



SKIING IS BELIEVING

**THINK YOU KNOW YOUR LIMITS?
CHANCES ARE YOU'RE NOT EVEN CLOSE!**

Ready to inspire a generation

The Blesma Community Programme is back and on a mission to empower thousands more **p38**



Blesma Week needs your help

Raise funds and spread the word; how you can support the Association this summer **p14**

What does your family think?

A groundbreaking research project into Members' families is to reveal its findings **p34**



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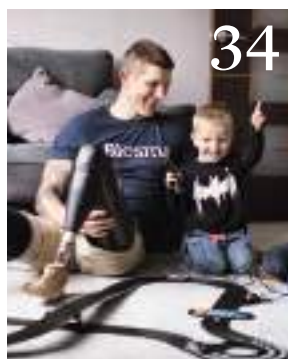
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Photography: Andy Bate, Frazer Waller



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Special thanks to: All our Members, Brian Chenier, Lorna Dorrell, Frank Garside, Barry Le Grys, Jess Mackinnon, Jess March, Emily Mizon, Heather Nicholson, Bryony Stevens, Ian Waller **Blesma Magazine** is published on behalf of the **British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association (Blesma)** by **ScratchCreate**. British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association Charity Numbers: England, Wales & N Ireland 1084189, Scotland SC010315; Company Limited Guarantee No. 4102768. Contact ScratchCreate at david@scratchcreate.co.uk or paul@scratchcreate.co.uk Printed by Wyndeham Grange. This publication may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form, in whole or in part, without the prior permission of the publishers. All prices and addresses are correct at the time of going to press. Every care has been taken in the preparation of this magazine to ensure the contents is fully accurate, but neither ScratchCreate nor Blesma can be held responsible for the accuracy of the information herein, any omissions or errors, or any consequence arising from it. The views expressed by contributors, customers and Members might not reflect the views of ScratchCreate or Blesma. Publication date: Spring 2018. © Blesma 2018.

NEWS

News, views and opinion from the world of Blesma

Flying the flag for Team GB

Getting an athlete to the start line of a race at the Paralympic Games takes more than just one person. For an individual to reach the pinnacle of world sport, a largely unseen support team must be in place. There are the relatives and friends who spark an interest in the sport, the coach who hones their talent, the sponsors who pay the bills, the loved ones who provide a shoulder to cry on when it's not going right, and the fans who cheer them on.

For the casual observer, it's easy to overlook the years of dedication and hard graft that have gone into getting into the perfect physical condition to make victory possible. And when you're an amputee who has had to get to grips with a new physical set up, it takes double the effort.

Owen Pick was three months into his first tour of Afghanistan with the First Battalion Royal Anglians, aged just 18, when he stood on an IED and lost a leg. Almost eight years after that fateful day, he lined up to compete in the Snowboard Cross and Banked Slalom events at the 2018 Winter Paralympic Games. To celebrate, many of the people who helped get him there gathered in a central London pub.

"Owen never blows his own trumpet," laughs his mum, Penny Pick, as the large crowd of supporters watch footage of her son holding the Union flag in his role as Team GB flag bearer at the opening ceremony. "He never even told me that he was getting good at snowboarding. He's never been a show-off. It was only when he mentioned, three years ago, that he might be in line to make the Paralympic squad, that I realised he was talented. I was amazed!"

FROM ARMY TO AIRBORNE FORCE

Penny says that Owen was Army-obsessed from a young age. "He knew right away what he wanted to do," she remembers. "He was just all about the Cadets. So when he joined the Army, he was very happy. And then we got that call. He said: *'Mum, I've had an accident, the Army will be in touch with you, I'm OK.'* Then the line went dead. As a mum, it was terrible. My imagination ran wild. But I was mainly just glad he was alive."

The immediate decision for Owen was what to do about his ankle: it was in such a bad condition that he faced two decidedly unappealing options. "So many bones in his ankle were affected that his doctor said



Owen's mum Penny (above right) has been 'amazed' by her son's snowboarding skills





Owen carried the flag he fought under into the Paralympic Opening Ceremony

The voice of Blesma

The man behind the audio mag (p12)



welcome

The winter appears to have left us, but only after a snow flourish that swept across the whole country. Our second and largest multi-disciplined winter sports activity in La Plagne enjoyed plenty of snow too, as you can see inside. We have new Member instructors and others who are interested in the role; this is something we would like to see more of in all our activities.

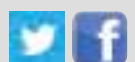
Also inside is the more cerebral Blesma Community Programme. The cohort of Members involved is now significant and the number of youths participating is beyond our original expectation. It seems we now have to think about the programme in a more strategic way, but with the education sector and the theme of resilience building remaining at the core.

Returning to the physical, Member Jordan Beecher and Captain Jon Armstrong returned safely from their row across the Atlantic clutching a world record. Another Member, Owen Pick (left) hoped for a record on his snowboard at the Winter Paralympics. Owen had not been on a snowboard until he went on a Blesma winter activity in Colorado five years ago. He demonstrates that the confidence and ambition sparked on a Blesma activity have no bounds; a strong message. The Paralympics is not for all, but a sense of achievement and fulfilment can be attained in so many activities and at any level.

I wish to thank Roy Phillips and John Miles for telling us their stories and for all their support as Members. I also wish to thank Members for participating in the research led by Anglia Ruskin University which we are now titling *Caring and Coping; The Family Perspective on Living with Limb Loss*. The report is close to completion and we think it will be particularly useful in helping delivery and support agencies see the injured, and those who care for them, in a different way, judging their needs more thoroughly. The university team told me they found it an enormous privilege to be able to converse closely and openly with the Members.

Finally, we have an article on Lonnie Bissonnette to give an insight into the wider world of limb loss and loss of use of limb. Lonnie is not a Member but there are stories outside Blesma which the membership may be keen to follow. We would be most interested to have your thoughts on this – letters bag please!

Barry Le Grys
Chief Executive





“HE HAS TALENT AND REAL PRIDE. HE WAS SO PLEASED TO CARRY THE FLAG, BECAUSE IT WAS THE SAME ONE HE FOUGHT FOR. HE’S VERY HUMBLE, HE DOESN’T SHOW OFF. HE’S A GREAT GUY!”

they could try to mend it, but he’d be living with the pain for a long time, or they could amputate,” says Owen’s gran, Pam Good. “And so he decided – at the age of just 19 – to have the leg off. I thought he was incredibly brave. He just wanted to get it done and move on with his life.

“The Army was great with him, and then he started getting into sport, which helped his recovery. There was no time to mope, and as a family, we tried to keep him positive. His aunty said; *‘You can either sit and stare at the wall, or turn around and look at the world.’* It’s to his credit that he just got on with things.”

Thanks to a supportive family, Owen was soon making progress. He discovered wakeboarding first and, thanks to Blesma, he encountered a snowboard for the first time. “Owen went on his first Blesma ski trip to Colorado in 2010,” recalls Colin Whitworth, a serving officer and Blesma Member who organises the Association’s participation in the annual Breckenridge Ski Spectacular in the USA. “I remember meeting him for the first time, it wasn’t long after he’d been injured. He clearly had the bug for snowboarding. He was a fantastic student and a great member of the team. And you could see from early on that he was talented. He learned things in a day that would take others weeks. With his wakeboarding and skateboarding background, he knew he could go places.”

Blesma, along with other sponsors such as QinetiQ, helped to fund his progress.

“Owen’s always been part of the Blesma fold,” explains Operations Director Ian Waller. “So we always wanted to help him achieve his goals. We wanted the funding we gave him to link directly to his training and performance. So it was a case of; *‘If you keep getting better, we’ll do all we can to help you achieve your dreams.’*”

TALENT AND REAL PRIDE

Owen also received invaluable assistance from his manager and mentor Bert Appleton. “I’ve worked with a lot of athletes and was manager of British Triathlon at the Athens 2004 Olympics,” Bert explains, “so I’ve had some experience of the scale of the Olympics. That’s useful to pass on. In Owen, I saw a driven performance athlete. He does this because he loves spending

time on the snow. He has talent and real pride. He was so pleased to be chosen to carry the flag because it was the same flag he fought for. And he’s very humble. He doesn’t show off, and he doesn’t talk about disability unless he’s asked, in which case he’s very happy to. He’s a great guy.”

Owen’s childhood pals have also been vital in keeping him grounded. One of them, Grant Mallyon, can’t quite believe he’s watching someone he grew up with competing against the world’s elite. “We were in the Cadets together and Owen was always all about the Army,” says Grant. “He’s always been the same guy – before and after his injury. We can always tell what the other is thinking. Sometimes he used to get grumpy with his leg, but the way he’s turned a negative thing into a massive positive is just inspirational.

“His snowboarding is incredible. I was boarding before Owen, and I remember bumping into him at the Milton Keynes Snowdome when he was just getting started. I was better than he was then, but now he puts me to shame, he’s phenomenal. How he got so good is just amazing.”

It’s clear that all these people have played a major role in getting Owen to PyeongChang. And as the evening draws to a close – last orders at the bar in the UK, but early in the morning in South Korea – the crowd enjoys a live Skype link up with the man himself, just awake from under his Union Jack duvet cover in the Paralympic Village. He seems a bit lost for words when he sees the huge turnout of supporters in the pub.

“Thanks everyone! It’s been such a long and bumpy road,” he grins. “To get together with all you guys – family, friends and sponsors – to say thank you, means the world to me. I’m massively happy.”

Owen came ninth in Banked Slalom and unfortunately failed to reach the quarter finals in Snowboard Cross

BLESMA DUO CHOSEN FOR INSPIRATION

Two Blesma Members were among a number of athletes who travelled to the Paralympics in PyeongChang in March to take part in the Paralympic Inspiration Programme. Alex Slegg (26) from Poole and Dan Sheen (36) from Cheshire were invited to take part in the initiative, which allows athletes and coaching staff to experience several days at the Paralympics. The aim of the programme is to inspire and excite developing athletes, and prepare them for competing at a future Paralympic Games.

Blesma Member Scott Meenagh was part of the programme at the 2014 Winter Games. He competed in the sitting classification of cross country and biathlon in Pyeongchang, with his best result 13th in the 12.5km biathlon.



Family matters

A research project unlike any other (p34)



Owen's gran Pam (far right) and good mate Grant (bottom) cheer him on





Words: Jessica Mackinnon, Danny Buckland Photography: Ben Duffy, Endeavour Fund

Blesma's Beecher one half of fastest pair to row the Atlantic

Amputee war veteran Jordan Beecher and one of his closest military pals have become the fastest pair to row across the Atlantic Ocean. The former Para Lance Corporal, who lost his left leg below the knee in an IED blast in Afghanistan, set off from the Canary Islands with Captain Jon Armstrong in December to take on the gruelling Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge as the Row2Recovery crew.

The pair reached Antigua 37 days, 8 hours and 8 minutes later, breaking the previous record by a whopping three days.

The duo, who first met in the back of a Land Rover on an exercise on Salisbury Plain when they were both new recruit Paratroopers, kept family and friends glued to their trackers as the competition became an intense battle between the Row2Recovery crew and an outfit called the Ordinary Boys.

