Helping people with upper limb differences live life beyond limits

Within Reach

Spring 2025 | ISSUE 158

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Front cover star Elmarie O'Brien

The official magazine of the association for people with an upper limb difference

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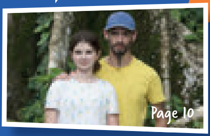

Immie in the Jungle

Lynne's Swim for Reach

Book Club

Living and learning with a difference

Events

APR

- 26th | North West Branch | Mini meet up Bolton
- 26th | Northern Branch | Trampoline & Soft Play
- 26th | Ireland Branch | Glendeer Farm

MAY

- 10th | North West Branch | Mini meet up Preston
- 16th - 18th |Scotland Branch | Family weekend
- 17th | Gloucestershire & Avon | Noahs Ark Farm
- 23rd - 25th | Reach on the Beach Swansea
- 24rd - 25th | East Anglia Branch | Family weekend

JUN

- 8th | Kent Branch | Lower Grange Farm

JUL

- 11th - 13th | North West Branch | Family weekend

AUG

- 3rd - 10th | RAW | Kepplewray Activity Centre
- 12th - 15th | Reach 18-25 Retreat | Dartmouth
- 17th | West Midlands Branch | Family weekend
- TBC | South London Branch | Club house BBQ
- TBC | 3 Counties Branch | Forest activities

OCT

- 17th - 19th | Annual Family Weekend | Swansea

DEC

- 7th | West Midlands Branch | Christmas party

For details contact reach@reach.org.uk or your local branch coordinator

Hello!

From the Editor & Designer of withinReach

Reach's Within Magazine proudly shares the stories and lived experiences of the Reach community and it only grows stronger with every issue because of you; your heartfelt contributions, unbelievable fundraising and our volunteers' dedication. Enjoy this spring 2025 issue and as always, we welcome comments and suggestions for future articles so please get in touch at withinreach@reach.org.uk.

Your Within Reach creators,
Max & Tom

Reach Membership

Membership is open to parents of children with upper limb difference, and individuals of 18 years and over who are interested in furthering the work of the association. The UK and Ireland subscription is from £36 (£35 via direct debit) and the International subscription is £40.

Views expressed in Within Reach are not necessarily those of Reach and are not intended to reflect or constitute Reach policy, or in any way portray an official view.

STOP Reach emails going into your junk folder!

Please add reach@reach.org.uk to your contact list.

Stay up to date

All event news is on our website www.reach.org.uk and facebook page www.facebook.com/reachcharity.

Meet our Wonderful Branch Coordinators

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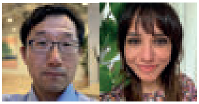

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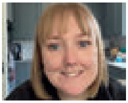

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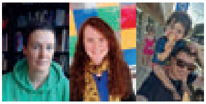

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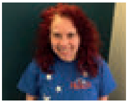

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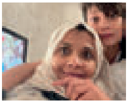

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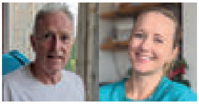

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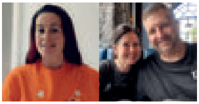

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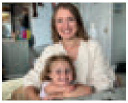

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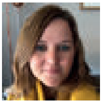

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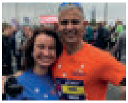

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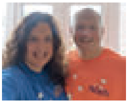

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How YOU can help Reach!

Know of a local venue, sports club or hall that would be perfect for a private meet-up for our Reach families? Or perhaps you're keen to help but can't commit to being a branch coordinator, no problem! Help your local Branch Coordinator by simply making that first contact with a venue or getting a quote for an event. Every little really is a BIG help. Don't underestimate your impact. Get in touch with your local Branch Coordinator or the Reach team at reach@reach.org.uk.

Spring has most definitely sprung in Devon!

Still some bracing winds but the sun has banished the dark and we have new growth - a bit like Reach. Before we get on to that I would like to start by saying thank you to all our branch coordinators who, across the UK & Ireland, filled the darker months with light in the form of Christmas parties, visits to magical heritage sites to meet Santa, Indoor Activity Centres, & family run farms. There were Arts & Crafts sessions, coffee and cake by the river + all the best Panto characters, Dick W, Snow White, Beauty & the Beast – thank you for giving your time across the year to keep Reach families connected. I would also like to welcome our new Branch Coordinators joining Mei in Wessex, Grace, Rachel & Lee, Shaheen in North London, and Sarah & Jenna, joining forces in the South West to keep Reach families connected from the tip of Cornwall all the way to Somerset - welcome! Please may I also make a plea, the role of Branch Coordinator is shared in 8 regions now across the UK & Ireland and it works well. Right now, we're seeking some support for Jen in 3 Counties specifically – if you live in 3 Counties and might like to get involved, please email: sarah-janel@reach.or.uk or phone me: 07932 747 652.

As Chris said, the 18-25 Retreat & Mentorship Programme is now LIVE. By the time this is published we will have appointed a Project Coordinator. We received over 100 applications for the post, and really appreciate the time, effort, and talent of the people applying. Young adults interested in participating in the Programme can read more about it on our website.

Another thing cooking right now is our Annual Family 2025 which is being hosted for the first time ever in South Wales and managed by Ashley! Volunteers from our South Wales Branch and our wonderful Welsh born AFW Guru, Sian Brooks are giving their time to make this event very special. To read more about it please visit our website.

Next, the growth bit:

We are proud to announce that two new programmes will go live in 2025:

Reaching Out, supported by the National Lottery, England and the VTCT Foundation will see Reach Charity broaden its delivery to support and involve young adults online, in person, and as a charity, making what has up until now been a children's charity relevant and useful to them. We will post more about Reaching Out soon on our website but for now I want to say thank you to the wonderful Working Group, all members of the Reach community, who gave their time to birth this project, all the people behind the scenes who worked very hard to prepare the bid, and most importantly the young people who put into words what we couldn't – thank you! This project will go live in April 2025.

