

MAGIC MOMENTS ALTRUISTIC MAGIC PROJECTS

BREATHE MAGIC

By Jay Fortune

Photographs by Richard Eaton



On 11th November 2013, Noel Britten organised The Magic of Magic Day as part of the International Festival of Magic. Myself and Richard Leigh were asked to open the day with a talk and Q&A about our magic fund-raising initiative Magic Moments. Throughout the day other altruistic magic projects were discussed, and many of the participants and founders were present. This series of articles looks at some of the projects happening globally, where magicians and other practitioners are using magic for the benefit of helping people in overcoming all manner of adversity and challenging circumstances. It is worthy to note that for the small group of attendees and speakers at The Magic of Magic Day, many were of the opinion it was one of the most memorable, emotional and impactful magic conferences they had ever attended.



Richard McDougall with young magician Arun performing the sponge balls

'I HAVE BEEN IN MAGIC FOR FORTY YEARS, AND HAVE STUDIED THE CRAFT FROM BOOKS AND OTHER MAGICIANS, BUT I THINK I HAVE LEARNED MORE ABOUT MAGIC FROM THE YOUNG MAGICIANS WHO COME TO THE BREATHE CAMPS THAN ANYWHERE ELSE. THE ORGANISATION ITSELF IS REMARKABLE IN MANY WAYS, BUT MOSTLY FOR YVONNE FARQUAHSON AT THE HELM, WHO EMBODIES DEVANT'S PROFOUND STATEMENT, "IT'S ALL DONE BY KINDNESS". Richard McDougall

The talk following Magic Moments was David Owen QC and magician Richard McDougall discussing their exciting Breathe Magic project. Since 2013 Breathe Magic has continued to grow...

Jay: We first met back in 2013. I was excited and inspired to hear of your project Breathe Magic. For those unfamiliar with Breathe, what's it all about? How did you become inspired to create the project?

David: Our team have recently launched a brilliant new website (www.breatheahr.org) which describes Breathe Magic as a project "where medical meets magical". That sums it up perfectly. It's a fun, clinically-effective way to use magic to improve people's physical and mental health.

One of our main programmes involves children with hemiplegia, a condition of the brain that affects one side of the body. We run

magic camps where clinicians and magicians work intensively with children to improve their bimanual skills, and boost their self-esteem. The tricks are chosen so as to enhance: hand and arm function, cognitive ability and self-confidence. Magic is a buzzy, powerful motivator that encourages children to practise, and so to learn practical skills for everyday life.

Breathe Magic is part of Breathe Arts and Health Research, an

organisation which develops creative and inspiring approaches to healthcare which are backed by research. So there's a wider context to the magic, and we work with a group of highly talented, creative colleagues.

Jay: Had you seen any other therapeutic magic projects prior to starting Breathe Magic?

David: I was originally inspired by the idea that there must be interesting



Our Breathe Magic team of magicians

ways of using magic in a therapeutic context. David Copperfield blazed a trail for this kind of work with his Project Magic in the States. I wanted to bring together clinicians, researchers and magicians in an ongoing, robust project. It took a long time for the idea to take shape. Our Chief Executive, Yvonne Farquharson, magically created an organisation from our initial efforts. Richard McDougall came on board at the outset, providing superb magical teaching and creative input. Many others shaped the project along the way.

Jay: You touched on it briefly, but would you expand your thought process as to why you chose magic as the art form to engage children?

David: When you tell children with disabilities that they're going to become young magicians, their eyes light up immediately. At school they've probably been "special" in a negative way; learning magic makes them special in a positive way. So the children love the idea of a magic project - they motivate themselves, and their progress motivates us. Magic can have a similar impact on adults grappling with a difficult physical or mental condition. Magic also has specific clinical benefits. It involves precise hand/arm movements. It requires practice

and control. Practice has a calming, focused quality, with a payoff when a trick is mastered. Performing allows children to overcome their challenges and do extraordinary things. Best of all, as we say at the start of magic camps, magic is fun!

Jay: It's cyclical isn't it? The children have a positive, motivating experience and that ultimately motivates you. It is a wonderful, and as I'm sure you would agree, fulfilling project. Did you have an end goal of Breathe Magic when starting out?

David: Our aim is to make our programmes available to as many people as possible, whilst maintaining the highest possible clinical and magical standards. I don't think we have an "end" goal as such - we enjoy it far too much to want it to end!

Jay: Which magicians have you worked with on the project?

David: Richard McDougall, Will Houstoun, Laura London, Christopher Howell and Edward Hilsun have been immensely helpful, devoting a huge amount of time to developing Breathe Magic.

We've had great support from Dynamo, James Freedman, Nigel Mead, Jim Carter (Downton's butler

and magician), Barrie Westbrook from The Illusioneer and many others. Martin MacMillan and everyone at International Magic have also been very generous and helpful to Breathe and our young magicians.

Jay: What keeps you doing it?

David: Why would one stop? It's satisfying, fascinating, and fun.