"They were definitely the better rowers and were more sea-wise, but by the time they overtook us a couple of days after Boxing Day, we'd been in first place for two weeks and we weren't prepared to let that go without a fight," said Jordan. "Especially as we knew we were already ahead of the world record by a week!"

After an intense race, which saw the rowers spend more than a month at sea, the Row2Recovery pair rowed into Antigua just two hours ahead of their rivals.

"Having a world record is a nice feeling, but we just got lucky with the weather and the fact that nothing broke," said Jordan after the event, during which the pair shared a tiny 22ft boat for more than five weeks. Their record-breaking effort is even more impressive when you take into account that they were running out of supplies towards

the end of the race, living on just 1,000 calories a day for the last three days rather than the recommended 6,000. Despite that – and suffering from sore backsides! – the challenge never tested the duo's friendship.

Both headed straight back to work after the race with little temptation to get back into rowing any time soon, but Jordan has since been thinking about his next challenge. "I might embark on a solo trek, maybe walk and kayak across Iceland, or perhaps run a marathon. I'm not sure yet!"

The Row2Recovery crew are aiming to raise £100,000 in sponsorship for Blesma, the Royal Gurkha Rifles Trust and Dreamflight. If you would like to donate to their incredible world record-breaking row, visit <https://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/Team/row2recovery>



The new outreach team will encourage 'at home living'

NEWS BRIEFS

BEN GAMBLES ON SCUBA AND DISCOVERS PADI POWER

Ben Lee (pictured centre below) has been honoured with an Endeavour Fund award at a ceremony attended by HRH Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Double amputee Ben won the Recognising Achievement award for the progress he has made in his recovery through diving.

In 2011, Ben lost both his legs, suffered serious damage to an arm and hand, and lost some of his hearing in an IED blast whilst serving with the Royal Engineers. After turning down the opportunity to learn to scuba dive whilst at Headley Court due to a near-death experience as a child, Ben conquered his fear in 2016.

"It was like a switch flicking on and I just said; 'I can do this!'" said Ben. "I lost the sense of belonging when I left the military, but the charity Deptherapy has given me that back." With support from instructors and fellow veterans, Ben completed his PADI Open Water Diver course and gained several other diving qualifications.

"I was shocked to win the award as there were a lot of lads there with worse injuries than me," said Ben, who is now an ambassador for Deptherapy and is working towards qualifying for PADI Divemaster.



LIBOR fines to pay for national outreach team

Blesma is to benefit from almost £1 million of government funding in the coming months. The money, which will come from LIBOR fines, was announced in the Chancellor's Autumn 2017 Budget. It will pay for two projects; a national outreach team for the next two years and a brand new BSO post for the next three.

Already in his role as BSO (West) is Tom Hall, who is responsible for ensuring the continuity of care for limbless veterans across Wales and the Border Counties.

Meanwhile, the Association has been granted £694,000 to create a national outreach team. The team of 10 will work alongside the current BSOs (one per Area) to enhance independence and wellbeing at a local level, and to encourage 'at home living' through initiatives that will counter isolation, improve pain management,

increase mobility, and support families living with limb loss.

"The nine outreach officers, along with a coordinator at Chadwell Heath, will focus on encouraging Members to engage with their local community groups, offer help with (and access to) technology, enhance mobility through improved transport support, and recruit and galvanise volunteers," said Operations Director Ian Waller.

The 10 posts have now been advertised and the outreach officers will be in place in late May/early June.

"We are a national charity with a regional footprint, but we need to continue to focus and deliver on a local level," said Ian. "The outreach team is a hugely exciting development because it will enable the Association to do more for Members in an immediate and tangible way."

HAMMERS ROLL OUT THE CLARET AND BLUE CARPET

WEST HAM UNITED FC SHOWED THEIR true colours as Blesma supporters when star players took time out to chat to Members at a training session in March.

Manager David Moyes and first team players paused their busy training schedule and rolled out the claret and blue carpet at their Chadwell Heath training ground, which is just two miles from Blesma's office, to meet Matt Weston, Stu Ellis, Mike Williams and Matty Woollard.

Assistant manager Stuart Pearce signed Stu Ellis' prosthetic leg, while players Adrian and Pedro Obiang, along with management team members Alan Irvine and Chris Woods, spent time with the Members, learning how



they have rebuilt their lives and about Blesma's role in helping them regain their independence.

"Our Members had a wonderful day at the West Ham training ground. As always, the players and staff made us so welcome and we are honoured to be a chosen charity of West Ham United FC," said Barbara Warner, Blesma's Associate Director of Fundraising.

Players posed for photographs (Andy Carroll is pictured with Matty Woollard, left) and signed shirts, while special thanks must go to Tom Banks and Lucy Mitchell from the West Ham Communications and Player Liaison Team who organised the event and made sure the Blesma team had a day to remember.

BLE SMA BRIEFING

Phantom Limb Pain: the facts

Brian Chenier, BSO (Prosthetics), offers the latest on prosthetics. This issue; Phantom Limb Pain, stump care, and why it's important to look after your remaining limbs



WHAT IS PHANTOM LIMB PAIN?

Phantom Limb Pain is the sensation of pain that seems to be coming from a limb that has been amputated. It is estimated that between 50 and 80 per cent of people develop Phantom Limb Pain after an amputation. The condition is more common in women than men, and appears to be more widespread in upper rather than lower limb amputations.

The term 'phantom' doesn't mean that the symptoms of pain are imaginary. Phantom Limb Pain is a very real phenomenon, confirmed using brain imaging scans to study how nerve signals are transmitted to the brain. Symptoms can range from mild to severe. Some people have described brief 'flashes' of mild pain, similar to an electric shock, that last for a few seconds, while others have described constant and severe pain.

The causes are unclear. However, there are three main theories:

The Peripheral Theory argues that Phantom Limb Pain may be the result of nerve endings around the stump forming into small clusters, known as neuromas. These may generate abnormal electrical impulses that the brain interprets as pain.

The Spinal Theory suggests that the lack of sensory input from the amputated limb causes chemical changes within the central nervous system. This, in turn, leads to 'confusion' in certain regions of the brain, triggering symptoms of pain.

The Central Theory proposes that the brain has a 'memory' of the amputated limb and its associated nerve signals. Therefore, the symptoms of pain are due to the brain trying to recreate this memory but failing because it is not receiving the feedback it was expecting.

TREATING PHANTOM LIMB PAIN

Phantom Limb Pain can be extremely difficult to treat as the effectiveness of every treatment varies between people. Several types of treatment may need to be tested, the most common of which are:

Medication

Medication, which may be prescribed by your doctor to help relieve pain from nerve damage or to attempt to block pain signals, includes:

Anticonvulsants such as carbamazepine or gabapentin

Antidepressants such as amitriptyline or nortriptyline
Opioids such as codeine or morphine

Non-invasive therapy

There are several non-invasive techniques which may help to relieve Phantom Limb Pain. They include:

Applying heat or cold such as using heat or ice packs, rubs and creams

Massage to increase circulation and stimulate muscles
Acupuncture needles are inserted into the skin at specific points on the body. They are thought to stimulate the nervous system and relieve pain.

Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS)

involves using a small electronic device connected to a series of electrodes. The electrodes deliver small electrical impulses to the site of the stump. TENS is thought to work by disrupting the passage of pain signals to the brain and stimulating the release of natural painkilling chemicals known as endorphins.

Mental imagery

Research carried out in Liverpool in 2008 found that if people spent 40 minutes imagining using their missing limb, by stretching out their 'fingers', for example, or bunching up their 'toes', they experienced a reduction in pain symptoms. This may have been related to the Central Theory of Phantom Limb Pain (that the brain is looking to receive feedback from the amputated limb) and these mental exercises may provide an effective substitution for this missing feedback.

One technique that can be used is known as Mirror Visual Feedback. This is where a mirror is used to create a reflection of the remaining limb. Some people find that by doing exercises and moving the remaining limb it can help to relieve pain from the missing limb. You can read more about the recommended treatments for Phantom Limb Pain on the Limbless Association website (www.limbless-association.org).

STUMP CARE

Injuries, infections and general soreness that affect the residual limb/stump can be more than just an irritation. If a problem with your stump is left unrecognised or untreated it can lead to more serious problems and even an inability to wear a prosthetic limb. Getting to know

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Photograph: Andy Bate

your stump is vital and daily checks are a good way to help prevent problems. Prevention, in this instance, really is better than cure. Below are a few simple tips that may help...

- It is important to keep the skin on the surface of your stump clean to reduce the risk of the skin becoming irritated or infected.
- Wash your stump at least once a day (more frequently in hot weather) with a mild antibacterial soap and warm water, and dry it carefully.
- If you regularly take baths, do not leave your stump submerged in the water for long periods of time. This is because the water will soften the skin on the stump, making it more vulnerable to injury.
- Using unmedicated talcum powder, such as baby talcum powder, is an effective way to help reduce perspiration around your stump.
- Some people find that wearing one or more socks around their stump can help absorb perspiration and reduce skin irritation. As the size of the stump may change during recovery as the swelling goes down, the number of socks used may vary. However, it is important to change the socks every day to maintain hygiene.

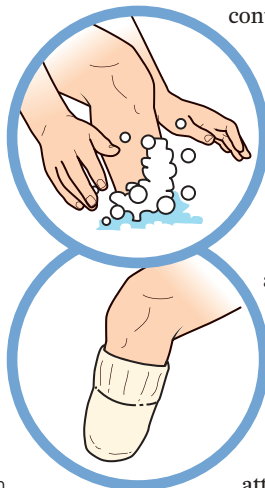
If you have a prosthetic limb, clean the socket regularly with soap and warm water.

Check your stump every day for infections such as:

- Warm, red and tender skin
- Discharge of fluid or pus
- Swelling of the skin

If you think you may be developing a skin infection, contact your care team for advice.

It is important to check your stump carefully every day for any sign of infection



YOUR REMAINING LIMB

After losing a leg, it is important to avoid injury to your remaining leg, particularly if you are diabetic, as the conditions that led to the need for amputation may also be present in the remaining leg.

Avoid poorly fitting footwear and ensure an appropriately trained individual (such as a chiropodist) is involved in nail care and the care of your remaining foot. An awareness of the additional strain put on the body (particularly joints) is essential. Keep alert for aches and pains in remaining limbs and seek medical attention if you need to. Early support may delay further problems. Seeking expert advice on diet, exercise and lifestyle may also be useful.

For more on any prosthetics issues, please contact BSO (Prosthetics) Brian Chenier at Chadwell Heath on 020 8548 7080 or at bsoprosthetics@blesma.org, or visit www.blesma.org

In the spotlight

John Miles



John Miles, 72, has had a long relationship with Blesma following the work of his father, who was instrumental in setting up the Bournemouth Branch. He has been producing the audio version of *Blesma Magazine* for more than 10 years.