The Reach Liaison Nurse Pilot Project Building on what you told us in the Early Parental Experience Survey we are going to facilitate a Paediatric Nurse with lived experience for a year, their mission? To contact 300 obstetric departments across the UK, work to improve the knowledge base of health care responders, parents and specialists, raise awareness of Reach and provide extra support for new parents. Our hope is the NHS will see the value and adopt the model…Thank you to our wonderful Trustee Ruth Lester for listening to our members and making this happen and thank you to the Milles Charitable Foundation for supporting this important work. We anticipate the project will go live in June 2025.

SJ

Sarah-Jane
Charity Operations Lead
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Reach Board of Trustees

Each day that passes is trying to convince all of us that "Spring has sprung!"

It's a lot like the Reach Charity in 2025. We have undoubtedly entered a new period of innovation and development, driven in no small way by the newly-energised young adult members.

Our Branch Coordinators are driving forward and have planned 4 Regional Family Weekends already in 2025. They are scheduled for (1) Abernethy Outdoor Centre, in Scotland, (2) Reach on the Beach in South Wales at YHA Gower, Swansea, (3) Hilltop Outdoor Activity Centre in Norfolk, and (4) Patterdale Hall in Cumbria – all happening between May and July. By planning regional events, we make access to Reach family meetups and activities more affordable and more accessible to our families. To get more information or to make a booking, just head to the Reach website News page: https://www.reach.org.uk/about-us/news and click on Regional Family Weekend Programme.

After the initial, and very successful, Reach Pilot Programme for the 18-25s Retreat, Reach applied for funding to enable Reach to continue to run this very rewarding activity for our young adults. We are very pleased to announce that we have been granted funding from the VTCT Foundation to continue offering the "Reach 18-25 Project - Retreat and Mentorship Programme" for another 3 years. We will also be collaborating with Durham University to document and produce research findings on the benefits of this programme for our young adults. Well done to Emily Tisshaw and Tony Addison for your initiative, and for the Retreat Mentors, Max, Tom, and Louise who made this pilot become a reality.

And then there was Netflix's very successful film Toxic Town. The response to the film was incredible. Is there anybody who hasn't seen it? Reach had to be on its toes to handle the response. Our Social Media Team were up to the task and helped a lot of people affected by the issues raised in the film. Our Ambassador Melissa Johns helped Reach to make representations to the producers, conveying the effect the film had on many of our families in dealing with the real-life issues raised. We were also supported by our LLLDAM partners as well as by MP Marie Tidball in the House of Commons.

Limb Loss & Limb Difference Awareness Month is in the month of April again this year. Following our very successful "How Do You Do It?" video campaign on Social Media in 2024, we are inviting members to participate in "How Do I Do It?" this year. We want to hear from more members, new and old, about your ability to get things done, your way. Please send us your videos and show the world what you can do?

There's a lot more going on in the background, too much to include here. Suffice to say that the contributions of our young adults, their energy and enthusiasm, their computer and social media skills, and the sheer amount of time and dedication they are prepared to commit to Reach for the benefit of their younger peers is magnificent. We need to support them in any way we can by keeping the donations coming. Reach has a track record of making good use of your fundraising efforts. May we say "Thank You" and ask you to "keep it going." It works.

Chris

Chris Creamer
Reach Board of Trustees Chairman
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Registered charity in England and Wales no.1134544

Registered charity in Scotland no.SC049805

Reach's new objects are in place!

The Reach team would like to extend their thanks to the trustees and the working group of members for their dedication and hard work in helping to update our charity's objects. Their time, effort, and expertise have been invaluable in ensuring that our charity continues to make a meaningful impact in the lives of our members.

The new Reach objects are:

"For the advancement, relief and support of people, and carers of people, with upper limb differences. In particular but not exclusively, children and young people who are either born with an upper limb difference or who acquire an upper limb difference in childhood."

Success for the 18 - 25s Reach Retreat!

It's wonderful to share that a £78k bid for an 18-25 Reach Retreat and Mentoring Programme has been granted, secured for our Reach young people for the next 3 years.

THE VTCT FOUNDATION

COMMUNITY FUND

What does this mean?

It means Reach can now give more support to its 18 – 25-year-olds through an annual 4-day retreat for up to 20 people. Giving young people a space to connect, share and grow in a safe, inclusive space.

The grant will fund a project coordinator to organise the events, allows year-round mentorship training, clinical support for the mentors provided by Chantelle of New Pastures Therapy, and the events will be supported by research and evaluations through Durham University.

Well-deserved recognition!

WR is delighted to congratulate Dawn and Robert Davies who hosted the Reach Tyncae Camping Weekend for 25 years. In January they were presented with the British Empire Medal (BEM) for "services to children, young people and their families," as printed in the London Gazette on 15th June 2024 for the King's Birthday Honours List.

The presentation took place at the Ceredigion Council Chambers, Penmorfa, Aberaeron on 17th January 2025.

Dawn and Robert Davies were joined by His Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant of Dyfed Miss Sara Edwards and the Lord-Lieutenant's Cadet Katy Moyes along with their four sons, Steven (Reach child), Roger, Michael, William and his wife Elinor.

The Big Give Christmas Challenge

This year Reach is taking part in the Big Give Christmas Challenge - the UK's largest match funding campaign, helping charities across the UK and overseas double donations.

How does it work? Charities secure pledges from major donors, which are then matched by Big Give's Champions. Then, during the campaign week in December public donations are doubled using these funds.

Find out more: www.biggive.org/christmas-challenge/

4 Regional events in 2025

Reach's volunteer branch coordinators are continuing to create unforgettable regional family weekends so Reach children, young people and families can connect, support each other and have wonderful adventures.

- **Scotland** branch coordinators are bringing families together at Abernethy Outdoor centre, Nethy Bridge.
- **South Wales** branch is inviting families back to Swansea for 'Reach On The Beach'.
- **East Anglia** branch's first regional family weekend will be taking place at Hilltop Outdoor Centre, Norfolk.
- The **Patterdale** Family Weekend is back for another year at Patterdale Hall, Lake District.

Find out more: www.reach.org.uk/news/regional-family-weekend-programme

RAW (Reach Activity Week) 2025

3rd – 10th August 2025

Have you got a 10 – 17-year-old that's keen to adventure with their Reach buddies?

