

Sometimes when you interview someone, you walk away afterwards amazed by their story and reaffirmed by life itself. Clenton Farquharson has such a story.

By Dominique Brady

Gallant TO THE END

Clenton is a wheelchair user and for the last ten years has devoted his life to improving the aspirations and life chances of not only disabled people but anyone who may be in a minority group. He represents the West Midlands on a government commission called Equality 2025, which aims to advise the government how to achieve disability equality. He is also a founding Director of Gallant 2000, a social enterprise company in Birmingham which specialises in human rights and equality issues.

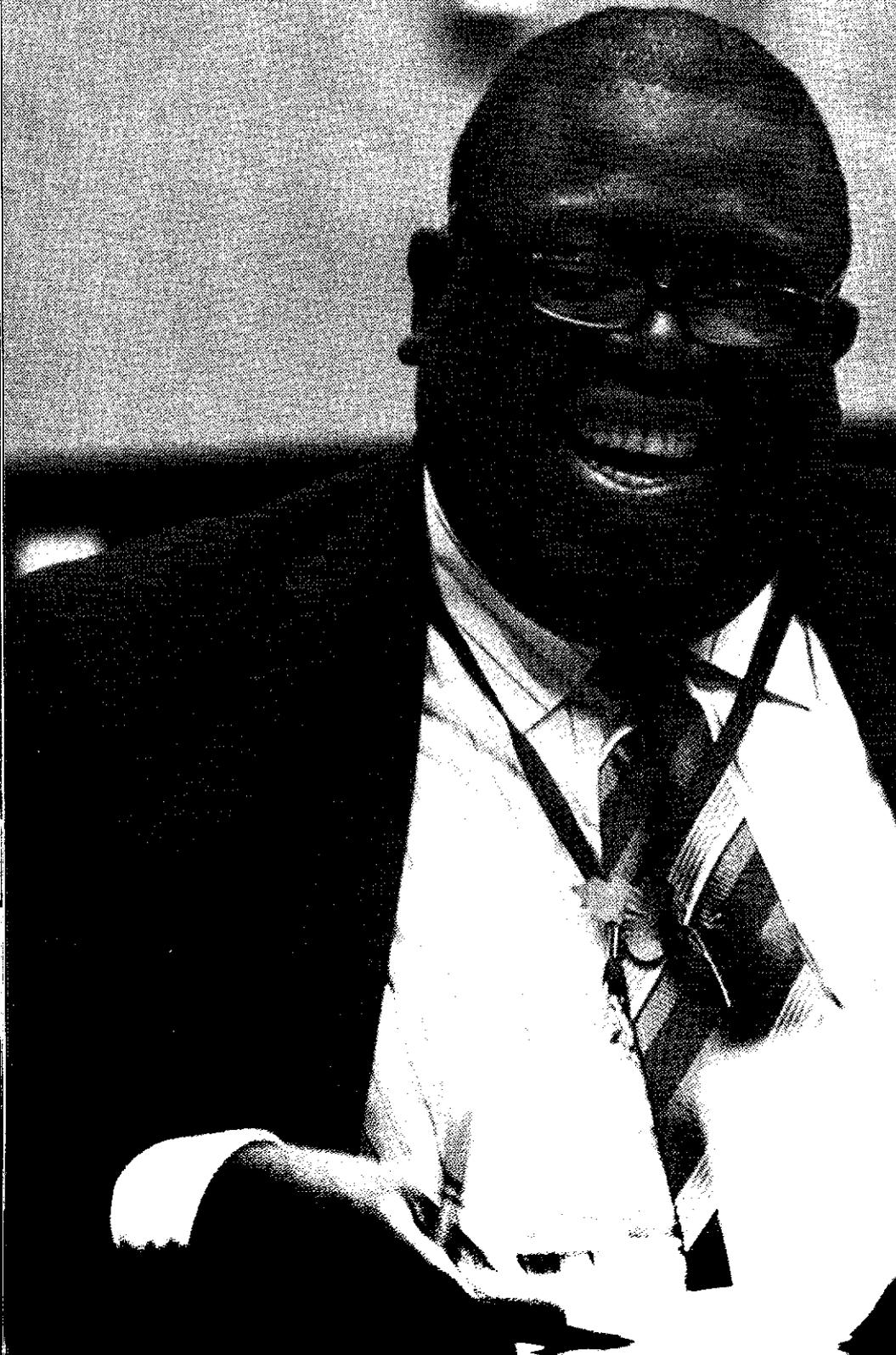
All these achievements and responsibilities are extremely significant. Yet even they cannot distract from the story of Clenton himself and his ability to obliterate the obstacles in his past.