“I first began recording the audio version in 2007, after I’d suffered kidney failure. My rehab was long and slow, and during that time I used to read the old *Blesmag* to my widowed mother. While reading it, I came across a request for help with the audio version and it made me think that doing something for people whose problems I understood well would help me, as well as benefit them.

“At first, I recorded the magazine onto cassettes. It was about 80 pages back then, and I wondered how anyone could listen to me for six hours! There have been three main changes since those early days. I now produce the audio version on CD rather than tape, and I do the copying and distribution myself. The new magazine is much shorter, more dynamic and easier to read, so my recordings only last about two hours now. I have a specially built computer for recording, and a microphone stand made out of an old Anglepoise lamp.

“Computer software allows me to make all kinds of edits, which makes things easier. I then print and burn the discs, which takes about three hours. I also record, produce and distribute the *Bulletin* as well as the War Widows’ Association magazine, *Courage*.

A LIFE LIVED WITH THE ASSOCIATION

“I’ve been around Blesma all my life. My father lost his foot after stepping on a landmine in the North African Desert in 1942, and developed gangrene. After his injury, he had two further amputations, and ended up an above-knee amputee. He was Bournemouth’s Branch Secretary for many years.

“In Bournemouth, we lived in one of 24 War Memorial homes that were built for disabled war veterans. About three quarters of the residents were Members and the Blesma ethos of Member helping Member was prevalent. My first involvement with the magazine came in the early fifties. All the copies

for Bournemouth were delivered to my parents and we mailed them out. My mother typed the labels and I wrapped them and stuck the stamps on. Sadly, my father died in 1992, and six years later my mother, now 98, moved from Bournemouth into residential care close to our home in Kettering.

CHANGING TO STAY RELEVANT

“Blesma has changed a lot over the years. It used to be very Branch based, fighting for pensions and benefits. It’s different now, but Blesma still focuses on the same issues; fighting for the rights of Members, but they are fewer in number and scattered across the country. The Activities Programme brings them together in groups to challenge themselves and to experience the camaraderie of life in the Forces again. It’s still about Member helping Member, but now it’s updated to the 21st Century.

“The magazine is hugely upbeat, with fantastic photographs and descriptions of the achievements of the Members, but there is always one moment of sadness – reading the obituaries, particularly in cases where, as a child, I knew the deceased.

“Laying on my back in hospital in 2007, I decided I needed a challenge, a target to aim for. I wanted to be able to walk again but that was not enough. Walking from coast to coast was the answer. Four years later, I set off with two friends and over that summer we completed the walk, raising £1,500 for Blesma along the way.

“We send out about 25 audio versions at the moment, most are on CD but it is also available on memory stick. Currently, I’m working with the BSOs to reach more of the Members who might benefit from this service. Sometimes, I get some lovely feedback; I just heard from a lady who was over the moon to start getting the audio magazine. That’s always nice to hear, although it will be a bit odd having to read this article about myself out loud for the next issue!”

If you are interested in receiving an audio version of the magazine, or know someone who might, please contact your Blesma Support Officer

“

I HAVE JUST HEARD BACK FROM A LADY WHO WAS OVER THE MOON TO START GETTING THE AUDIO VERSION OF BLESMA MAGAZINE

”



Schoolboy sells home-made poppies for Blesma

A DOUBLE AMPUTEE SCHOOLBOY has raised more than £100 for Blesma by selflessly using his school lunch breaks to crochet and sell poppies.

In the run up to last year's Remembrance Day, 12-year-old Cieran Kelso (pictured below with Blesma Member Shaun Stocker) who had to have both his legs amputated when he was just 13 months old after being diagnosed with meningitis, wanted to support injured soldiers who were in a similar situation to him by fundraising for a military charity.

With the help of his teaching assistant, Cieran discovered Blesma and, after successfully crocheting lots of poppies

and selling them to members of staff, he raised £125 for the Association.

Last December, Cieran's school held a surprise assembly during which Blesma Member Shaun Stocker was presented with the cheque. "It was amazing to meet Shaun," said Cieran, who lives in Cheshire. "He is the first injured soldier I've ever met. The assembly, and Shaun's visit, were a total surprise to me and afterwards we were able to talk alone. We talked about our different legs and Shaun even took his prosthetics off. It was pretty amazing!"

During the assembly, Shaun also gave a talk as part of the Blesma Community Programme (see separate story on p38).



NEWS BRIEFS



PLANS CONSIDERED FOR FRANKLAND MOORE HOUSE

The future of Elizabeth Frankland Moore House, Blesma's main office for more than 50 years, is in serious question. Not only is the building disabled unfriendly (so not used by Members), it is dysfunctional in layout and is most inefficient. The building is too big for Blesma alone, and in order to attract other business tenants, significant investment is required to bring the building up to a commercial standard.

The building is in Chadwell Heath, in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The original building was constructed in the 1960s as purpose-built offices. A two-storey extension was added to the rear in the 1990s, but apart from a few internal alterations and maintenance, nothing has been done since.

The Board of Trustees is considering refurbishment of the House. This will require approaching the local authorities for outline planning permissions in order to establish what is realistically possible in the local environment. There is a strong attraction to improving efficiency and reducing overheads, putting the building to better use by taking tenants to provide additional income and add value to the asset.

It is the Board's intention to meet with surveyors and the local authorities in order to work out what is best for the future, and the membership will be updated as soon as a decision has been made.

A FOUR TO BE RECKONED WITH

The Soldiering On Awards will be held in April, and four Members have been nominated for an award. Strongman Mark Smith (see separate story on p17) and para triathlon athlete Steve Crowley have been shortlisted for the Sporting Excellence award, blind double amputee veteran Andy Allan has been nominated for the Inspiration award, and Luke Delahunty has been entered into the public vote for the People's Choice award.

The event, which will be held on 20 April, celebrates the achievements of the Armed Forces community, with nominees being put forward by local businesses, gyms, sponsors, and a host of charities.



TELL US WHAT YOU WANT FROM YOUR MAGAZINE

What do you think of this issue of Blesma Magazine? What subjects would you like to see covered in the next issue? Write to us at editor@blesma.org and let us know so that we can constantly improve your magazine.

Words: Jessica Mackinnon

Get involved in **Blesma Week** 28 May-03 June 2018

Now in its fifth year, **Blesma Week 2018** is set to be the biggest and best to date. The week will be packed full of activities and events to help raise vital funds and awareness for our amazing charity. We have lots of great tips and ideas on our website at www.blesma.org/blesmaweek. **To find out more about how to get involved, please contact the Fundraising Team at fundraising@blesma.org or call 020 8548 7089**



BLACKSTONE CONSULTANCY™

GARDAWORLD



100for100 Challenge

2018 marks 100 years since the end of the First World War, which led to the creation of Blesma. To mark this anniversary, we are launching the 100for100 Challenge during Blesma Week.

Walk 100 miles in 100 days, sell 100 Grand Prize Draw tickets, give something up for 100 days, do 100 press-ups, sell 100 cup cakes, stay silent for 100 minutes... The challenge can be anything – whatever you choose to do, we would love to hear about it! **For more information on the challenge, or to register for your challenge pack, visit www.blesma.org/100for100**

Blesma BBQ

Stick the barbie on, invite your friends, workmates, neighbours and family over, and get together for an afternoon of fun. Throw in a few games and some music, and it will be a backyard festival!

Workplace Fundraising

Are your colleagues up for a bit of fun? Why not challenge them to take part in the 100for100 Challenge during Blesma Week? Could you dress up, dress down or dress crazy? Swap your work clothes for something more interesting? Which department can raise the most?



Bucket Collections

We are looking for helpers to support us at two Transport for London station collections. Can you spare a few hours? We'll be at Canary Wharf on Wednesday 30 May and King's Cross on Friday 01 June. If you're not able to make it to London, is there anywhere local you could organise a Blesma Week collection?

School Fundraising

Get creative, get baking, or have a dress-down day! If you would like to nominate a school to get involved during Blesma Week we would love to hear from you.

Blesma Week Quiz

Rack your brains with the Blesma Week Quiz. To get your quiz sheets, please email barrie.taylor1@outlook.com

Get involved

To request your Blesma Week pack full of tips and ideas to help make the most of Blesma Week, contact the Fundraising Team on 020 8548 7089 or fundraising@blesma.org



Grand Prize Draw

Tickets are just £1 and the first prize is £1,000

Last year, the draw raised more than £10,000 and, with your help, we can do even better this year. You will have found two Grand Prize Draw ticket books in this issue of the magazine. Please sell them to friends and family. If you would like more books, please email fundraising@blesma.org or call 020 8548 7089. The first prize is £1,000 courtesy of Centro Plc. All the prizes are sponsored, so all proceeds go to the Association. **The Draw closes on 16 July, with winners announced shortly afterwards.**



Fall for the Fallen sets its sights high again in 2018

ONCE AGAIN, THE ASSOCIATION AIMS TO ‘BLESMARISE’ THE SKIES THIS YEAR as scores of intrepid fundraisers are set to take on the ultimate rush; a tandem skydive. At this year’s event, which will take place at Dunkeswell Airfield in Devon on Saturday 08 September, participants will be able to skydive from 15,000 feet – the highest jump possible without oxygen!

Fall for the Fallen was set up by veteran Dave Pacey and Blesma Member Edward Appleby in 2012, and has so far seen more than 200 people complete tandem skydives, with each jump representing a life lost in conflict. You can be part of the fun and join Team Blesma for this amazing experience by securing your place for just £50, with a fundraising pledge of £500. But don’t worry if you can’t make it to the event in Devon – you can still be part of the team and jump from one of 20 other sites across the UK that are taking part in Fall for the Fallen.

For more information, or to secure your jump, please contact the Fundraising Team on 020 8548 7089 or email them at fundraising@blesma.org

NEWS BRIEFS



IT’S TWO NOT OUT FOR BLESMA’S IST20 PARTNERSHIP

Blesma has been chosen as the Inter Services T20 Cricket charity of the year for the second time. Following 2017’s success, Marylebone Cricket Club will welcome Blesma and their collection buckets back to Lord’s Cricket Ground on Thursday 14 June for a day of great cricket.

The British Army team will be hoping to successfully defend their IST20 champions’ title for the sixth successive year against the Royal Navy and RAF. Tickets are £17 for adults, £8.50 for the over-65s and £5 for U16s, and can be bought by calling 020 7432 1000 or from tickets.lords.org



GET A SLICE OF HISTORY AND SHOW SUPPORT FOR BLESMA

The Helicopter Museum in Weston-super-Mare, Somerset, is holding a ‘World at War’ Weekend in aid of Blesma on Saturday 07 and Sunday 08 April from 10am to 5.30pm.

The event attracts a large number of WWII enthusiasts with their collections, as well as re-enactment groups and serving military personnel. This year, the Blesma-supported Gazelle Squadron will be in attendance as will members of the cast of the BBC’s comedy show ‘All or Nothing’.