This year RAW is heading to Kepplewray Activities Centre in the south of the Lake District National Park.

Book now:

www.reach.org.uk/news/raw-reach-activity-week-2025

In loving memory of Frank Letch MBE

June 1944 - April 2025

It is with deep sadness that we announce the passing of Frank Letch, former Trustee, Branch Coordinator, Chairman, and Ambassador for Reach Charity Ltd. Frank passed away peacefully at home, surrounded by his beloved wife Natalia and family.

For over 25 years, Frank was a guiding light within Reach, making a profound and lasting impact on the charity and its members. His dedication, warmth, and leadership will be deeply missed by all who knew him.

Write your will for free!

We are proud to be entering an exciting period of growth and new initiatives, thanks in part to a large legacy left in a will to Reach. Whether you feel passionately that we offer additional support to new families, lessen financial barriers enabling more 10–17-year-olds to attend RAW, support 18–25-year-olds in their Reach journey, or in our new era welcome all adults with an ULD as Reach members, leaving a legacy is about what you want the future to look like and where possible doing something positive towards that future goal now.

Find out more: https://farewill.com/reach-magazine

THE BRITISH WILLS & PROBATE AWARDS

Trustpilot

In partnership with Farewill

Celebrate our branches & coordinators

Meet the team: Wessex Branch

Meet Reach's Wessex Branch and coordinators: Mei, Grace, Rachel and Lee.

Mei is a full-time mum of 3 and her Reach child is Henry, she's recently been joined by new coordinators Lee and Grace, parents to Reach child Asher, and Rachel, mum to Reach child Rosie. We caught up with them after their recent event...

Some of you held your first event in February, what was your standout moment?

Lee – It was a great success! As myself, Grace and Rachel are still relatively new members of Reach, it was great for us to meet so many local families and chat about our experiences. It was also wonderful to watch all the Reach children interact and play together!

Did you face any challenges during the organisation?

Lee – As me, Grace and Rachel only became Branch Coordinators in January it was a race against time to organise the event. However, that's where having each other and Mei for support was crucial. We each have different skills and experience to bring to the table which helped us successfully pull the event together.

How did it feel to see it all come together?

Grace - During the planning we were keen to create opportunities for families to talk to each other and share stories in between the activities. We created meeting points in the itinerary to do this, and it was these conversations with other parents, and with the very lovely and confident Reach member Katie, that was my favourite part of our first event.

For experienced BC Mei, is it nice to have the support of 3 new BCs?

Mei – It's fantastic! The branch covers a huge area, it was quite difficult to juggle it alone, with everything that life brings on a daily basis and organising events. It became quite unmanageable when my third child arrived, very little progress was being made. Now, not one but three BCs have joined me and even after a short time I feel we've bonded well - I love their energy and motivation!

I couldn't have asked for a better outcome. We have a common aim and purpose and we each bring different qualities to the group. I'm hopeful that the Wessex Branch will flourish and hold more events across the area so that all members can benefit.

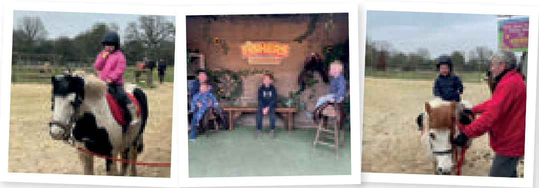
What's next for the Wessex branch?

Rachel – We're planning a summer and winter event with the hope that we can bring as many Wessex members together as possible. Then continuing these events year after year to build friendships and support each other.

Lee - All four of us are due to catch up in the near future to debrief and discuss plans for the rest of the year. Fundraising will be on the agenda, so watch this space!

Is it beneficial to have BCs from different areas?

Mei - It's really helpful as local knowledge is a benefit. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Lee, Grace and Rachel for putting up with me and for their patience! I feel very lucky and I'm looking forward to making a real difference!



What advice would you give to new members or anyone looking to attend a local event?

Rachel - Do it! Everyone is so lovely and welcoming; any nerves will disappear. We attended our first meet up when Rosie was 10 months old, wondering if we needed to but it most definitely was worth it, for us more than her at this stage.

What do local branch events offer members that the bigger events can't?

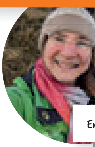
Grace - Local events was the main reason I was keen to become a BC. It was about building connections with other families that we'd be able to see more regularly so that we had a local support network as our son Asher grows. Being able to learn from and share experiences with other members as well as showing Asher he's not alone is the most important thing for me. Being able to provide this for other families as they join Reach would be magic.

What does Reach mean to you?

Rachel - Reach has helped so much since we joined during pregnancy that I was keen to get more involved.

Grace - Finding Reach has been pivotal for me, seeing others achieve incredible things and cope with life's challenges has been amazing – seeing those with lived experience sharing stories on Instagram helped me feel like we were less alone. We read Asher (his current favourite) book called Uniquely Brave by Tracie Wilson and love that the main character has a limb difference. It's made me realise how important it is for children to grow up seeing themselves represented as characters to find a sense of belonging in the world.

Take a brave step into the unknown and discover the warmth of the Reach family...



Emma

WR editor Max chats with Reach mum Emma about their first Reach family weekend; about pre-event trepidation and how things have changed for them since.

What was your experience of the Patterdale weekend?

My Reach daughter Sophie is 2 years old. She has two big sisters, Hattie (5) and Martha (8). In July 2024 we made the trek from Devon up to Patterdale Hall in the Lake district, not really sure what to expect but sure that missing the day of school and the long drive would be worth it. It was our first BIG Reach event!

Did you go with any expectations?

I'd describe my mood as optimistic but nervous. My worries were that we would arrive to find mainly older children with most families already knowing each other, and that with Sophie only being 2, we'd be the odd ones out and that other groups of parents and children wouldn't be keen to get to know us.

I knew that these fears were unlikely but I imagine many people feel them to a greater or lesser extent.

What did you hope to get from the weekend?

That we'd show Sophie and her sisters that her limb difference is only a tiny part of who she is and what she can do, and in meeting other children with similar differences they'd be able to understand more about her potential.