Jay: [Laughs] I totally agree! Tell us a bit about your magical journey.

David: I became hooked on magic when I was seven (so can appreciate the appeal of magic to children around that age). In the 1970s, I was a joint winner of the Young Magician of The Year Competition. Magic has been a passion ever since. I also developed a little sideline as a barrister and QC, and spent over thirty years working on complex international legal cases. Now, when I'm not busy with magic, I'm busy being an arbitrator and mediator in England and abroad, helping people sort out difficult legal disputes. Which means that Breathe is a welcome contrast with other parts of life...

Jay: It's fascinating to see other magicians, often those outside of magic as a full-time day job, creating new experiences and reasons for applying magic to other means as opposed to simply being for paid entertainment. What does the future look like for Breathe Magic?



Will Houstoun with young magician Ashleigh performing the cups and balls

'WORKING WITH THE TEAM AT BREATHE MAGIC HAS BEEN A REAL HIGHLIGHT OF MY MAGICAL LIFE. AS MAGICIANS WE OFTEN SPEND TIME TALKING ABOUT HOW WE CAN ADD MEANING TO OUR MAGIC AND I CAN THINK OF NOTHING MORE MEANINGFUL THAN BEING PART OF A PROGRAMME THAT, IN A VERY REAL WAY, TRANSFORMS PEOPLE'S LIVES.' Will Houstoun

David: As with any organisation of this type, funding and the long-term are always uncertain, but the future looks exciting. A few examples of what's coming up:

At the end of last year, we won a prestigious award from NHS England, which means that we're liaising closely with NHS England to develop further projects around the country.

Jay: Congratulations!

David: Thank you. We've piloted a "stage two" camp, to take children to the next level as young magicians - which we'll be developing further. There's also a new research project in the pipeline, looking at the effect of teaching magic on the social skills and psychological development of children.

Jay: Exciting stuff! If readers are interested, where can they find out more, and are you looking for folks to get involved?

David: The Breathe website is the best place to learn more. www.breatheahr.org. So far as involvement goes, three things come to mind. Firstly, we're always looking out for people who can help, and there are many different ways of offering support. We only have a limited number of magicians on each camp, but as the number

of projects increases, we want to expand the pool of suitable magicians who might be able to help in the future. Secondly, we're on the look-out for simple but impressive magic props which are not too complicated, and which the children can use for shows at the end of magic camps. So if you've got good quality props gathering dust which you no longer want, let us know via the website. Thirdly, and most importantly, every little donation helps!

Jay: Thanks David. When we first met at The Magic of Magic Day one of the most inspiring things I recall was the number of magicians in the audience who were motivated to try doing something more fulfilling with their magic and to seek a greater end goal utilising their skills. The challenge is to encourage magicians to get involved and actually give it a go. And I know that once they do, once you do something really positive with your magic that has a transformational effect on another person, you get hooked. It's an amazing and fulfilling feeling that can only be experienced by doing it. In many ways, it makes you feel truly present and alive. It gives back, not only to yourself, but to the participant.

Congratulations on your continued success and I look forward to hearing of your progress.



Occupational therapist Skye working with young magician Alex

'MANY OF THE CHILDREN CAME TO THE CAMP HAVING FACED REJECTION FROM OTHERS BECAUSE OF BEING DIFFERENT AND SOME TENDED TO HIDE THEIR HEMIPLEGIA AFFLICTED HAND FROM THE WORLD. IT WAS THE EXPERIENCE OF LEARNING TO BE A MAGICIAN THAT PROMPTED MANY OF THE CHILDREN TO BLOSSOM. APART FROM THE WORK ON DEXTERITY, IT WAS THE TRIUMPH OF CHARACTER FROM ALL THIS MAGIC THAT CAUGHT ME OFF GUARD. IN LEARNING THE MAGIC 'TRICKS', OTHER TRULY MAGICAL THINGS BEGAN TO HAPPEN. MY OTHER SURPRISE WAS ALL THAT I HAD TO LEARN FROM THEM. THE COURAGE THEY HAVE TO PUSH THEIR BOUNDARIES AND REACH BEYOND THE ABILITY THEY HAVE TODAY IS NOTHING SHORT OF INSPIRING. Christopher Howell



'I HAVE RECENTLY BECOME PART OF THE BREATHE FAMILY AND BEFORE I WAS INVOLVED, I USED TO LOVE WATCHING THEIR AMAZING VIDEOS SHOWING THE RESULTS OF THEIR THERAPY PROGRAMME. IT IS SO INCREDIBLY INSPIRING SEEING THESE SHY YOUNG CHILDREN BECOME CONFIDENT YOUNG ADULTS AND DO THINGS THEY PREVIOUSLY THOUGHT TO BE IMPOSSIBLE. THE WORK THAT BREATHE DOES IS THE CLOSEST I'VE EVER SEEN TO REAL MAGIC.' Edward Hilsum



Occupational therapist Melissa working with young magician Gregory



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