Tickets for this family-friendly event are priced at £7.50 for adults and £4.50 for children, or £20 for a family of two adults and two children. For more information, visit helicoptermuseum.co.uk/events

SET YOUR ALARM FOR TEE TIME

After the success of last year’s Blesma Golf Day at Denham Golf Club, the Association is delighted to be returning to Denham, Berkshire on 17 July for what is set to be another amazing day of golf and fundraising. And not content with having just one golf day this year, Blesma is also hosting a golf day at The Nottinghamshire Golf & Country Club on Tuesday 25 September.

For each golf day, teams of three are invited to take part and play with a Blesma Member for an 18-hole, four-ball Stapleford. Entry includes breakfast, a carvery lunch and competition prizes. Lunch will be followed by an auction and prize giving, as well as the chance to hear the inspirational story of one of our Members.



ENTRY DETAILS

Denham Golf Club	Team of three: £450	Individual: £150
Nottinghamshire G&C Club	Team of three: £150	Individual: £65

If you are interested in entering a team, or playing as an individual in a team put together by Blesma, contact the Fundraising Team on 020 8548 7089 or fundraising@blesma.org

Activities 2018

Get out and active in 2018

Blesma is offering Members the chance to try more activities than ever before in 2018 – all for free! Here's what's coming up in the next few months. Don't miss out! Apply now by emailing Emily Mizon on meo@blesma.org or by calling her on 020 8548 7094



Intro to Cycling

Location: York

Date: 16 June

Application deadline: 13 April

This activity is for Members who haven't tried cycling since they've been injured. The event will introduce participants to different types of adaptive cycling, all under expert guidance. By the end of the course you will know how to take your cycling to the next level.

Who can take part?

Any Member. You don't need to bring a bike – they're all supplied!

Art and Painting Course

Location: Somerset

Date: 06-11 July

Application deadline: 13 April

A six-day course for both beginners and improvers. Members will be given the opportunity to take part in fieldwork (visiting a number of outdoor locations) as well as studio-based work. This is a fantastic course for Members who are looking to take up a new hobby or improve their artistic skills in a relaxed and sociable environment.

Who can take part?

Any Member. The equipment is all supplied but you can bring your own if you want to. Experienced artists are welcome to come and hone their skills.

Family Activities Week

Location: Hampshire

Date: 06-10 August

Application deadline: 13 April

The Family Activities Week will be held at the Poppy Pods in Hampshire. The pods are hugely popular and have been designed with accessibility in mind,

which makes this the perfect break for the whole family. You will be able to enjoy quality family time and experience a whole host of adapted activities such as archery and climbing.

Who can take part?

Any Member with a family of up to four members (eg Member + up to three others). Those with a bigger family should contact Blesma directly.

Couples' Weekend

Location: London

Date: 10-13 August

Application deadline: 13 April

A weekend break for Members and their spouse/partner to explore our capital city, enjoy a show, and socialise with other Members and their spouses.

Who can take part?

Any Member and their spouse/partner

Activities Calendar 2018

DATE	EVENT	LOCATION	APPLY BY
16 June	Introduction to Cycling	York	13 April
06-11 July	Art and Painting Course	Somerset	13 April
06-10 August	Family Activities Week	Hampshire	13 April
10-13 August	Couples' Weekend	London	13 April
18-25 August	JST Voyage	Southampton	18 May
23-26 August	Family Glamping Weekend	Brampton	26 April
24 Aug - 01 Sept	Classic TT	Isle of Man	26 April
03-11 September	CAMO Wilderness Expedition	Colorado, USA	09 June
07-09 September	Dorset Fishing Competition	Dorset	13 June
07-14 September	Widows' Week	Cheshire	09 June
09-14 September	Activities Week	Kendal	23 June
09-15 September	Iceland Photography Expedition	Iceland	13 May
14-21 September	Seniors' Week	Cheshire	09 June
15-23 September	Greek Regatta	Greece	26 May
23-26 September	Golf Tuition	Essex	26 May
30 Sept - 07 Oct	Soldier Ride UK	(TBC)	09 June
05-06 October	Ride To The Wall	Burton upon Trent	23 June
12-20 October	Scuba Diving Expedition	Egypt	06 August
12-15 October	General Photography Course	Winchester	23 June
29 Oct - 07 Nov	Bahamas Expedition	Bahamas	23 June
October (TBC)	Scuba Training / Try Dives	Poole	TBC
10-11 November	Remembrance Weekend	London	10 August
10-18 November	Horseback in America	Arizona	22 July
12-16 November	Fitness and Lifestyle Course	Fuerteventura	12 August
30 Nov - 03 Dec (TBC)	Christmas Markets Couples' Weekend	Belgium	01 September
November (TBC)	Colorado Ski Spectacular	Colorado, USA	20 August
19-27 Jan 2019 (TBC)	Winter Sports Europe	France	09 November

Challenge Aspen

Military Opportunities

Multi-Activity Expedition

Location: Aspen, Colorado, USA

Date: 03-11 September

Application deadline: 09 June

This multi-activity expedition is hosted by Challenge Aspen Military Opportunities in Colorado. It includes six days of activities in the famous Rocky Mountains. In the past, the event has included white water rafting on the Colorado River as well as archery, horse riding, climbing, hillwalking, fishing, exploring old silver mines, downhill biking and much more. There will also be time to socialise and get an idea of how much you are capable of.

Who can take part?

The event is open to most Members. The team in America do their best to get every Member active and involved in all the activities. Please contact Emily on the email or contact number above if you would like more details. You must be able to enter the USA.

Autumn Widows' and Seniors' Weeks

Location: Alvaston Hall, Cheshire

Date: 07-14 September (Widows' Week)

14-21 September (Seniors' Week)

Application deadline: 09 June

Based at one of the prestigious Warner hotels, the week focuses on relaxing and socialising, with gentle activities and sightseeing in and around Cheshire and the surrounding areas.

Who can take part?

Seniors' Weeks are open to any Member, spouse or Widow(er) over 65 years of age. Widows' Weeks are only open to Widows.



Words: Jessica Mackinnon Photography: Kasia Fiszer

Mark is going from strength to strength

Mark Smith, who has won the title of Britain's Strongest Disabled Man for the last two years, has added yet another accolade to his ever-growing collection. In March, Mark was invited to Ohio in the USA to defend his title of Strongest Disabled Man in the Arnold Sports Festival, a prestigious competition created by Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Mark pressed, pushed and strained his way through five events; the Dumbbell Medley, the Loading Race, the Atlas Stones, the Sled Pull and the Farmers Hold, winning four out of the five events.

"This year, the weights were a lot heavier and the athletes a lot better than last year, so the whole competition was much tougher,

but fortunately it was by far the best competition I have performed in," said the 33 year old, who lost his right leg during a live firing exercise in Canada while serving with the Grenadier Guards. "Winning so many of the events has made me realise that I am capable of winning the World's Strongest Disabled Man competition."

There's no time for Mark to sit back and enjoy his victory, as he will soon be competing at the inaugural England's Strongest Disabled Man competition in April, before he aims to make it a hat-trick at Britain's Strongest Disabled Man in May. That event is also a qualifier for the World's competition, which will be held in Norway in September.

CORRECT CONTACT DETAILS FOR BSO (EASTERN)

Kevin Long is the Association's newest Blesma Support Officer and is responsible for looking after the Eastern Area. His phone number was published incorrectly in the Bulletin and Members can get in touch with him by calling 020 3954 3020.

INBOX

Word from our inbox. Get in touch at editor@blesma.org

Lifestyle course changed my life

I'D JUST LIKE TO SAY A BIG THANKS for taking me to Fuerteventura last year on the Lifestyle and Fitness Course.

The course was fantastic – hard but so rewarding. The instructors were so professional and well prepared, they answered all the questions that were fired at them, and explained everything in layman's terms so everything sunk in! The fitness side of the course was very educational. Gregg, the fitness instructor, was an absolute inspiration; very positive and passionate. He strongly believes in his outlook on life as he is living proof of what can be achieved with the right support and education. I can't recommend this course enough to other Members!

The week had such a positive effect on my life! Before I went on the course last November I weighed 18 stone. Today, I'm down to 17 stone! That's with hard work and plenty of determination, but also from incorporating into my everyday life all the lifestyle choices that I picked up; no carbs after 3 o'clock, make sure you eat breakfast,

don't just go for 'fat free' because it might be full of sugar... simple tips that really work.

The course has given me confidence as I was quite depressed before I went on it. But being with other Blesma Members – people who have a similar condition – really inspired me into thinking; *'I can do this!'*

It made me feel; *'If they can do it then so can I!'* I went from being the only person in my life with a disability, feeling that I was on my own and low, with people fussing around me, to being just one disabled person in a group of disabled people, some of whom are far worse off than me. I looked around and just got on with it.

I know I'm using the word 'inspired' a lot, but that's one of the many things I've taken from the course that has changed my life. I've been inspired to crack on as I now know the only person who can change my life is me.

Craig Blakesley



Those who have passed away

November 2017 - February 2018. May they rest in peace.

Aldrich I Mrs	Civilian casualty	Sutton & Merton	Feb 2018
Balls M	RHA	Gt Yarmouth	13/02/2018
Bennett A	Lancers	HQ	28/01/2018
Bicknell R	Parachute	Bournemouth	Feb 2018
Brisco J	RE	HQ	24/12/2017
Bryant T	RAF	HQ	Jan 2018
Cain T	RAF	HQ	21/02/2018
Cox J	RHA	HQ	01/11/2017
Cunliffe K	RAC	HQ	25/02/2018
Delves G	RAF	HQ	21/02/2018
DuVall A	RAF	HQ	06/01/2018
Garcia A	RE	HQ (Merseyside)	Jan 2018
Gilbert J	RN	HQ	22/01/2018
Inman F	RE	HQ	Feb 2018
Kennett G	Blues & Royals	HQ	30/01/2018
Moore T	RN	HQ (E.Berks)	Feb 2018
Newman H	RAF	HQ	15/11/2017
Palmer J	RAF	HQ	Jan 2018
Pearson W	RAF	HQ (Eastbourne)	13/12/2017
Pickett M	RAF	Southampton	20/02/2018
Powell F	Worcestershire	HQ	09/01/2018
Reason J	Monmouthshire	HQ (SW Essex/Chelmsford)	03/12/2017
Thaxter T	Royal Scots Fusiliers	HQ	16/02/2018
Timlin J	RA	HQ	09/11/2017
Webb J	RE	HQ (SW Wales/Swansea)	13/01/2018
Williams A Mrs	WRAF	HQ	Feb 2018

Leeds and District Branch closure

IT IS WITH GREAT SADNESS THAT I, as the Chair at Leeds, give notice of the closure of the Leeds and District Branch. We closed on Monday 19 March, on the 90th anniversary of the Branch.

We have 33 Members of all categories, but only 10 regularly attend meetings and functions. There have been no new Members from any conflicts in the past 20 years. We have literally died on our feet, so to speak. Filling in the roles of Chair, Treasurer and Welfare / Social person was difficult. Our auditor and good friend John Mordy wished to call it a day as banking got more difficult, so the inevitable closing approached rapidly.