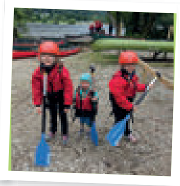
In reality the weekend brought all of this and more. I think the culture of the Reach community is what we needed - I'm so grateful we went. We learnt, we laughed, had heaps of fun and made friendships that I hope we can continue to grow!

Why did you want to go?

At only 2 Sophie had begun to tuck her ‘little hand’ (her words) inside her sleeve, becoming self-conscious if anyone asked about it. What I did notice was that she liked to turn the pages of the Within Reach magazine and her sisters liked to show her if anyone had a little hand like hers.

What was it like when you arrived?

We walked into Patterdale Hall late on Friday but the moment we met people we felt welcomed. I had to coax my girls into the sitting-room on the first evening but once they’d met a few of the other children there was no looking back. I watched Sophie see other children with limb differences similar to hers and walk over to investigate. There’s nothing like the bluntness of a 2-year-old to get people giggling through an initial meeting. Pretty quickly my girls found a tribe, off to play at every opportunity. The younger ones holding the hands of older children. Meanwhile my partner Holly and I chatted with other parents, learning tips and tricks from those with older children over a glass of wine or around the dinner table over delicious, wholesome food cooked by the Patterdale team.



Did you do lots of activities?

The sign-up sheets for activities were a huge source of excitement. I suspect most people did what we did and sign up to too many - it was easy to get carried away! Having adjusted to a more realistic programme, we canoed, did bushcraft, archery and high ropes. (My children have informed me that we’ll be signing up for gorge-walking, rock climbing and stand-up paddle boarding this year!)

The instructors were fantastic; knowledgeable, inclusive and encouraging. The experiences were incredible, my daughters still bubble with excitement when telling people about all their special safety gear in case they fell in the water whilst snatching up rubber ducks!

When it was time to leave, how did you feel?

We drove away from Patterdale, everyone exhausted, grubby, and with a binbag of wet clothes and huge grins on our faces. It was absolutely brilliant.

Everything was magical. We fully intend to go again; our daughters are holding us to it and Sophie still talks about her “Reach big-girl friends!”

How was Sophie after the weekend?

Sophie is noticeably more confident. Now, if children ask about her hand she shows them and says, “I’m just born like it” and gets on with playing. Meeting other Reach children was and will continue to be invaluable. Her sisters also saw proof that our determined little Reach people will grow to be able to do everything they set out to do; they have learnt not to baby Sophie who really can, “do it herself,” and if she can’t, she’ll work it out. For us, talking to other families who’ve gone through early childhood (and onwards) was inspiring. There’s nothing like the knowledge of people in the same (Patterdale) ‘canoe’ as you. Some of my worries could be set aside and there are answers to others.

What would you say to anyone who is thinking about attending an event?

To anyone wondering whether to take the plunge and get together with a group of strangers and a tribe of children, DO IT, everyone is there to have fun, I’ll see you there!

We’re so grateful to everyone involved in the planning and execution of the weekend, thank you!

A jungle adventure!

Reach member Immie first grabbed our attention last year when she appeared on 'Into the Jungle with Ed Stafford' on Channel 4 alongside her dad Chris. We caught up with Immie to ask her about being part of Reach, why she wanted to face the challenge of the jungle experience and her exciting new sporting endeavours since...

4Viewers

Ed Stafford's expedition follows in the footsteps of the Mayans, as he leads the dads and kids deeper into the jungle where they spend their first night sleeping wild...

#IntoTheJungle, 9:15pm on @Channel4

Immie, thank you for joining us for the spring magazine, I would love to hear about your experience, but firstly, how long have you been a member of Reach?

I've been a member of Reach since I was born, so 14 years!

That's a long time, have you been to many Reach events? (I.e., Annual Family Weekends)

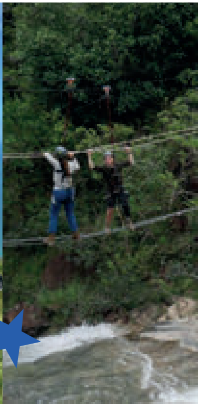
We used to attend lots of events when I was younger.

As you might know, Reach has just changed its Articles of Association so it's now a charity for people of all ages with upper limb difference... And the second 18 - 25s retreat is going ahead this year, which is very exciting, so hopefully we'll see you at one of those events in the future!

I think I would attend events that interest me. I liked meeting Nicole who is my taekwondo team mate at a competition this weekend as we had something in common.

Last year we saw you and your dad on the TV show Into the Jungle with Ed Stafford. What made you want to take on the challenge?

I wanted to take on the challenge because I loved the idea of exploring the jungle and learning new skills and having the opportunity to prove myself to everyone.



You talk about having the opportunity to prove yourself, why was that important to you?

I wanted to prove that I can do anything - and for people to see me as something amazing. That my difference doesn't stop me.

> **"Don't let anyone or anything stop you from doing what you want because you really can do anything!"**

Have you had experiences where people haven't expected you to be able to do something?

People often ask me 'do you need help' or assume I can't do things and won't offer to let me try. I think they are trying to be kind, but it makes me feel like they are treating me differently, as though I am not as good as them.

Last year Reach had the 'How we do...' campaign, sharing videos on 'how we do' things with an upper limb difference like tying hair, doing laces, playing sports... Are there things you do that you would like to include in that?

I'm quite independent and usually find my own way to do things. I don't have social media yet, so I haven't seen these clips, but I made my own guitar pick from duct tape. I was inspired by videos I found on YouTube so when I do have social media those [kinds of videos] could be helpful.

When you first arrived in the jungle, was there anything that surprised you about the environment?

I was surprised by how high the humidity was - my hair was so frizzy. Managing my self-care in a difficult environment was challenging.

Biggest challenge and fear you overcame?

The biggest challenge was definitely the abseiling, and fear… spiders! But I got used to them – I'm still not a big fan though.

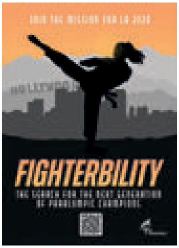
Do you have a favourite memory?