Fourteen years ago in 1995 when Clenton was a Door Supervisor in New Orleans Nightclub in Birmingham, he saw a young woman being attacked by a man. Instead of simply walking past, Clenton intervened and stopped him. The man and an accomplice later followed Clenton home and he was stabbed 26 times. Clenton was lucky to survive, but his spinal nerves were damaged and this made it near impossible for him to walk. Clenton has had to use a wheelchair since the attack.

I sit stunned as he tells me of the attack and express my sympathy. He shrugs it off, "it's dreadful but a lot worse things have happened to people. You just have to pick yourself up and get on with your life".

However he didn't acquire this positive attitude and acceptance immediately after the attack. Clenton was 27 at the time of the attack and his life was turned upside down. He developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from the attack and also had to come to terms with his disability.

"If I'm being totally honest I didn't wake up the following morning



thinking I will forgive them now- I was very angry. If I could have put my hands on the individuals at the time...," he pauses. "It was hard. There is a saying 'forgive yourself, that is the hardest thing'. I was convinced I had done something wrong. Accepting my disability helped me to move on."

How difficult was it to accept his disability? "Very difficult. I used to play rugby and had always done a lot of after-school activities. Not being able to do that was a very hard thing to come to terms with and I ended up having mental health issues because of it." He not only had to accept how his own life had changed but discover that friends and family also perceived him differently. "Even though they've known you for a long time they treat you differently, not intentionally, but they treat you differently."

One of his attackers received a 14-year jail sentence and the other was let off due to lack of evidence. Did this give a sense of closure? "I wouldn't say it gave me closure. It made me angry, because I felt I was in a tunnel and I couldn't see where to go. It didn't give me what I thought it would give me. It made me more frightened I suppose because I didn't know the next step."

Becoming disabled however opened Clenton's eyes to a new world. He had always presumed that there were sufficient structures in place to help people with disabilities but was shocked upon leaving hospital that it took 18 months for a stairlift to be fitted into his flat. Suddenly he was aware of the problems that disabled people faced on a daily basis: "It isn't until you have to try

and work yourself through the maze that you realise there are gaps."

A physical disability is sometimes easier to spot, but when Clenton received a visit from an organisation providing services for disabled people, he realised he had another more hidden disability. "I didn't realise when I left school I had a hidden disability called dyslexia. I'd just gone through the school system thinking I was stupid, that was what I had been repeatedly told." George Rowley, who came to visit him and who is also now a director of Gallant 2000 was able to spot Clenton's dyslexia and also find a simple solution.

For as long as he could remember Clenton had a problem visualising the text on the page- a problem triggered by black print on a white page. He describes the text as "moving around", which made it impossible to read. However George solved the problem by simply placing a piece of yellow acetate over the text. This was a big moment in Clenton's life. "It made me cry basically because I couldn't believe that a cheap piece of acetate could stop that. I just thought that everybody had issues and saw it the same way."

So, what was it like to be finally able to read? "I can't tell you. It was great. It was like Christmas." He tells me how he discovered the joy of reading, "I remember the first book I wanted to read was the autobiography of Will Carling. And that was absolutely brilliant." Suddenly doors opened and a new life began for Clenton. He went

to Fircroft College where he did a management degree. After this he did a course at Handsworth College in teaching adults and he has a HND in construction. The guidance and support given to him by George made him realise his untapped potential and made him want to do the same for others. "That's what inspired me to want to work and give chances to disabled people, because he saw the potential in me and other people didn't see that potential."

Which leads neatly onto Clenton's work with Gallant 2000, where

he works both with companies and individuals providing training and consultancy about diversity in the workplace.

They also help

disabled people find solutions for problems they are encountering. He works closely with Equality 2025, trying to remove the barriers that still prevent disabled people getting full life chances. He has worked with numerous other organisations on issues of human rights, including: Advantage West Midlands, the Qualification Curriculum Authority and Commission for Social Care Inspectorate.

Clenton wants there to be more role models for disabled young people, especially BME disabled young people and still more opportunities and life chances for disabled people in all areas. He thinks society's attitude towards disabled people are changing, but it's a "slow change". He warns: "Things have changed but we can't rest on our laurels."

Looking back at the attack Clenton no longer views it a bad thing. "I don't think of it as a negative but as a positive, to increase not just my life chances but other people's life chances and to give people the opportunities that are often denied." Instead of focusing on the negatives in life, Clenton accepted and embraced the circumstances that he found himself in and now is a beacon, to all people, as he explains, we all have disabilities and problems. "Rather than moan and do nothing about it, it was better to be part of the change. If you want the change to happen, you have to be part of it."

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