I would like to thank all Members who have contributed to the Branch; Enid Thomas, Jackie Eaton and Les Goddard. I remember the huge contribution of Braham and Lola Myers, Peter Kelly, Ron Massey, Allan Thomas and Eric Radcliffe. The Friends of Leeds Branch for many years raised funds to support us and the Branch contributions to the Blesma homes. We know that Blesma support is still here for us in the shape of BSO Peter Shields and Stuart Riley.
Andy Mudd, Chairman



Leeds and District Chair Andy Mudd

“I AM SORRY IT MUST NOW CLOSE. IT HAS PLAYED A SIGNIFICANT PART IN THE WORK OF THE ASSOCIATION NATIONALLY”

Annual Dinner was always attended by the Lord and Lady Mayoress, the Chief Constable, and a representative from the Headquarters and the National Management Committee.

In 1959, I attended the National Conference as a Branch delegate. Chairing the conference (in those days probably made up of 100 or so delegates) was Philip Dixon whom I recognised as an exact school contemporary. He recognised me too, and at the end of the proceedings came up to me and said; “Why didn’t you open your bloody mouth?”

The next year, at Harrogate, I did, and though I didn’t think they were particularly good speeches, they must have been well received as the following year, at Margate, I was elected to the Executive Council, which much later became the Board of Trustees.

From this, much followed for me and for my wife, Lola. She has always supported me and chaired the Ladies’ meetings at Annual Conferences. Following from this one election, I eventually became National Honorary Treasurer, chaired the Annual Conference for five years, and chaired the Committee which organised all the arrangements for the Association’s Golden Jubilee. I was also a member of the Association’s Advisory Committee.

In the ’70s, because of recommendations from Blesma HQ, Eric Radcliffe and I became members of one of the Leeds Health Committees. I also had a full-time job, but obviously indulgent and capable colleagues! On several occasions, often with Philip Dixon and his wife, we represented the Association at conferences of kindred organisations in France, which were always memorable occasions for the food and the wine, but also for the feeling of difficulties shared. During all of these years Leeds Branch prospered, adding “and directed” when Wakefield Branch closed, represented at Annual Conferences and Area Meetings.

I am sorry it must now close, but there is no longer the membership to keep it viable. It has played a significant part in the life of amputee veterans from Leeds, Wakefield and the area around, and in the work of the Association nationally.

Braham Myers, 97

Leeds Branch: a personal memory

LYING IN BED IN CHAPEL ALLERTON hospital in Leeds in late 1946, I was approached by an elderly gentleman with a limp and was told that I must join the Leeds Branch of the British Limbless Association.

At the time, I was living with my parents in Harrogate, and after I returned home I wrote to Charles Dunham, the General Secretary, asking if there was any way I could help. He suggested I form a Branch in the town but I thought there were unlikely to be many ex-Service amputees living there, so I did not make the attempt.

Some years later, in 1956, by which time I had married, moved to Leeds and had two daughters, I read in the *Blesmag* that Cyril Stephens, National Chairman and Chairman of the Leeds Branch, had died. I decided it was time to find out more about the Leeds Branch and the Association, so I set off to the next meeting.

This was held in a pub near Leeds University. I arrived a little late, and at the same time as an arm amputee, Eric Radcliffe, who later became a colleague and a friend. To our astonishment the room was packed, perhaps 50 or 60 amputees, including some from WWI. They were having problems



Braham Myers

finding replacements for the Management Committee following the sudden death of Cyril Stephens. As soon as we arrived, an Irishman rose to his feet and said; “Those two look like likely lads. I propose we elect them.” So we both became members of the Management Committee without knowing any of its Members or its duties!

My first job was Employment Secretary. At this time the Branch was well respected in the city as well as within Blesma. The

A wide-angle photograph of a snowy mountain slope under a clear blue sky. In the foreground, a skier in a red jacket is descending the slope. In the middle ground, several other skiers are visible near a wooden building, possibly a ski lift station. The background shows a large, snow-covered mountain peak. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

La Plagne 2018

IT'S ALL DOWNHILL FROM HERE (IN A POSITIVE WAY!)

**THE BLESMA SKIING TRIP WAS SO MUCH FUN IT
MADE ONE MEMBER FORGET HE WAS PARALYSED!
DO YOU FEEL AS IF YOU'RE MISSING OUT?**





was sitting on the ski lift one day, enjoying myself so much that I thought; *'This is perfection!'*" says Glen Leversedge. "I was imagining myself going into the bar that night, seeing everyone and telling them what I'd done, saying how great it was. For the first time since I was injured four years ago, I forgot I was paralysed! It was just a brilliant feeling."

Glen has recently returned from January's skiing trip to La Plagne in France, and his experience is far from unique. The Blesma trip is a perennial favourite for a reason: there's nothing quite like thundering through freshly fallen snow, breathing in the crisp Alpine air, and marvelling at the magnificent views. It's good for the mind, body and soul, and it ticks so many boxes for the Association: Members help Members (in the roles of instructors and assistants), whilst people who take part often get so much out of the trip that they decide to change their lives when they get back home.

FROM COLD FEET TO COLD... EVERYTHING

One such person is Glen. Paralysed in a scaffolding accident in 2014 after leaving the Royal Anglians, he'd been struggling mentally before the trip. "This was my first ever Blesma activity, and I'd been suffering so badly with depression that I actually called my BSO and told him I couldn't go," he admits. "I was so nervous. Since my accident, I've not been on a plane, I've kept myself local. I was nervous about the flight, the baggage, everything. But a couple of my paralysed friends who knew what a state I was in, rang me up and told me; *'Go skiing! If you don't like it, you'll never have to talk to us again, but we promise you'll love it!'*"

Glen eventually decided to join up with the 23 other Members (the group included five wheelchair users) on the Alpine adventure, and he soon realised that his mates were right. "The whole thing flowed seamlessly,"

he says. "The effort the entire crew put in for us was unbelievable. We were so well looked after – my bags were even in my room when I arrived! Everyone fitted in, you were accepted right away, and the skiing shoved the depression out of me. I enjoyed myself so much."

Members have a wide range of options on the slopes, trying activities like skiing, snowboarding, three track (a single ski and poles), ski bike and sit-ski, depending on their level of ability and personal taste – it really is a trip for everyone! Previous participants have included Owen Pick, who tried snowboarding for the very first time on a Blesma skiing trip and became so talented that he competed at the 2018 Winter Paralympics [see p04]. But you don't need to know your snowploughs from your parallel turns before heading out there.

"On day one, the instructors couldn't even let go of me when I was stationary," laughs Glen. "I'd just fall

Previous page:
Grieg Yorke gets to grips with a ski bike, while (above) John O'Neil enjoys the slopes of La Plagne on a sit-ski

Right: there was plenty of time to relax, chat and enjoy each other's company, or to just have a nice sit down, eh Bob?





**“FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE
I WAS INJURED FOUR YEARS
AGO, I TOTALLY FORGOT THAT
I WAS PARALYSED! IT WAS
JUST A BRILLIANT FEELING”**



straight over! But within four hours they had me going slowly, and I could hold myself up when we stopped. By day two I was going out on beginner slopes, and by the end I was doing much harder slopes on my own – and getting some speed up. I even won the ‘toilet seat award’ for the best crash. Everyone knew I was OK because all they could hear was me laughing! I had so much fun, I couldn’t take the grin off my face.

“There was an exhilaration to feeling free again. I’ve always liked speed, I’m a nutter like that, and I used to race bikes. Fortunately, they paired me with the perfect instructor, Billy, who allowed me to do a few wild things and push myself to my limit.”

IT’S NOT ALL ABOUT MILES PER HOUR

Those with something more sedate in mind were well catered for, too. “I’m 60 years old, and the instructors were very adaptable for me,” says Teresa Garrard, for whom this was also a debut Blesma trip abroad. “I’m a wheelchair user, so I did sit-ski, and my instructor did a lot of the driving for me. Because I’m a bit older and got a bit more tired than some of the others, I did fewer hours than everyone else, so they really took care of me in that regard. But we were still speeding along.

I think I was doing 50mph at one point, I could barely believe it! The trip is what you want it to be,” adds Teresa, who was injured at the age of 18 after a fall while working on a military plane. “I don’t drink, so it wasn’t about the bar for me, but I still got on well with everyone and made plenty of friends.”

Jimmy Goddard, who was paralysed in a rock climbing accident in 2004 while serving in the Royal Artillery, agrees. “It was one of the best things I’ve ever done – just exceptional,” he says. “I was nervous going out there because I’ve been out of the military for a long time. But it ended up being a week of camaraderie, excellent socialising, and helping each other out – all the best bits of the military, without the pressure.”

The fact that every Member had their own instructor was also welcomed. “I tried sit-skiing for a few weeks 10 years ago, but I remember falling over a lot and being cold and wet, which can get miserable,” says Jimmy. “But with a personal instructor you don’t crash as much, you don’t get as tired, so you learn and achieve more.

“I’m not a massive speed junkie – although there were plenty of those around! – so for me it was more about having access to the mountains again. I can’t go walking in the hills or go climbing, which I used to

Left: skills got so good that by the end of the week, close formation ski biking was the order of the day!

From skiing and sit-skiing to ski bike and even bobsleigh – there was something for everyone!







**“EVERYONE FITS IN, YOU’RE
ACCEPTED RIGHT AWAY, AND
THE SKIING JUST SHOVED
THE DEPRESSION OUT OF ME.
I ENJOYED MYSELF SO MUCH”**





love, so the trip gave me the chance to get up there and have freedom of movement. I was travelling around again rather than just sitting in a café looking at the view. I had access to everything.”

Many Members worked their way up through the SAGB (Skibob Association of Great Britain) standards of bronze, silver and gold, while others worked towards becoming assistant instructors and instructors. There were even thrills to be had after the lifts shut for the night, as Members tried ‘super luge’ – essentially, a free-for-all sledge race. “You sit on a tea tray with two little brakes, and there are bodies everywhere,” laughs Bob Monkhouse. “You start off tentatively, but then it gets silly! Everyone is trying to take each other out, it’s like *Wacky Races*. Great fun!” The braver Members also went on La Plagne’s Olympic bobsleigh run in four-man sleds and solo sleighs. “Everyone wanted the fastest time, it was like a mini Blesma Paralympics,” says Glen, “and I won by a split second!”

Activities Manager Jess March thought the trip was a big success. “La Plagne is ideal,” she says. “It was our second year there, and we will definitely be going back. There is so much disabled access, plus it has one of the top adapted ski schools in Europe. It covers every form of disability, which is perfect for us, as is the hotel.

“We didn’t have a single bad review from Members, and it was great to have some new faces come along. A few of those first-timers have already applied to take part in other activities, which is fantastic.”