My favourite memory of my time in the jungle was swimming in a waterfall on the last episode.

How do you think the experience has changed you?

I think the experience has made me want to do more challenging things and to keep going even if I feel afraid.

What have you been up to since? (We heard through the grapevine that you've started Taekwondo!?)
Yes, I have also recently started Taekwondo - which was from an advert I saw in Within Reach magazine before Christmas. I'm training hard and I'm loving it.

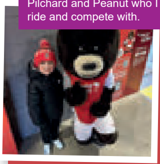


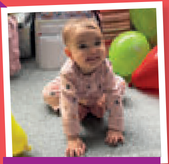
I fought my first Taekwondo competition this weekend, I won both of my fights. I am very excited to continue this journey with my coach Joss and team mate Nicole.

What advice would you give to other Reach kids that would like to try a new experience but might be nervous or worried to say yes?
Don't let anyone or anything stop you from doing what you want because you really can do anything! I love trying new things and proving myself. My parents always let me try things and know that I am determined to give it my all.

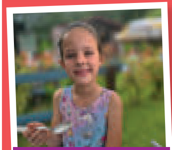
Welcome to Reach

Alfie Hi I'm Alfie Doyle I am 5 years old, I live at home with my mummy, daddy and little sister Aaliyah. I am football mad, I support Rotherham united and go a lot of matches with my daddy. I also have two horses called Pilchard and Peanut who I ride and compete with.

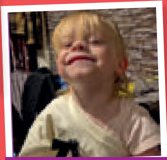




Athena was born with congenital longitudinal deficiency. As parents we noticed that her left thumb and wrist looked different to her right hand but it took over a year to get a diagnosis. Athena doesn't have any grip with her left thumb but that doesn't stop her from achieving her milestones. Nothing has phased her and I'm so amazed every day by what she achieves. She really is an inspiration and I'm so proud of her.

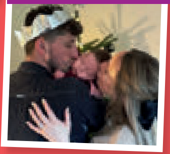


Matilda Matilda, 7, was born with an upper limb difference, she is missing her left hand and part of her forearm. She loves gymnastics, riding her bike, playing rugby and all things crafts. She is amazing, kind and such an inspiration to everyone around her.

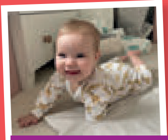


Ava This is my gorgeous daughter Ava, so happy to have found this amazing charity.

Eadie This is Eadie, born on Halloween - a real life pumpkin! Eadie was born with symbrachydactyly on her left hand, which we didn't know about until she was born. Already Eadie is showing us that nothing will stop her, she is the most wonderful determined 3 month old!



Rosie Hello, this is Rosie, she is 8 weeks old and was born missing part of her left arm, she is the smiliest, happiest baby you'll ever meet!

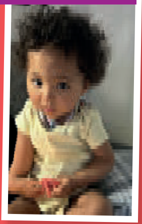


Hattie Hi, I'm Hattie. I'm 6 months old and I was born without a left hand. I love rolling on my tummy and playing with my big sister Mya.

Teddy This is Teddy Summerson, born on the 20th August 2024.Just a well loved, well cared for happy little chappy.

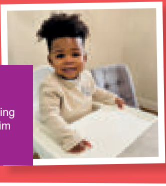
Maggie Maggie is small but mighty!

Joella My name is Joella and I was born with TOF and VACTERL association. I love spending time with my family after a first 12 month in hospital.

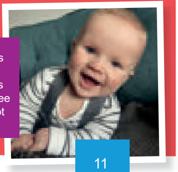


George This is George who will soon be having pollicisation surgery on his right hand. George was diagnosed with 15q24 microdeletion syndrome at 5 weeks old after his congenital clasped thumb was noticed at birth. He's adapted well to using his hand with no thumb but we're looking forward to seeing what George can do after his surgery.

Brayden was born with symbrachydactyly in his right hand, we didn't know until he was born; he is an amazing, cheerful and very smart 22-month old boy, and he loves playing with his brother, dancing and being adventurous - we want him to join a community that he can feel proud of and guide him throughout his development.



Freddie This is Freddie, he is a chilled out, happy and hilarious little boy who absolutely adores his big sister. He was born without three of his fingers but it is absolutely not holding him back.



Make it Monthly

Visit Reach.org.uk, click 'Support us', then select 'Make this a monthly donation' and follow PayPal's instructions.

Donations

£400	Al Mata Masons Lodge	Tracey & Jason from West Midlands visited and we received a donation
£10	John McKenna	In memory of Heather Tennant
£100	Claire Phillips	For your amazing support of Ru N and her family
£115	Jackson Quinn Solicitors	
£115	Vanessa James	This is a donation made from The Santa's Grotto that took place in Bicester Oxfordshire. Justin James, Dad to Reach Member Jessica (age 14) dressed as Santa and Jessica's Mum decorated the grotto and was Santa's little Elf Helper.
£20	Lesley Langdell	With love to Barnaby Austen and his family x
£40	Deborah Gorman	
£204	Jett McCandless	

Fundraising

£792	Chris Knox	Visiting 70 Lake District Lakes tarns or meres during a year.
£538	Lindsay Wright	Hot Wheels Mega Count Up

Monthly Donations

£5	Annette Gabbedey Goldsmiths	
£10	Heather Nash	
£10	Jonathan McGee	
£30	Sarah B in Sutton	
£160	Sandra	From all her beautiful knitted creations
£223	Diane McCullagh	This is a donation in loving memory of Heather Tennant.
£30	June Pidcock	
£20	Michael Guinan	
£200	Pádraic Rehill	
£5	Samson Ogunyemi	
£51	Carl Crabtree	
£10	Emma Bramley	
£30	Sarah Bowron	Donation made to support Tracey & Jason in the West Midlands x
£20	Rebecca Nelson	
£20	Juan Arenas Marquez	
£10	Erika Balsyte	
£200	James Dashwood	
£30	Michale Matthews	Christmas Card Donations.
£10	Mihail Anton	
£5	Vera Herkommer	

Featured Fundraisers

Making bracelets

“Ella raised a brilliant £53 for Reach by making bracelets with her friend. Ella spoke really well in front of all those people at the West Midlands meet up explaining what she did ♥ ♥. We are very grateful and very proud of her!”

