

Our Heart's Centre: 70 years of Centre 404



Exhibition Guide



Our history

1951

The society was founded

Our name was changed to
The North London Society
for Mentally Handicapped
Children

1955

1961

We rented a room at 404
Camden Road from the
Quakers. We bought the
building in 1964

The Beacon Nursery opened

1965

1966

Our name was changed to
The Islington Society for
Mentally Handicapped
Children, or Islington Mencap

We left Mencap to become
an independent charity

1985

1999

Service users chose a new name: Centre 404.
Formerly run by volunteers, we hired our first paid Director Debbie Pippard

Jean Willson, family carer, became chair of Centre 404.
Linda McGowan became CEO

2003

2009

We launched the Finding and Matching Service.

The Build Our Future project transformed the building

2009-
2020

2021

We began supporting people in Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest and Enfield

Jean Willson Stepped down as Chair after 18 years

Learning disability has had many names.

Each new name attempted to do away with the stigma and discrimination, but eventually each absorbed those offensive connotations.

mentally defective and mental deficiency were the most common terms from 1900-1950

ineducable was introduced by the 1944 Education Act

backward came into use in the 1950s

subnormal and severely subnormal were introduced by the 1959 Mental Health Act

people with mental handicap became preferred medical term in 1980

people with learning difficulties was adopted by self-advocacy groups soon after

people with learning disabilities was adopted as the official term by the Department of Health in 1990

Why do you think learning disability has had so many names?

Origins

One evening in 1951, 35 parents gathered in the Claremont Mission near Angel Islington. Many of their children attended the voluntary school for children with learning disabilities held on the first floor of the Claremont Mission. Some parents had brought food and drinks, some ran a creche to look after the children, and the room was full of conversation.

They'd gathered that evening because they were going to set up a parents' association: the Claremont Occupation Centre North London Group. Mary Stoneman was elected Chair. Where support was lacking, an enormous responsibility had fallen to mothers. The council, the state, the school-system – none had stepped in to support these parents, offering little beside the isolation of long-stay institutions, and so they decided to support themselves. These founding principles of mutual-support and community have endured and this exhibition charts some of the campaigns that have shaped Centre 404.

Education

For a long time, people with learning disabilities were denied the right to an education. The 1944 Education Act had deemed some children 'educationally subnormal' and 'ineducable'. Some special schools offered these children an education, but they did not cater to all children with learning disabilities and many simply stayed at home. Many mainstream nurseries refused to take in children with learning disabilities.

When the council asked us to set up a nursery for children under five who could not attend other nurseries, the Beacon Nursery opened its doors. It was February, 1965, and the centre was renting a room from the Quakers at 404 Camden Road. In 1986, after 21 years, the Beacon Nursery was handed over to the Local Authority. The Beacon Nursery was a life-line for children and their families and part of the fight to provide education and child care for all children.

Community

Centre 404 has always been about community. Our first two clubs, The Handshake Club (for boys) and The Beacon Club (for girls) were founded in 1958 and 1963 as part of Mencap's nationwide network of Gateway social clubs. With a different activity every night of the week, the Beacon Club pushed against the social isolation that people with learning disabilities and their families faced.

Barry Shoben, Club leader, set up the Integration Programme to connect young people with learning disabilities and those without in the local community. Legend has it that Barry would walk around the local area asking, "do you want to join a social club?" There were darts competitions, pottery classes, even a famous disco on Friday nights. Then holidays came too: swimming at beaches, camping in the woods, rowing and climbing trees at Lakeside. Along with the Beacon Nursery, this was the start of our Learning and Leisure service.

Housing

The first long-stay hospital for people with learning disabilities opened in 1847 and life-times have been spent in these institutions. In those first meetings at the Claremont Mission, parents arranged visits to long-stay institutions and in the 1970s these parents finally won the fight to bring their children home. Now their children needed a place to live – a real home in which they could be safe and happy.

Parents connected to Centre 404, including Jean Willson, campaigned to open Field End House: the first home for children with multiple disabilities. This ground-breaking initiative in person-centred living was an inspiration to many, and Centre 404 opened St Paul's Road in 1982 – then a house supporting three women in 1983, Tollington Road and Witherington Road in 1990, and Kendal House and Killick Street in 1991. In these homes people with learning disabilities and people without learning disabilities could live independently and as equals.

Campaigns and fundraising

When care moved from the institution to the community, fundraising became essential for service providers to supplement low council funding. Tamsin Heycock was famous for her plant sales and Mary Stoneman held Summer Fairs in Camden Passage. Judith Fox sent what she called “begging letters” to funding bodies and potential donors. This hall was built in 1972 with a donation by Moshe Nurtman, who lost his family in the holocaust.

As well as fundraising, Centre 404 has fought many campaigns against cuts to social care funding. One took place in the 1980s, when local people with learning disabilities received a weekly £3 payment for attending training centres. These were Ex Gratia payments, meaning the council could choose not to pay them. Yet they were wages to service users, an important recognition of their hard work and place in the community. 1988, Margaret Thatcher cut funding to local councils and Ex Gratia payments were quickly axed. But service users successfully fought back.

Onwards

By 2001, the society had changed its name to Centre 404 and left Mencap. We took on our first paid director, Debbie Pippard, in 1999. And over the last twenty years we have continued to expand and deepen our ties to our local communities. We now support people in 8 boroughs, but it is the spirit of those 34 founding parents that motivates that support: we continue their work towards a world in which people with learning disabilities, autism and their families enjoy the same rights, freedom, responsibilities, choices and quality of life as people within the wider community.



Thank you for
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