But the real measure of a trip’s success is what the participants take home with them. “It has given me impetus to ski more,” says Jimmy. “I’d like to take some more lessons in UK snowdomes and eventually be able to go on a skiing holiday with my wife, just the



two of us. It’s a good goal to work towards.” The trip changed Glen’s outlook as well. “It has already helped me with my depression,” he concludes. “It’s made me rethink a lot of things. I’m now looking at buying a tent and taking my kids camping this summer, and I am considering trying hand biking and maybe doing a Blesma bike trip, too. Think about it: I couldn’t ski when I was walking, but now I’m paralysed, I can! If anyone has any doubts – like I did – about doing a Blesma trip, they should call me!”



JOHN SANDFORD HART

Ski bike supremo and junior instructor

You chose to go on the ski bike for this trip, why was that?

I've been five or six times before doing the three track skiing, so I decided to convert to the ski bike, and it was fantastic. The bikes allow you to become a competent skier quickly – it's like letting a dog off the leash! You can ski all day, come in smiling, and be ready to go again the next day.

They're technically quite impressive, too

Going downhill in a straight line like a lunatic on skis is quite easy, but there is real style and panache to skiing on the bikes. It's quite stylistic, and bloody good fun. I'd describe it as a cross between speedway and flying in the back of a Chinook. You

can bank around like in a helicopter, and get the g-force from a smooth curve. It's great!

And as a junior instructor, you're also helping other Members...

Yes, it's the old stereotype about giving something back. As a junior instructor you are up at 6am, digging the vans out of the snow and prepping the equipment. The Members smash it down the slopes and you get everything sorted afterwards. You're the last to bed, absolutely knackered, but it's 100 per cent worth it. I also identified a couple of people who I thought needed some extra help away from the skiing, and I think I've helped them with a few of their problems. That's important!

OLIVIA ZAMBONINI

Proved that being partially blind is no barrier to skiing

What kind of challenges did you face when it came to getting on skis?

I have MS, which means I suffer from a lot of pain. I was initially supposed to do sit-skiing, but I decided that if I can still walk, I should give standing skiing a go. I didn't know if I would manage, but I like to try. It was hard and painful, but I did it and I loved it.

You're also partially blind, was it tricky to stay safe?

I can't see out of my right eye, so I was very conscious of that! If I was going from right to left, I could see skiers, but if I was going from left to right, I couldn't see a thing! My instructor was brilliant though, and he guided me so well.

What was your highlight?

Being out in the fresh air and sunshine all day every day. By the end, we were doing some steeper runs, and I'd say that I did fantastically well! I was very proud of myself. I also got on great with everyone – we had a good group.

You're a great example of not giving in to a disease...

I was diagnosed in 2003, whilst serving on an FTRS (Full Time Reserve Service) with the Royal Signals. I'm 43 now and every day is painful, but I'm determined not to lie down to MS. I get up and do as much as I can, and I just have to deal with it. Blesma is brilliant for helping people like me. I'm hoping to go on a skydiving trip with them soon.





BOB

BOB MONKHOUSE

Instructor extraordinaire

You're an instructor on the trip. How did you get into that?

I was injured in Bosnia in 1995, and 18 months after losing my leg I hadn't really got into any activities. I went on a Blesma skiing trip and loved it. The ski bikes are great – you're sitting down so you're not under any pressure. I thought; *'This is good, how can I keep coming back?'*, so I decided to become an instructor! I've only missed two trips in 22 years since then.

What's most satisfying about teaching Members?

We can normally make sure newcomers are skiing within 20 minutes of getting on the ski bikes. It's a buzz to see their faces when they realise how high some of the runs are, and then by the end of the week they are coming down black runs like they haven't got a worry in the world. It's really nice to give something back. Skiing helped my rehabilitation a lot, so it's brilliant to meet new people and help others in the same way I was helped.

You must see some real transformations?

Absolutely! You just need to hear everyone talking at the *après ski*. They are buzzing, telling each other what they did in different groups that day and what runs the others should try the following day.

And what's going on with your fantastic ski helmet?

I work for a company that makes safety signs for boats and oil rigs, so I've taken some of the stickers and plastered them on! But I've actually got a new one now – the guys I was teaching on the trip bought me a helmet cover with a panda on it.



ARCHIE NAUGHTON

68 years old and feeling the need for speed

How did you find the trip?

Great! I'm a below-knee amputee and my goal was to get moving like a regular skier so I could book a skiing holiday with my family and friends.

How did you get on?

I was tentative at first – I'm 68 and I've not skied since my school days – but with the right tuition, you just blossom. I had a one-to-one ski instructor for the week and he knew when to push me. I progressed without realising, and it gave me huge satisfaction!

What was your highlight from the trip?

In addition to the skiing, we did lots of other activities, and the atmosphere in the group

was special. But for me, the best moment was going down quite a steep run.

So by the end you were ready for some serious speed?

By the last day, I was ready to hurtle down! I was quite giddy and elated by the end, it actually took a couple of days to wind down.

Not bad going for 68...

At first, I felt a little guilty about going on the trip and wondered if someone younger should have been skiing in my place. But Blesma were wonderful. They said: *'No, we're a charity for all ages.'* Giving someone an experience they've never had later in life is a wonderful gift!



Words: Danny Buckland

WHY WE S



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AFTER 18 MONTHS OF RESEARCH, THE RESULTS OF A STUDY INTO MEMBERS AND THEIR FAMILIES ARE ALMOST READY TO BE REVEALED

The groundbreaking Blesma Families Project is a unique research initiative that has, for the past 18 months, been gathering information on how veterans and their families cope with limb loss. A total of 72 people from Members' families have been interviewed or surveyed to create a comprehensive understanding of their prime issues and needs.

The project, which was conducted by Anglia Ruskin University's Veterans and Families Institute, will report back with its findings at the 2018 Members' Weekend. Danny Buckland caught up with senior research fellow and project leader Hilary Engward, and research assistant Kristina Fleuty to discover more about the project...



HILARY ENWARD
Senior research fellow
*Anglia Ruskin University's
Veterans and Families
Institute*



KRISTINA FLEUTY
Research assistant
*Anglia Ruskin University's
Veterans and Families
Institute*

Where did the idea for the research come from?

Hilary: The director of the Institute, Matt Fossey, wrote a paper on the role of the family in helping to care for veterans, and we discovered that there was very little recognition of the role of the family in regard to limb loss, or to care generally. With Blesma's aim to look after the whole family, not just the veteran, it made sense to find out more about what the family would like or require; how they support the veteran and what kind of help they need to do that.

How did the project get started?

Hilary: Heather Nicholson, Blesma's Director of Independence and Wellbeing, had already spoken to Members who had told her that the family's voice was not being heard, so she and Matt Fossey wrote a plan for the study which was approved and funded by the Forces in Mind Trust. We approached the project in three distinct phases: initial interviews were followed by a more detailed survey and, finally, we conducted telephone interviews.

What was the intention of the project?

Hilary: Blesma wanted to inform its policy for future service and provision and, for the effective use of resources, we needed to know what Members and their families find useful and not so useful. In the past, research has focused on the veterans, not the people around them, so to a large extent the family has been neglected. To make sure we offer the right services in the future, we should be learning from the people who are doing it rather than us assuming that we know

“THE PROJECT WILL HELP BLESMA DESIGN ITS FUTURE SERVICES AND COULD HAVE A USE ACROSS THE NHS AND MOD CARE SPECTRUMS”

what they are doing. We asked people; *‘What has been important to you? What have you found meaningful and what has been hard?’* Research always seems to view the ‘family’ as a typical caring unit, but that is not always the case. Every family has its quirks. We also assume that family members are going to want to act as carers, but that may not be the case.

So did you start with a series of fixed questions?

Hilary: No, because we wanted to approach this with an open mind. Initially, we visited the families taking part in the study and asked open questions – finding out how their limb loss happened and what had been important in helping them overcome difficulties. We did that for both the veterans and their family members, so we were able to get two different sides of the story.

Kristina: We started without preconceptions, listening to the veterans and their families because they are the ones with the lived experiences. They are the experts when it comes to talking about what they have been through, and so they have the best ideas about how they would like to be helped.

What themes stood out from the start?

Hilary: It was very clear that how the individual loses a limb is very important and we shouldn't assume that, once a limb is lost, everyone feels the same. For example, the reaction of someone who experiences a traumatic limb loss is usually very different from someone who has suffered a chronic, long-term illness. Then, in some sense, the removal of the limb might actually result in more independence.

It also quickly became apparent that although lots of support groups, and friends and family may ask the veteran how they are getting on, very few people were asking their carer. At the point of traumatic limb loss, both veteran and carer may experience feelings of relief that they are alive and receiving professional care. During the rehabilitation phase, however, the veteran's coping levels may be quite high as they learn to adapt to life with a prosthetic, while their carer may be concerned about the changes in their circumstances and how they are going to manage as a carer. The veteran may be focused on rehab while their carer may experience anxiety about how they will manage.

How did you interpret the interviews?

Kristina: What's great about this research is that it comes from conversations about people's experiences. It was a real privilege to hear about them and you can start to see similarities and differences. The veterans really welcomed us and were very honest about things such as dealing with everyday pain and how different family members were affected in different ways.

Did any of the research findings surprise you?

Hilary: There were so many interesting findings – particularly the realisation that there is a lot of wrap-around care for the patient but very little for the carer. We are recommending that the family is more involved in the rehab process so they can help the veteran move forward. We heard families talking about ‘piggy-backing’ veterans up and down the stairs, and that was true for those who had served in WWII and those

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who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is incredible that things like that are still happening and haven't moved on. We need to change this.

Kristina: We didn't interview anyone younger than 18, but some family members had been children at the time of the injury and recalled the events from a child's perspective, so it was fascinating to hear views that had not previously been considered. There were some really interesting findings that could be extremely beneficial to Blesma. We also heard about the caring roles that partners and spouses take on, particularly in the home, which may not be so visible to the outside world.

What are the major recommendations of the research's findings?

Hilary: We will release the full findings at the Members Weekend but one of the outcomes is a very strong

recommendation that the Member and carer should be looked at separately as well as collectively. We are suggesting a Living with Limb Loss Support Model, which could feature distinct phases with specific times in the limb loss life course where interactions may have more impact. The plan is to not only shape new ways of providing care and support but also decide when to make it available.

The project will help Blesma design its services in the future and could also have a use across the NHS and MoD care spectrums. New care support packages may have initial costs but the long-term benefit will be that the carer will be able to offer support for longer if they are well themselves.

The full findings of the Blesma Families Project will be published in the Summer issue of Blesma Magazine





THE POWER OF THE PERFECT PERFORMANCE

NOW IN ITS THIRD YEAR, THE STAGE IS SET
FOR THE BLESMA COMMUNITY PROGRAMME
TO BECOME AN UNRIVALLED SUCCESS

BLESMA IN THE COMMUNITY



Words: Danny Buckland. Photography: Andy Bate

Blesma Community Programme leader Alice Driver (top right) and members of the Class of 2018 take a bow

The audience settles into silence in the glorious 893-seat Theatre Royal Haymarket. The words that fill the dark chamber are delivered with poise and deep meaning, ensuring that everyone listening is gripped. The voice, however, doesn't belong to a professional actor, but instead to a Forces veteran and Blesma Member.