– Tracey, Branch Coordinator, West Midlands

Finn Valley Golf Club

“I have raised just over £2700 for my Captain’s charity for the senior section of the golf club. I have chosen REACH as my charity because my 14-year-old granddaughter, Grace, was born with upper limb difference. I would like the money to go towards the 10-17 project in the Lake District. Grace has attended events in the past and will hopefully be attending this year.” – Paul

Branch Coordinator Navdeep runs 10k

Navdeep and her colleagues ran the Norwich 10k raising funds for their regional family weekend.

“Proud of our Reach Norwich 10k runners who ran today and the amazing Reach supporters in the crowd who fuelled us on!” – Navdeep

Support our upcoming fundraisers...

Meet your London Marathon 2025 Runners

Please meet the 5 runners, racing for Reach at the London marathon this spring:

- Thomas Romberg: www.2025tcslondonmarathon.enthuse.com/pf/thomas-romberg
- Abigail Collins: www.gofundme.com/f/running-london-marathon-for-upper-limb-differences
- Adam Harding: www.2025tcslondonmarathon.enthuse.com/pf/adam-harding
- Matt Donaldson: www.2025tcslondonmarathon.enthuse.com/pf/matt-donaldson
- Steven Harrington.

24-Hour Walking Challenge for Reach Charity

“This cause is deeply personal to me because my wife was born with a limb difference and has been supported by Reach since she was a baby. I’ve seen firsthand their incredible work, Reach supports people with upper limb differences by helping them build confidence, make lifelong friendships and embrace life without limits.”

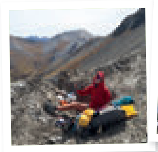
https://www.justgiving.com/page/alex-bennison-24-hour-walk-for-reach

“Have the courage to try”

By Ellie o Brien

Last year, in October 2023, I went to New Zealand in pursuit of walking Te Araroa - a 3000km trail the length of the country. Thru-hiking is the act of continuous walking on a long-distance trail, often in one direction from A to B, carrying everything you need on your back. I first stumbled across the concept on YouTube, a suggested video of Te Araroa popped up, I watched it, I cried, I fell in love, and then I promised myself I'd do it. 4 years passed between seeing that video and walking Te Araroa. In that time, I finished my BSc of Bioscience, I worked in a research lab, and then I got a job as a Clinical Trials Assistant. I earned enough money for the trip and then left for New Zealand.

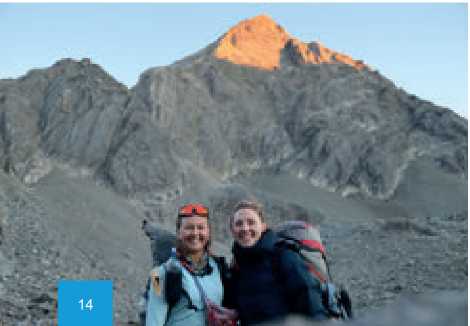
Unlike most thru-hikes, Te Araroa includes 150km of canoeing - this was going to be my biggest challenge. I had canoed once before at a RAW camp when I was 10. I hadn't used an adaption and I also hadn't gone very far! Considering the extent of this trip I knew I would need some support. I reached out to a product design friend about potentially making a prosthetic adaption and then they pointed me toward the “one-arm freedom paddle”. I was very relieved to see an “off-the-shelf” product. It immediately eliminates so much time and faff going to appointments. Seeing other people use the paddle, naturally, also inspires confidence. Soon after I ordered it, I applied to the Reach bursary scheme.



This is open to members under 25, the bursary supports adaptive equipment like this paddle, or car adaptions, and any other specific needs pertaining limb difference, such as specialised training. I personally find the bursary to be more than just monetary support, it makes me feel understood. Having been through the rigmarole of getting my mountain bike arm through the HSE grant - where they’re really only interested in funding cosmetic limbs, *audible sigh* it was a pleasure applying for the Reach bursary.

There are not enough pages in this magazine to share all the pictures and stories of Te Araroa, but fear not - I gave a presentation at the AFW (Annual Family Weekend) in October 2024 and you can find the recording here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpIRHhL8k4Y

After you watch that, you might have some questions like…



How far did you walk each day?
I usually walked around 25km a day, it varied depending on the terrain, your energy, and how heavy the bag is.

Did you go alone?
I went to NZ solo but I was always walking in company on Te Araroa. The trail is very popular, people from all over the world come to walk it, it’s actually a very social experience! I walked with a group of 8 for 3 weeks and then 2 people for the remainder of the trail.

How heavy was your bag?
My base weight (the weight of the pack without food and water) was 8.5kg. Food can add on 3-4kg depending on how much you need to carry, and 1-2kg of water. The heaviest my pack weighed was 16kg, I was carrying food for 7 days. The good thing is, the more you eat the lighter the load!

Did you take breaks?
Yes! We call them zero days because you walk 0km! The trail can be broken down into bite-size sections, usually dictated by towns. Every 4-7 days you will come into a town to resupply, wash clothes, shower, reply to messages, eat, rest, plan the next section of trail (how many days food you need etc.,) and then go again.

What did you eat?
I ate enough tuna and noodles for a lifetime. I usually ate oats and a granola bar for breakfast. Lunch and dinner could be anything; instant mash, salami, cheese, crackers, bread, pre-cooked rice, little cans of beans, lots of nuts, cous cous, and the occasional dehydrated meal offered exceptional flavour!

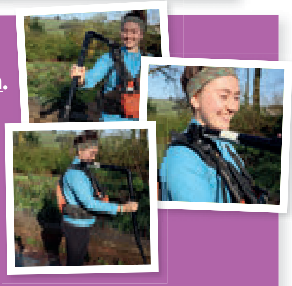
Did you camp or stay in hostels?
Predominantly camping. On rest days I stayed in hostels, nothing beats the comfort of a proper bed! There are back country huts on the South Island offering basic shelter, they have bunks with foam mattresses, and sometimes a stove. I stayed in many of these huts, they feel very homely after a long day in the outdoors.

