

SNOWDON

TRUST

Tanni: Winner, loser and cabbages!



Tanni is famous of course for her outstanding record in wheelchair athletics from which she retired in 2007 having won 16 Paralympic medals including 11 Golds and been 6 times winner of the London Marathon.

She is now a parliamentarian, having been made a crossbench peer in 2010 and a TV presenter as well as being a board member of UK Athletics and the London Marathon and a patron or trustee of numerous charities – including the Snowdon Trust.

Here is some of the wit and wisdom she shared at a recent reception for disabled students:

Education gives you choices

I'm a huge fan of the Snowdon Trust my father used to say to me "Tanni, education gives you choices". Back then I used to think "Yeah – whatever!" but he was absolutely right.

When I first realised I was disabled

I became paralysed in 1976 at the age of 7. I was really lucky because I had amazing family and friends who didn't let anyone discriminate against me. 1981 was a very important year for me because it was the first time that I realised I was disabled. . All the while I'd been at junior school, my headmaster knew that the best environment for my education was in a mainstream school – so he didn't tell anyone that I was in a wheelchair and if there was an inspection, my mother would get a phone call saying it would be best if Tanni didn't come in today! (At the time, segregated education wasn't really education it was just keeping people busy until they went off to live somewhere else.) So, in 1981 I was due to go to High school – my local high school accepted me but then found out I was in a wheelchair. My parents received a letter which I still have today which said "We don't take people like Tanni at our school".

I get my stropiness from my Dad

But that same year (1981) a White Paper on Education came out which had been written by Baroness Warnock. There were a few lines in it which said that as a disabled person, I had the right to be educated in the best environment for me. My Dad read it, understood it and the implications for my life. So he threatened to sue the Secretary of State for Wales over my right to be educated in a mainstream environment. People wonder where I get my stropiness from!!

The ability to get into mainstream education defined my life – it got me into sport but most importantly, it gave me the ability to have choices and to have confidence.

Sport

I was always an annoyingly competitive child. I got involved in sport and from the age of 13 every decision I made was based around me wanting to be an athlete. The Paralympics as a term hadn't been invented then, but I knew that I wanted to be involved in sport. It was an amazing journey. I competed in 5 games and won some medals along the way and had a chance to be involved in sport at an amazing time when the lives of disabled people were being changed.



Winning the Olympic bid

It was always a dream that we'd get the chance to host the games in London. For 10 years of my life we talked about bringing the Games to London. The things I learnt from my education and sport are the things we took in to bidding for 2012 and that was "What is the worst that can happen?"

Everyone had said don't bother bidding because it's Paris's turn. But as the journey went on, more and more people believed we could do it. And in 2005 in Singapore, that moment when the IOC president said "and the winning city is.....London!" I will always remember for many different reasons. Denise Lewis, crowd surfing.... Matt Pinsent at 6' 6" was on his feet before everyone else and I got to hug David Beckham – which was pretty good! But it was a chance to change things and do things differently bringing the Games on to home soil. But I wouldn't have had a chance to do that if it hadn't been for my education.

Be careful what you say!

I went to Loughborough University and did a politics degree. I learnt a lot from that – including never be blasé about what you're going to do with your life. I did tell my professor in my final year just before I graduated that I was never going to get involved in politics because politics was for losers. My professor was still alive when I came into the House of Lords and he sent me a lovely e-mail which simply said "Dear Baroness Grey-Thompson – Loser!"

Back to education

It has been an amazing journey, but it all comes back to education. Without my education I wouldn't have had the chance to be in the House of Lords trying to make changes for other people. So, seeing as I'm getting older and can give advice, I'd say to everyone here make the most of the opportunity you have and what the Snowdon Trust can give you. It is a fantastic opportunity not just to change your lives, but to influence other people along the way. The reality is that we all know this...disabled people find it harder to get into education, harder to get into work....it is just harder. You guys going out there and spreading the message about education and the fact that you have done it...you have made a difference you can also help to change other peoples' lives.

Aim high

My grandfather used to say something to me which was equally important. He would say "Tanni, aim high even if you hit a cabbage!" (He was Welsh!) It's about having a goal and a dream. It's about seeing what you can achieve. In athletics terms it's about putting yourself on the start line and just training really hard and doing what you could. In education it's about being there, contributinglots and lots of different things. But I firmly believe if you aim high, you will never ever hit a cabbage!