The unique Blesma Community Programme is in its third year, and today the Class of 2018 is graduating with what has become something of a tradition: a final session in which they perform their inspirational life stories on stage at the celebrated theatre in London's West End.

The 11 Blesma Members who are about to complete this year's intensive week-long course of performance and delivery skills will soon take up invitations to run resilience workshops at secondary schools and education centres across the UK.

There, they will add to the programme's already impressive tally of having reached 8,500 teenagers across the UK.

In the wings Alice Driver, who devised the project, smiles as the latest crop are put through their paces by a team of skilled trainers, directors and performers.

"It is very humbling and so lovely to be able to listen to these stories and to see people benefit," she says. "And those feelings surge up every year we run this course – I'm moved every time I witness what they achieve!"

"We're delighted how far the Community Programme has come and we have very ambitious aims to reach a further 10,000 teenagers this year, and then maybe take our learnings to first responders such as paramedics and NHS staff."

The Arts as a recovery tool

The programme was forged from the successful impact of *The Two Worlds of Charlie F*, a groundbreaking play from 2014 in which real veterans' stories were delivered by real veterans. Following the play, in which Blesma Members played a role, the Association approached Alice's

company, The Drive Project, to see if the initiative could be extended.

"Blesma came to see it and wanted to use the Arts somehow as a recovery tool," says Alice, a theatre producer who set up The Drive Project as a social enterprise in 2015. "The Association had two objectives; to do something for its Members and to give something back to the community. The programme has evolved and we've made some changes since the pilot course. We continually evaluate it and use the feedback to make it better every year."

Some Members are naturally good at telling stories, but the Blesma Community Programme gives them the necessary skills to give their life stories structure.

"The training resonates with the military because it teaches them how to be the best story tellers. We set very high standards but everyone focuses. We bring in top trainers from the industry; they are all theatre directors, actors and story tellers who have worked with the great and the good of the theatre world, and they deliver a tried and



NERYS PEARCE

The 36-year-old former Army medic was paralysed from the chest down when a car reversed into her, knocking her off her motorbike in 2008

Why did you join Blesma?

My life just fell apart after my accident. My weight ballooned from 10 to 17.5 stone. I isolated myself completely, but my sister got me on a Blesma skiing trip and that was the start of me getting my life back.

Why the Community Programme?

I was skeptical because my life is based on science; if I can put something in a list then I'm happy. English and drama aren't my scene at all! But people said I would be good at it and, because Blesma has helped me with my recovery, I really wanted to do

something that told the world what they and others have done for me.

What were your first impressions?

I was petrified. I hate groups of people looking at me and I expected this crazy, arty, 'be a tree' drama school-type thing. Flamboyancy and subjectivity scare me, but no-one made me pretend to be an elephant or anything like that, so I really enjoyed it!

What has it taught you?

It showed me that I have a bigger skill set. My mother was born blind, so I have been audio describing all my life – how brown the toast is, the water reaching boiling point in a pan... Before this, I would explain things in a matter-of-fact way. Now, I'm able to take people on that first skiing trip with me – I can make them feel the nerves, the fear and then the joy. I used to think; *'Why would*

anyone listen to me?' But I know they will now because I have these new skills!

What would you like to achieve with the Blesma Community Programme?

Success would be showing teenagers that you can recover. Awful things happen, and that doesn't have to be having your legs crushed! It could be getting an F in your homework even though you'd worked hard. But that can become a C or even an A – you *can* move forward. I hope I can give people the confidence to take a risk, to say life is not perfect but do something about it.

Are you looking forward to your first session with students?

It scares and thrills me equally, but having the chance to change just one person's outlook on life is more important than feeling nervous going into a classroom!

JOSH BOGGI

The 31-year-old former Royal Engineer broke his back, lost both his legs, and had to have his right arm amputated when he stepped on an IED on New Year's Eve in 2010

How did you learn about the Community Programme?

Simon Harmer and Jordan Beecher said it was the best course they'd ever done.

They told me I had to do it!

What were your first impressions?

We started off with humming and a lot of 'la-la-ing', and I thought; 'What have I let myself in for?' But that was just a way to warm up our voices. These guys strip your story to pieces and build it back up again so it is much more powerful.

So how did your story change during the course?

It was mainly about developing a structure and realising what works for you. You might think everything about growing up is important, but people don't want to hear what you did at 16, they want to hear why you are there with three missing limbs. I found that hard at first, but it worked and now I feel confident giving a 20-minute presentation, using techniques like dramatic pauses to build up the suspense.

What do you want to achieve from taking part?

I do public speaking for a living now, so it was great to improve those skills, but I also want to give back to society. I want to go into underprivileged schools and help teenagers who haven't had the type of upbringing I had. I can stand in front of them with three limbs missing and say; 'My life is better now than it was when I was 24, when I was at the peak of my fitness.' That shocks people! It also shows you that, although you may fail, there is somewhere else to go or something else to do. The moment you accept you've lost your legs, crashed your car or failed an exam is the moment you can just get on with life.





Professional actors, directors and story tellers offer Members tips, tricks and techniques to deliver a powerful monologue

“HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH TOUGH TIMES IS AMAZING, AND THANKS TO THIS PROGRAMME, THAT IS HAPPENING UP AND DOWN THE COUNTRY!”

tested training programme. Some people think they aren’t good at public speaking, or that they don’t have a story to tell, but this is never the case! Everyone has a story and the ability to be a good public speaker.

“Some of the group have even described the programme as therapeutic. We’re not therapists, although our work is overseen by mental health professionals and has therapeutic consequences. Over the years, I have seen that if anyone can talk about the dark things in their past, in the right context and with the right support, it can be beneficial. This programme allows many Members to talk about things they have never spoken about before, and discussing their experiences with other veterans can be incredibly cathartic.”

Today, the Members take it in turns to step out onto the stage in a West End theatre and put all they have learned into practice. Watching and listening intently is director, trainer and actor Al Nedjari, who has had a string of theatre successes and a stint in *Coronation Street*. He and the team jump in on occasion, stopping the Members mid-sentence to draw out the emotion from their stories or to restructure the delivery to make it even more poignant.

The techniques the Members are taught can be transferred from the workshops they are about to embark on in schools to motivational speaking and presentations.

“The skills Members have learned on previous Community Programmes have helped them with job interviews, public

presentations and fundraising appeals,” says Alice. “The workshops, which form the backbone of the five-day programme, are run at a great rehearsal space in London. Members stay at the Union Jack Club and have all their meals and transport covered. They work as a group, in pairs and on their own with a trainer. The emphasis is on being involved; it’s definitely not just about listening to lectures!”

Skills to structure your story

Members first learn how to structure their own personal story. When they arrive, most don’t think they can talk for five minutes, but when their story is unpicked and worked on, it can develop into a powerful and effective 20-minute monologue.

“We use story-building techniques from the theatre world to understand what the audience hears and then we teach the techniques that the best actors use. It’s a very active and fun course!” says Alice

Nerys Pearce loved the experience but confessed that the naturally sloping stage



Members take it in turns to take centre stage on the last day of this year's programme

had its challenges. “I was convinced my wheelchair would take off and that I would end up in the front row!” she says. “But what a feeling it was to be up there. It was incredible and I can’t wait to deliver the workshops in schools.

“All the Members enjoy giving something back and being useful. And they realise their story, their journey, their injury, can help people because the feedback they have already had from students is fantastic.

“You don’t know what battles people are facing and our stories can really resonate. To have a real person coming in to say; *‘I lost my leg in an explosion or an accident’* really breaks down barriers. They listen and take something away to help them deal with their adversities – things like bullying, family issues and social media pressures.

“After last year’s workshops, 100 per cent of teachers fed back saying that their pupils were more motivated and positive as a direct result of the Blesma Community Programme. It made the pupils think and realise how lucky they are, and it made

them open their eyes to the world around them. It gave them the tools to overcome adversity and realise they are not alone.

“Helping children through tough times is an amazing thing to aspire to, and thanks to the Blesma Community Programme, it is happening right now in classrooms up and down the country.”

Lily Phillips, a workshop facilitator who has worked on the programme since the start, adds: “Some Members worry that their story is not ‘heroic’ enough, but it doesn’t matter whether they were injured in a conflict zone or an accident, because the kids are transfixed. I’ve never seen pupils respond to something so quickly!

“Normally, kids at school can be a bit ‘stand-offish’ at first – a bit like; *‘So who are you, then?’* – but when a Blesma Member comes in, they are inspired. We’ve changed the workshop structure every year and simplified objectives so we concentrate on the strongest messages, learning the various forms adversity takes and how to be resilient. The impact is incredible.”

ALISON GRANT

The 48-year-old former major in the Queen Alexandra’s Royal Army Nursing Corps suffered severe back injuries when a drunk driver hit her car in 2004. She was discharged from the Army in 2006

How did you hear about the Community Programme?

I have been involved with Blesma for a while and was keen to take part as soon as it was launched, but I couldn’t make the first two programmes. I also know others who have done it, like Darren Swift, and they talk glowingly about it.

How do you think your experience can help teens?

I’ve come out of a catastrophic injury probably a better person and I hope I can contribute by showing that, no matter what your depths of despair, there is always a way out and a future. If I can reach and inspire just one person by telling my story, and demonstrate that you can come out stronger and better, then that is reason enough to do this.

Did anything about the course surprise you?

There were times during the training when we were asked how we were feeling and to describe those feelings – that made me feel a bit vulnerable. But that was after a few days and we had got to know each other by then, so we were quite relaxed around each other as a group. It was definitely important for us to address those feelings and understand how other people might feel about our stories.

What do you hope your sessions will achieve?

Teenagers often feel isolated and you can certainly feel isolated in a wheelchair. The students who we will speak to could be facing any type of trauma and I now feel confident that my story will help them. I’m not saying I won’t be nervous, but I feel that I now have the skills to tell my story and hopefully make a difference to other people’s lives.





Words: Nick Moore Pictures: HotSpot Media Ltd/Lonnie Bissonnette


 An aerial photograph of a valley with a river winding through it. The valley floor is covered in green fields and some buildings. In the foreground, a person is seen from behind, wearing a red and white jacket, looking out over the valley. The background shows misty mountains.

Inspiration From
Outside Blesma

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE BASE

THE FIRST IN A SERIES OF FEATURES LOOKING AT AMPUTATION AND LOSS OF USE OF LIMB FOR NON-BLESMA MEMBERS FOCUSES ON EXTREME SPORTSMAN LONNIE BISSONNETTE

Seconds after sustaining the injury that paralysed him, Lonnie Bissonnette – one of Canada’s top BASE jumpers – had an even bigger problem. He was drowning. “I was jumping off the Perrine Bridge in Twin Falls, Idaho, when I rushed my exit,” he says. “My mini parachute wrapped around my foot, which meant there was no chance of the main one opening, and I hit the water. Hard!