Any crazy or scary moments?
Lots! A spontaneous helicopter ride, so much hitchhiking, rapids on the Whanganui river, rutting stags, gunshots, glow worms… a lifetime of stories!
If you have a spark of interest in this sort of thing, give it a go! It will always be a bit daunting, “have the courage to try”

Ellie has a blog where you can read more about this trip, ask questions, and follow along for more adventures at elmarieobrien.com or find her on Instagram @elmarieeeee

Have you heard about the Reach Bursaries?

Ellie's bursary helped her to purchase the One-Arm Freedom® Canoe Paddle from dillenschneiderdesigns.com.



Ellie, why was it important for you to share your discovery of the one-arm freedom paddle?
"It's important to share any discovery, big or small, with Reach. You never know what doors that will open up for someone else. Searching for solutions can be a barrier and, to be honest, sometimes a burden, but when you know someone who has used a piece of equipment, it inspires confidence and hope. Ultimately we want to spend more time doing rather than figuring out!"

And to be granted a bursary - what difference did that make to your experience?
"Again, it reduces that burden. Ideally, there should be no disincentive for Reach folk trying new things, but realistically the cost can be overwhelming, and unaffordable. The Reach bursary is heaven, it eliminates the mental load and allows us the freedom to play!"

Why would you encourage young people to apply for a Reach Bursary?
"I encourage everyone to avail of the funding - it's for you! I think people might assume it is a laborious process, as they usually are… but it's not! The Reach bursary is designed by our Reach trustees - who are there to support you. They have made it as simple as possible. It is so easy!"

Could a Reach Bursary help your child?

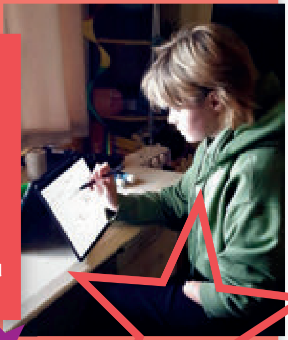
When you're navigating the two-handed world with an upper limb difference or differences, there are sometimes barriers to overcome to access or feel included in certain activities. You may require specific equipment or adaptations, or additional training, but these things cost money, which is why Reach wants to help young people and families thrive and avoid potential funding barriers.

For many Reach members a huge part of growing up is learning to drive. Car adaptations are vital for some, whilst for others it can make driving much more comfortable. Even the cost difference between an automatic and a manual car can be hampering, so a Reach bursary can help to make things possible.

Over the years the Reach bursaries have helped in all kinds of ways, with membership and subsidised events and activities, to adaption-focused contributions for everything from car adaptations and laptops for school or university, to customised surfboards and one-handed paddles.

Maddelena requested help for a laptop & stylus:

"I used to get a lot of back pain due to constantly reaching forward with my left shoulder, particularly when using a computer keyboard. This laptop and stylus have made the pain disappear completely. The Reach bursary scheme has given me so much freedom in my studies and has made me even more excited and confident to begin university in September!"



Reach Bursaries

There are three options:

1. Adaption Bursary

Open to children and young people up to the age of 25 years.

2. Activity Bursary

Helping young people attend RAW and families attend the Annual Family Weekends.

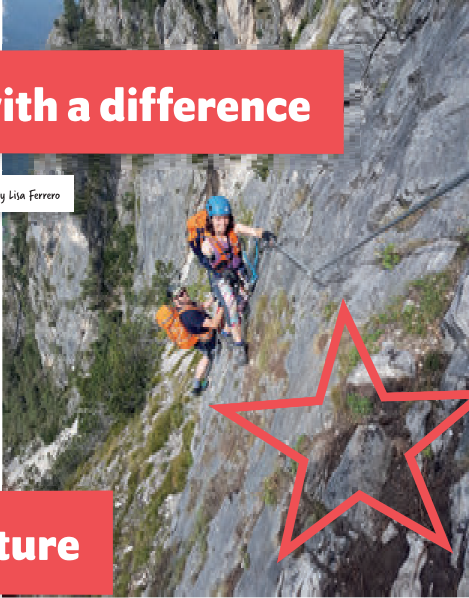
3. Membership Bursary

Inviting families and individuals with upper limb difference to become members when the cost would prohibit joining.

Apply for a Reach bursary today:
www.reach.org.uk/resources/apply-for-a-bursary

Living and learning with a difference

By Lisa Ferrero



I'm in the somewhat odd position that my physical difference is extremely obvious but the effect on my ability to do normal things is pretty minor. I don't remember anyone ever referring to me as disabled when I was a kid. I was just Lisa, and Lisa had a little arm.

It never really entered my head that I might be any more limited in what I could achieve than other people, in anything that actually mattered. There are very few things I actually need extra help with, I may do it unusually or a bit more slowly, but I'd much rather do that than people do things for me. After all, if you don't practice a skill, you will never learn to do it, and if you stop practicing, you will only get worse.

I think as humans we like categorising things and people. We put them in nice simple boxes, and in my case, at first sight, it's often the box marked 'disabled'.

Our multi-day adventure

Travelling gives you thinking time; as we journeyed through Paris, the Paralympics got me thinking about how people see disability. I often notice these sorts of things more when on holiday, with different people and in different situations.

There were noticeably more visibly disabled people around and I wondered how many people assumed I was also heading to the Paralympics. In fact, I was on my way to the Dolomites in Italy for a multi-day trip between mountain huts, with much of the route being on 'Via Ferrata'.

Via Ferrata were created during WW1 to provide through-routes through the high mountains for soldiers by widening and tunnelling, and adding ropes, staples or ladders on the difficult sections. Via Ferrata take you into rock-climber's territory without requiring as high level of skills and equipment, though you still need the head for heights!

> “They must all think we're inconsiderate friends.”

Our friend Claire would be joining later, so me and my partner Walt started with a couple of day-trips, including a 'medium' Via Ferrata. We both rock-climb, but Walt hadn't done Via Ferrata before, and I hadn't for nearly 20 years.

