

TDW Radio...

By Pete Hill

<https://tdwradio.wixsite.com/tdwr/home>

I was asked the other day when I first started the TDW Radio project and without thinking I said about 1977. Not surprisingly the person who posed the question looked a little confused until I explained with a little bit of history.

At the time I wanted to be the next Noel Edmonds and when a chance to volunteer at Radio Friern the internal radio service of Friern Hospital in North London came up I couldn't believe my luck. I will never forget being taken into my first ward one night for what the presenters called 'a visit'. The general idea being to talk to the staff and gather any requests for the night's programmes. Having seen the building from the outside I must admit I had little idea what it would look like from the inside. The answer was high ceilings, patches of peeling paint, and a general run-down appearance. That though wasn't my main impression, what concerned me much more were the circle of 'patients' sitting round staring at a TV which presented a picture which turned over every 30 seconds. Who were these people and what were they suffering from? The answer from the staff was they were geriatrics. They all seemed of a similar age but what about the younger woman in the corner who wasn't as old as my Mum?

That lady was Catherine who, although I didn't realise it at the time, had early onset dementia. Catherine was mild mannered and loved the song Mississippi by Pussycat a song we all got to know well. As the years progressed, we got more and more involved with the patients and staff dreaming up various wacky plans to try to lighten the gloom. Easter 1988 was a good example for some reason we decided it would be good to do a 27 hour non-stop broadcast the first part of which would be a series of challenges for two sets of presenters. A kind of I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here, minus the creepy crawlies and the nauseating menu. One of the activities was to stage a party in one of the wards. This particular ward had managed to get an old piano from somewhere, but they didn't have anyone to play it. Then out of his armchair Sam arrived, he was in his 80's as I now know living with dementia but that didn't stop him banging out an hour of cracking party tunes. At the end I'll be forever indebted to my friend Michelle who put a microphone in front of Sam who calmly looked up and said: "I came to this place many years ago and by and large this party has been the jolliest time I've had since I've been here. The only thing is next year you'll have to find a second pianist." No there wasn't a dry eye in the house and true to his prediction when we did go back a year later sadly Sam's dementia had progressed, and he could no longer play the piano.

I have no idea what happened to Catherine and Sam after the hospital closed in 1993. I do know though that they live on in my memory and to this day I carry the audio clip of Sam recorded at Easter 1988 on my phone. In fact, I used it as the

closing point of the presentation which got me a job with the Alzheimer's Society some 28 years later.

Two years as a Group Activity Coordinator in Essex brought me back into 'Dementia World' and when my contract came to an end and things came full circle when I approached UK Health Radio with the idea of doing a radio show based around Dementia. Like me all those years ago, they jumped at the chance and since June 2019 The 'D' Word has been going out weekly to an estimated 850,000 listeners. In that time, I've chatted to people all over the world and made a whole bunch of new friends.

I have witnessed the power of music to help memories come flooding back and so I decided to form TDWRadio to try to do just that. Having enlisted my friends Angela and Paul, another former Radio Friern DJ, to help me we've set out to provide a whole range of radio shows aimed at people living with Dementia and their carers. During the COVID-19 lockdown we produced a few "Family Favourites" type shows for a local care home in Hertfordshire and the Stepping Out With Carers Charity. These gave loved ones the chance to send messages and request music for their relatives and friends in lockdown. It's an area we would like to expand as technology makes things possible I couldn't have dreamed of in 1977.

If you like the sound of what we do and want us to produce something for you please get in touch at tdwradio@gmail.com. Everything we do is voluntary and it's great fun working with brilliant people in the medium of radio that I've always loved. I often wonder if I'd still be saying that if I had become the next Noel Edmonds and to be honest now, I don't think I'd swap!