

July 2024 meeting

NORTHWICH u3a – July monthly meeting 2024

The speaker at the July meeting of Northwich u3a was Ella Milnes, who talked to us about 'Being Transgender'.

At the outset, Ella said that the presentation was really called 'Being Me', because she could only speak for herself and her journey; her 'lifelong story'. She began by stating what she was not – e.g. a transvestite, a 'trannie', a transsexual person, infectious, a bad influence, female. She is, she stated, 'trans' or 'trans woman'. Ella asked a lot of questions and concluded that some questions are more difficult to answer than others but it is only society that tells us what to be embarrassed about. For example, a man wearing a dress or skirt could be made to feel uncomfortable, because the norm for our society is that men wear trousers or shorts. (In countries like Samoa, men wear skirts all the time). 'Unconscious bias', Ella explained, refers to unconscious forms of discrimination and stereotyping based on race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, age, and so on.

Born Robin Milnes in 1963, her father was a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm and her mother was a housewife. She has 2 older brothers and spent a little time reminding us what life was like in the 20th century. Phrases like 'Dolls are for girls' (when Robin wanted an Action Man when he was 6) and 'They finally made a man of you' (when he had completed Fire Service Training) were comments that we have all heard.

Ella spent some time clarifying facts regarding biological sex, sexual orientation, gender and gender identity. This was fascinating and Ella regaled us with a plethora of scientific information. Essentially, biological sex obeys the biological rules of birth, sexual orientation is a 'brain thing' which develops much later, gender is male/female roles acceptable to society and gender identity is 'how one feels inside'.

Ella's journey is a long one. She joined the Fire Service in 1986 and eventually became a watch commander in Warrington – 'an alpha male among males'. She married in 1989 and had children in the 90s. She had been honest with her wife who knew that she was skirting around the issue, suffering crippling anxiety and compartmentalising her life. Her wife supported her in many ways through the years until Ella retired in 2016 and they discussed the way forward. This involved many steps until in November 2019 Ella visited a private health provider and began taking HRT and blockers. Within a week, the testosterone had disappeared and with it the anxiety. Ella said that it was 'unadulterated bliss!' Before any surgery could take place, Ella had to live as a woman in society for at least a year, which she did, and in June and December 2023 had the surgery. She said that the process was expensive (about £27,000), painful and takes commitment (about 8 years) and, she explained, there is a different cost. She realised that she is now in a minority group and acknowledged that some people don't like trans women. Ella ended the talk by saying 'trans people are just that – people, just like you'.

This was a deeply moving and personal presentation that addressed many of the issues about which there has been much discussion in the press. It cleared up some confusing issues with clarity, honesty and some humour, and, after 40 years of trying to be herself, Ella stated that at last she has done it!

The next meeting will be on Wednesday 21st August at Owley Wood Club, Weaverham at 2pm, when Dr. Peter Scott will tell us about 'Restoring the Danny'. Come and join us! Look on the Northwich u3a website for more information about monthly meetings and our groups

