. I work with a charity called Free at Last and every Friday we do a debt and benefit advice clinic. I've been trained up and supported by Birmingham Settlements to give that advice to people who come to us. And it could be simple things like, "Am I getting the right amount of benefit?", i.e. income support, child tax, working tax credit, even housing benefit and council tax benefit. And we sit down with the clients and we listen to what they've got to say, and then we try to find out what their problem is, what actually, their specific problem is they've come to see. And we do what we call a benefits check and 9 times out of 10 we can give the clients that extra. They can go to the benefits offices then, or it's the simple thing of a phone call on their behalf and 9 times out of 10, their benefits are increased. They get a better way of life. And it's open to all age groups and all religions, all races.

My learning situation was, I left school when I was 16, I left school with no qualifications. I started out in what I call a dead end job, working in a shop, greengrocers. And I worked then for 26 years, I worked in that shop till I was 18 then for the next 26 years I worked at the post office. I started off as a postman, I worked my way up to the next grade of a postman which was a postman higher grade, I worked my way up to being an active supervisor, then a full supervisor and then I became dissatisfied with the supervisor job so I went back down to a postman higher grade and then they got rid of that grade, the post office did a reorganisation, they got rid of that grade and we all became post persons. But, whatever level I was on, I always had training; I was trained how to use the machinery, it went on my record that I was trained to operate such and such a machinery, I learnt how to drive the little electric tractors that they use, and so forth. And as the machinery became more... progressive for the mail, we were all trained up on it and it was all entered on our record and training. In 2001 I was medically retired from the post office. I had what they call a heart attack and then from 2001 to 2003 it was like a

recuperation period for me. And then I got involved with the charity Free at Last, and then they asked me to be a volunteer, and then I did all of the training from then on, did all the training first, from the August 2003, right up until the November 2003 and the charity went live then with the debt and benefit clinic and the training has been ongoing, ongoing, and every time I've done some training I've gained a certificate. I've got different certificates for different course that I've done and it all goes on to a CV. I list it all down on my CV when I apply for jobs, what I've done. But unfortunately I haven't got a job yet; I'm still doing volunteer work.

The training I'm currently receiving is for different areas of the city. Birmingham Settlements were the main trainers, then a tribunal unit, Birmingham Tribunal Unit, which is in the city centre, and then, there's a new one that's started up, over by us, Active Partners, in the city, where they take small organisations that are doing advice work to people, whether its on debt, benefit, or even helping them fill in simple claim forms. And they refine their technique of explaining to people, from that you get a broader insight into what the actual benefit service is. What you can... I've learnt... from what I've learnt, what I've been taught, I've learnt a lot more about the benefit service and what benefits are more appropriate for people. It's like someone comes in and say, "I'm unemployed, I'm only getting jobseekers allowance, can I get any more?" You have to look into the whole situation and what that person is getting, and then you might find that, yes, they might be entitled to some extra money from another benefit. Even simple things like housing benefit, or even council tax benefit. Just by listening to the person and from the training that I've received, I can put the two together and come up with an idea, well not an idea, but a plan, to help that person gain more benefit. Get more out of what they've put in.

I was just seeing how it went, cause at one stage it was looking like I was going to have a major by-pass operation so I was just taking things steady. Then after two tears I was approached by the charity, I was involved with them, I was going to their dad's group, my granddaughter lives with us, so it was a long time since I'd had a three year old running around at that time, she's now six and they say you never lose the knack, but you do lose the knack, of being a parent again, and I wanted to learn. I wanted to learn from other fathers, how to treat the children. And I made such a good impression on the charity that they asked me to be the volunteer, there were two volunteers they asked and I was one of them. And I've still been there now, three years now. And I've done all the training courses that they asked. I've even done... I even went to a further education course. It was six weeks. It was two hours on a Monday for six weeks, to learn how to operate a computer. The first two hours was just learning how to switch it on, switch it on and unlock it! But I learnt it and now if you put me in front of a computer, I can switch it on, I can get into the menu and I can type a letter out. I even learnt on that course how to do a spell check on the computer. And print it off, and it was great. Instead of using a biro or a fountain pen to write letters out, I just type it in the computer, pres a button and it appears in front of me.

I was using computers when I was employed at the post office; all of the machinery was computerised, so I had a basic understanding. But, the computers that we used at the work are completely different to the computers that you use now, well not now, they're different sort of computers, so now I've got an understanding of how to use a basic computer.

It's helped me out of work cause I can take the laptop home and do work at home and play the games with my granddaughter. She's more computer literate than me now. She can do anything on a computer. She can type her own name and print it off and next thing you know she's doing it in colour, so it's helping her as well.

The important factor that's helped me, that I've gained more benefit from has been the debt and benefit side of the training. It's given me a better understanding of how to approach debt, I mean everybody has debt, but it's helped me on how to approach it with a clearer vision and how to manage it. And the same with the benefit as well, how to approach benefits, cause when you say "I'm on benefits", people think, "he's a scrounger", but people are on benefits for a reason. They're either incapacitated or they're elderly, and it's only what they've paid in through their national insurance stamp over the years. They're entitled to the help from people. That's really opened my eyes and made me more aware of it.

I have one elderly client that I see at the clinic every so often, she comes in, she just knocks on the door. She brings a flask of tea, some toast for us. She says "I've got a little problem, can you help me?" and you listen to what she's got to say and you say "Yes it's a simple thing, I'll call up and get the forms sent to you and when they come just bring them in". And you help her down the steps and she goes skipping down the street, and she's got an artificial hip. Something like that is really good. You see people they come in, they're all down, depressed, but after they've spoken and we say "Yes we can help you out", they go out with their spirits raised, and it's a good feeling inside, helping people.

Hopefully my future lies in getting back into full time employment, the debt and benefit side, if possible, but if not, something else, even if it means me going back to college to get re-trained, to get another qualification. I'm prepared to go that far, go to college, get a qualification, and get letters after my name.

This project was managed by jo.knight@niace.org.uk - who can be contacted for more information. She works for NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education). Birmingham and Solihull Learning and Skills Council funded the project.

