

Multistory Press Release issued on 30 March, 2021
'Seeing in Isolation' project to be launched on 6 May, 2021

"My ongoing sight loss is more frightening for me than Coronavirus. Unable to travel to photograph for this project, because of lockdown restrictions, meant that we had to find another way. In a very short space of time, blind and sight impaired Sandwell Visually Impaired members overcame the hurdles of working virtually and using technology so they could collaborate with me. They shared memories from their family albums; did audio recordings; and some found a way to make photographs. I am deeply grateful to all of the participants for their time and faith in what I was trying to do." **Karren Visser**

'Seeing in Isolation' is an exciting new project by community arts organisation Multistory and photographer Karren Visser that shares digital stories made with, and told by, visually impaired Sandwell residents. The project brings together members of Sandwell Visually Impaired (SVI) to share their stories through short digital films made up of audio recordings, photographs from family albums, music and animation. It aims to challenge people's understanding of sight loss and show that blind and visually impaired people want to be part of the visual world.

Despite this project being created during the Coronavirus pandemic, with many participants shielding in their homes, surprisingly it is largely absent from the stories. Instead, there are memories and reflections, past and present, on relationships, hopes and dreams, the everyday and the challenges faced by visually impaired people. These stories have universal themes of resilience, including how Helen overcomes hurdles to realise her dream of opera singing. Craig's journey to acceptance, after he goes blind in his twenties because of his diabetes, gives us a window into his world of hallucinations caused by Charles Bonnet Syndrome. Jean's story of faith and love is beautiful in its timelessness; and Perm speaks for many young women, pushing boundaries to break free from family and community expectations. Time constraints and virtual adaptations meant that we could not include all of the stories that were shared with us, and there are many more that speak of a strong, vibrant community.

As Karren was unable to photograph individuals and hear their stories in person, they were collected over Zoom, on the phone and via voice recordings. Participants worked with us to choose the experiences that they most wished to highlight, and they were involved in writing and recording the script. The process is as important as the final outcome, as each person has co-created, and audio-described, their digital story.

Karren Visser is a photographer. She has degenerative myopia and glaucoma and she experienced further sight loss during lockdown. The initial 'quiet' that

came from there being fewer people out on the streets meant that she was more aware of how her other senses help her to see. This freedom was short-lived, however, and she began to hide her white cane and soon she retreated from the streets. Whilst working on 'Seeing in Isolation', for the first time, she also created self-portraits and audio recordings about her own experience that reflected this sense of increasing isolation.

The digital stories will be launched on **Thursday 6 May 2021, 2pm to 3.15pm and Saturday 8 May 2021, 5pm to 6.15pm via Zoom** and will subsequently be available on Multistory's website. For more info about the launch and a series of online public events please visit www.multistory.org.uk

Sandra Troth, Development Worker from SVI said:

"With the onset of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown, it was amazing that the project carried on. Photography is traditionally an art that blind and visually impaired people feel isn't for them. Then add lockdown and the odds start to look insurmountable. There's been challenges along the way but talented and artistic people, creative minds, determination and resilience have worked together to make the project something new, real and very exciting. It has given our members a real sense of self-worth to know they have really been involved in something that challenges people's understanding of sight loss. You don't need sight to have true vision; that comes from within."

Emma Chetcuti, Director of Multistory said:

"Producing 'Seeing in Isolation' to the backdrop of Coronavirus meant there were many challenges along the way and continuing the project would not have been possible without the team at Sandwell Visually Impaired and the determination of Karren Visser. Thank you to all of our collaborators for coming on this journey with us and making this possible."

Media

If you are interested in any of the following, please contact Amy Mclauchlan at amymclauchlan@multistory.org.uk

- A selection of free to use, high-res press images.
- An interview with Multistory and / or the photographer, Karren Visser.
- To attend the public events.

ENDS

Alt tag: Logos from Multistory, Sandwell Visually Impaired, Sandwell Council and Arts Council England.

