

STEP FORWARD

THE WI'S ALWAYS BEEN GOOD AT INCLUSIVITY SAYS DISABILITY ACTIVIST **DR AMY KAVANAGH**... BUT CAN WE DO BETTER?

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After moving to a new area, Amy (second left), enjoys the company of West Ealing WI members



In the last two years I've gone from not even describing myself as disabled to appearing as a disability activist on the national news. I've been visually impaired all my life, but it was only when I started using a white cane to navigate in public that I noticed how many people pull, shove or drag me somewhere without asking – and how frightening it is.

I still think of myself as a 'baby blind' because for a long time I didn't think I was really disabled. I'm registered partially sighted: I can see some things, but not others, and it can be better or worse from day to day.

To me, 'blind' had always meant older people who couldn't see anything and had no independence, and I didn't identify with that at all. But I was hiding the real me and it was exhausting. I have a PhD in History and there wasn't much support in academia for disabled students, so I'd lie and pretend I could see things or say I needed new glasses.

Talking to other disabled people online helped me realise there's no right way to be disabled and it was quite all right to ask for the help I needed.

I'm bisexual and when I was younger it felt less shameful to tell people about that than to open up about my disability, which is very sad when I reflect on it. I always describe

embracing my disability as my 'second coming out', and telling people I was disabled was a lot harder.

Naturally, my mother remains in total denial about 'the ladies' because I'm now in a happy relationship with a nice chap.

When I first started using my cane, I nearly threw it in the bin, it was really challenging to learn how to use it safely. I love my cane now and it feels like part of my body, but once people could see I was disabled, the way they treated me almost made me want to risk falling over and getting hurt instead.

If someone grabs me, I try to be very polite or else I act startled: if I don't look after their feelings, they often take it personally and can get aggressive.

Most people are nice and they want to help, but good intentions don't make it all right. The most frightening thing is when people don't talk to me before they touch me. So how do I know their intention is to help me? It's horrible when somebody grabs me and tries to take me somewhere, especially if they are a strong person that I cannot get away from.

I've tried every set of doors on the London Underground to work out where I'm least likely to be grabbed. I never stop to look at my phone or to check something in my bag near a road: if I pause for a second too long, someone will pull me across.

The best way to help someone is to ask what *kind* of help they need. People are worried about causing offence, but I'm

MY STORY

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much more offended by someone laying their hands on me and dragging me off a train than if they'd just said to me at first: 'Would you like a hand?'

I wondered if I'd become a magnet for grabby people, so I started talking about it on Twitter in August last year and created the hashtag #JustAskDontGrab. It went viral and thousands of people told me that it happens to them too, which was reassuring. Sky News asked me to do a video about it and since then I've done interviews and articles about disability for Radio 4, London Live, the *Independent* and the BBC.

Before I started using my white cane, my vision had worsened and I was scared of leaving the house alone. I'd moved in with my partner and away from all my friends, and I was isolated and depressed. That's when a friend who worked for the NFWI told me I should join the WI. So I decided I would try to make it to a meeting at West Ealing WI, which was only a three-minute walk from home.

I instantly enjoyed meeting like-minded women and I've now been on the committee for two and a half years. We have a good mix of working and retired people, mothers and women from many different backgrounds: there's no other forum that would allow for a 20-something to meet and make a 74-year-old best friend.

As a historian, I love to hear about all the campaigns and movements our older members have previously been involved in, and it makes me really proud. There are so many people living in London that you often don't feel like part of a community, but now I do.

My friends at the WI really encouraged me to be more honest about the support I needed. The first route I practised with my white cane was to the meeting and back. I think it's a good idea for WIs to look at how they can be more inclusive.

For example, do you meet in accessible locations and publicise the accessibility of your meetings? Do you ask people about their access needs? We always have large-print copies of documents especially for me, and I've taught some of the committee members how to guide me.

You can do fun things as well: we're looking into inviting a deaf speaker to teach our WI some British Sign Language.

Disability is not offensive. If you're worried about causing offence or not knowing what to do around disabled people, get to know them: invite disabled people into your space.

Organisations such as Guide Dogs for the Blind often have qualified speakers and they're always looking for new groups to address. Most disabled people are pretty cool with answering questions if asked in a respectful way.

The WI is a champion of inclusivity in many ways. There are countless people with disabilities who are isolated and it would be great to be able to say: 'Here's a place where people will make an effort to ensure you feel included.'

• **Dr Amy Kavanagh is a member of West Ealing WI, Middlesex Federation. You can find out more about her work on her blog: caneadventures.com or follow her on Twitter @BlondeHistorian**



ABOVE Stephanie Keen (right), the President of West Ealing WI, offers a supportive arm to Amy during a walk in the park **RIGHT** Once in denial about being partially blind, Amy loves using her cane, which even sports a jauntily embellished parrot



Amy raises awareness of disability among her circle of local friends