“My first thought was; *‘Holy hell – that hurt!’* Then I realised that I needed to get out of the water, but I’d suffered a spinal cord injury and couldn’t move my arms or legs. Essentially, I swam to the surface by wiggling my head! It felt as though it took forever! I managed to get a breath, and then went under again. I was starting to black out and my body went into convulsions. I was two inches under water, exhausted, and eventually couldn’t even move my head.

“I remember thinking; *‘I can’t believe I survived that fall and now I’m going to suffocate two inches from air.’* It was ridiculous!”

Help from Lonnie’s fellow jumpers arrived just in time. He was pulled out “by the hair”, and says he remembers knowing that his limbs didn’t work. Then he passed out.

Lonnie’s life – which he says he lived at “100 miles an hour” – hit the brakes that day. But the way in which he has fought back, becoming the world’s first

“I NEEDED TO DO ONE MORE JUMP. PEOPLE THOUGHT IT’D KILL ME, BUT I HAD TO PROVE THE SPORT HADN’T BEATEN ME – THAT I HADN’T GIVEN UP!”

paraplegic BASE jumper, and a champion para-bobsleigh athlete, is an astonishing testament to positive thinking.

Lonnie took up BASE jumping – which stands for Building, Antenna, Span and Earth – when it was deeply taboo. “I was just a regular skydiver in Canada, and a lot of skydiving clubs would sack you if you were caught BASE jumping,” he says. “But I caught a few guys watching videos of it at our club one day and thought; ‘*Woah, I have to do this!*’ A week later, I was climbing up a 750ft antenna in Toronto!”

Lonnie, a father of two boys who worked as a tiler, was hooked. “That first jump was terrifying but so exciting,” he recalls. “I climbed up the antenna with two guys, but one gave up because it was too windy. It was so exhilarating! As I kid I used to have dreams about flying. I thought skydiving had made them real, but then I realised BASE jumping was what I’d always sought. It immediately became a passion.”

In no time he had clocked up hundreds of jumps from locations as far flung as the Norwegian fjords, Venezuelan waterfalls and even from the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur. “I was this regular guy, working by day and BASE jumping at night, only sleeping three hours in every 24,” he recalls.

But then came his 1,100th jump. “I told everyone that I wanted it to be a jump I’d always remember,” he says, “and it was – but for all the wrong reasons! I decided to try a quadruple gainer – a rotating flip – to mark the occasion. We were trying to break the Canadian BASE jumping record at the same time, and I was also helping some junior jumpers – I was too busy, and didn’t prepare properly.

“During the jump, I quickly realised I wasn’t going to complete the flips, but I didn’t want to open my

parachute early because it might have endangered another jumper, as I’d have been in their space. I’m only alive now because I stayed conscious, but waking up in the hospital was a shock.”

It was there that Lonnie’s positivity saved him. “The first question I asked my doctor in intensive care was; ‘*How long do you think it’ll be before I can jump again?*’” he laughs. “She was great, but she didn’t pull any punches. She told me I would never jump again.”

But 10 months after his accident, Lonnie performed his first skydive as a paraplegic – alongside his son – and shortly after that, he climbed an antenna and threw himself off. “I kept saying I needed to do one more jump. I suppose people thought it would kill me, but I wanted to prove that the sport hadn’t beaten me. I wanted to prove that I hadn’t given up!

“I pulled myself up that antenna through sheer determination. I had regained the use of my arms, they work fine now, and I still knew how to fly a ‘chute! I didn’t need my legs to land, so off I went. And as soon as the ‘chute opened, I thought; ‘*I’m back home!*’”

FROM BASE TO BOB

Lonnie has since developed a system for BASE jumpers in wheelchairs (including a parachute for the chair, should it detach), and has taken part in an incredible endurance race across Canada, pushing himself 1,400 miles in his wheelchair in the middle of winter.

But it’s as a bobsled pilot that he has really made the headlines. In 2016/17, he was overall champion of the para-bob season, and is now targeting participation at the Beijing 2022 Winter Paralympics.

“Piloting a bob is similar to BASE jumping,” he says. “It’s high speed, adrenaline fuelled, and lasts about a minute. I’m 52 now, but I’m doing everything I can to make Beijing. And after that I’ll become a coach. I can offer disabled athletes some good insight.”

His recovery has all been down to a positive mental attitude, he says. “There were some very, very tough moments, but everything is about attitude. When something difficult happens, whether it’s a bad day at work or an injury, you need to peel back the layers.

“You can either curl up into a foetal position, suck your thumb and say; ‘*I want my mummy*’, or you can say; ‘*This sucks, but...*’ As soon as you say the word ‘*but*’, you’ve opened unlimited avenues about what you can do in life.”



“As soon as the ‘chute opened, I thought; ‘*I’m back home!*’” says Lonnie Bissonnette, the world’s first paraplegic BASE jumper





Live like Lonnie

Don't let anything get in the way of your dreams. Here's how to throw yourself into life like a BASE jumper...

TALK ABOUT IT

"My only outlet in hospital was therapy, and working things through did me so much good. I'd go in early and they'd have to drag me out."

BE STUBBORN

"I'm the most stubborn person in the world! Don't let anyone tell you that you can't do something. Ever! It's amazing what you can achieve when you put your mind to it."

USE VISUALISATION

"The side of BASE jumping and bobsleigh that people don't see beforehand is the mental preparation. Running through what you're about to do in your mind helps you do it more successfully. That's true for anything in life."

TAKE CONTROL OF THE NEGATIVES

"You have to acknowledge when something sucks, but the one thing you can control is your reaction to that. The world is wide open to your hopes and dreams when you have a positive attitude."



Roy with his wife Rose (right) and daughter Rachel (left)

ROY PHILLIPS

During WWII, when he was just 14, Roy joined the Royal Marines as a Bugle Boy. His war ended shortly after the D-Day Landings, when he stood on a shoe mine

I grew up in Cornwall with five siblings. When I left school at 14, I told my father I wanted to join the Navy. I went on at him so much that we eventually took a bus to the naval base in Plymouth. They wouldn't take me because I was too young, but they sent me to the Marine barracks, and two weeks later I was in the Marines!

I was in Stonehouse Barracks for a year or so, and then I went to Rosyth in Scotland to join the battleship HMS Orion as a Bugle Boy. There were two Bugle Boys on the ship and we mixed in – we were part of the crew.

The next stop was Scapa Flow in the Orkneys and from there we travelled down the west coast to join a fleet for the invasion of Normandy. As I understand it, ours was the first ship to open fire in the D-Day invasion.

We sailed back to Plymouth to put new guns on the ship before heading to the Mediterranean to support the Allied landings in France. We spent some weeks there before we went to Italy. I remember walking up a beach in Trieste and the next thing I knew, I woke up in hospital two weeks later. I had stepped on a shoe mine and lost my right leg below the knee. I was just 16 years old.

I was shipped home to a hospital in Plymouth. My parents were just glad to see me alive. I needed

two blood transfusions directly from nurses whilst I was there. I still remember their names – Isobel Stokes and Dorothy Holmes. They gave me a pint of blood each!

I did lots of odd jobs in the years that followed before working as an office machine mechanic for 20 years fixing typewriters, computers and photocopiers. In 1960, when I was 32, I emigrated to South Africa and then volunteered to go to Mauritius to work on the machines they had on the sugar estates.

I met Rose in Mauritius and kept in touch with her via letters when I returned to England three years later. She came to live with me in December 1965 and we were married one month later. We had our first child, Roy Junior, in 1969, and our second, Rachel, three years later.

“I’VE HAD A PROSTHETIC LEG FOR 72 YEARS. IT WAS LIKE I HAD MY OWN LEG. I’VE HAD NO TROUBLE WALKING AT ALL!”

I’ve had a prosthetic leg for 72 years. They don’t make legs like they did in 1945 any more! Back then, the prosthetic legs had shoulder and body straps. They were fairly amateur things back then!

From 1945 until about six years ago, I would put my leg on first thing in the morning and I wouldn’t know it was there until I took it off when I went to bed. It was like I had my own leg! I did all sorts of jobs with it on; I drove lorries and did all sorts of things. I had absolutely no trouble walking at all!

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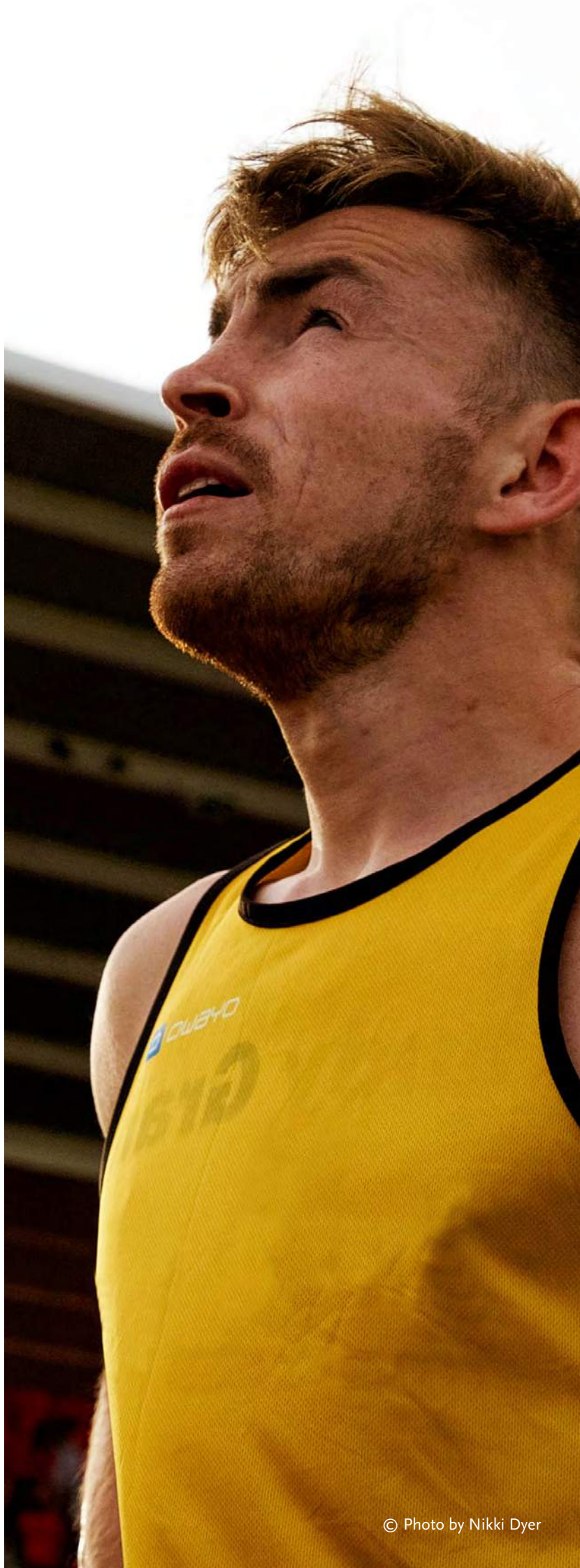
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Andy Grant uses Cheetah Xtend for Sport
and Cheetah Xplore for everyday use

Further information about Andy Grant can
be found at: www.agmotivation.co.uk



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