Our first route got off to a slightly unnerving start, turning out to be steep with poor footholds and a big rightward reach to a critical handhold - the worst possible combo for me! Within 30 metres I had to ask Walt to get out the 'get Lisa over the steep bits' rope which we only bought as a just-in-case. The route also had a basic wire-bridge. Now, as well as the obvious challenge this presents with only one long arm, I REALLY don't like things that wobble. With some experimenting I inched my way across sideways, with little hand on a side-wire and my strong hand holding the overhead wire. It was slow and tiring, so despite feeling proud of myself, I told myself I'd make sure we didn't have a wire bridge on our multi-day route!

Sometimes when I have a day where my little hand does mean I'm the 'weakest' in the group, I think, 'should I be here/ am I being a burden?' Thankfully, I've never been too prone to that, and have just given it a go anyway.

Over the years, I've not only learned to judge what will or won't cause issues and built a network of climbing partners that know me, but I've realised that everyone has strengths and weaknesses. Claire is a skilled and fit mountaineer, but struggles with the cold more than me; I'm usually fitter than Walt, but he's stronger; I often take on a lot of the organisation and route planning, whilst others lead the way on steep routes that I find hard. One of the things that bonds mountaineers is each having helped and depended on each other. Everyone needs help sometimes.

We ‘cheated’ the start by catching a ski-lift up the mountain. In many countries, they have established a system where people with a disability get a ‘badge/ID’ with which you get discounts almost everywhere. I have no such ID and no need for a reduced price or carer ticket, but I’ve had a few times when kind-hearted ski-lift cashiers are determined to ask the manager, causing queues behind me as they try and get me the ‘disability ticket’ that I didn’t ask for.

Another favourite is random strangers trying to help me- this time just as I was figuring out how to climb up a tricky slippery bit. They were politely fended off by Claire - the last thing you want on slippery rock is someone giving you a (well-intentioned) shove from behind when you don’t expect it!

Back at the hut, Claire walked into the bedroom as I was decanting bottled water into my water bottle, so I explained that I’d been trying to do it somewhere more sensible but people kept offering help… distraction is the last thing you want, no matter how many arms you have.

“They must all think we’re inconsiderate friends, never doing anything for you,” said Claire with a grin.

“Just how I like you,” I said.

Claire was joking. My friends do help but when I ask them to.

Amazing pizza at a little local place that evening brought back funny memories of a previous trip and a lesson to all waiters - never take a hungry mountaineer’s (or anyone’s) pizza away without asking. The waiter had put it down, and just as I was about to cut into it, a senior waiter whipped my plate away - it came back sliced (but by then rather lukewarm). It was sweet that my friends were so indignant on my behalf that I didn’t need to do anything to make sure the waiter got the message. (Though I did still pointedly eat the entire thing with knife and fork despite mimes that I could just pick up the slices.)

> **“Many people think that doing things for you is a kindness when often in the long run it could stifle your freedom, ability and self-belief.”**

This trip, no problem, the lady offered to slice it, as subtly as the language barrier allowed and I thanked her but declined. She gave me a very genuine and non-patronising thumbs up.

Day 5 was a beautiful hot day and the via ferrata was very popular. It was a fairly steep route so we told the teams following us they could overtake. As it turned out, it was our Scottish heat intolerance that limited our pace, not any ‘Lisa-barriers’. At the top, a lady from another group said she was very impressed and asked if I had special techniques…

“Erm- not really, just a lot of practice of having one and a bit arms!”

I find those conversations annoying if I feel people are just impressed by someone with a disability ‘doing something’. But if, like this lady, I get the feeling they’re genuinely interested and think what I’ve done is particularly difficult/skilful (even if I don’t agree), I don’t mind.

That evening, we asked the hut staff for suggestions for a Via Ferrata. Even with poor Italian I could tell the guy got told off for suggesting a ‘medium’ route to a one-armed person. Once we showed them photos from that morning’s route they seemed less worried, but the next day when we returned early they (wrongly) assumed we’d turned back…

If anything, though, I found the oddest moment of the trip to be on a busy German train on our way back when there was only one free seat, next to a lady in a wheelchair’s friend/carer. They thought we should tell the person across the aisle to move, as that seat is reserved for “invalids” (her word - this was all in German). Being as Walt had no visible disability and she’d just seen me walking ably up the carriage carrying lots of stuff, I found this odd. Did she really think I needed Walt as a carer, or that I should take advantage of my ‘invalid’ status to claim the seat? The other person could have had a less visible disability for all she knew. We declined, and (being as he’s tall and inflexible) I gave Walt the seat and sat in a clear corner on the floor. Who knows what she thought of that :-)

What message am I trying to relay? I suppose it’s mostly that over the years, in my career, hobbies and life I’ve learned that if I allowed myself to be limited by what others thought I wouldn’t have done a fraction of the things I’ve done. No-one else knows your limits and the only way to guarantee failure is not to give it a go.

I’ve also learned that the wrong amount of help can disable you, too much or too little. In my experience many people think that doing things for you is a kindness when often in the long run it could stifle your freedom, ability and self-belief.

(Lastly, thanks to my glove-share buddy, Within Reach Editor Max Swinhoe, for the ropework glove that was well-used throughout this trip! 😊)

Day in the life of a Paralympic athlete

It's great to have Para Taekwondo champion Amy Truesdale back with WR! We were thrilled to watch Amy achieve her Paralympic gold medal in Paris last year, and we'd love to hear about what it takes to train, compete and win as a Paralympic athlete.

Amy, what does a typical morning look like for you?

My day usually starts when I wake up around 7am, as my first training session of the day starts at 9:10am. Between 9:10am-9:30am we start activation, which is essentially waking up the muscles and preparing them before a training session. Exercises such as running, jumping and changing direction primes the nervous system resulting in being better prepared for performance.

I then train from 9:30 until 11:30am, which is usually a kicking session, but this generally depends on what themes we're working on. For example, if it is a technical session, we would do high repetitions of specific taekwondo kicks, focusing on the hip and body position in order to practise the correct kicking technique which will increase our chances of scoring in a competitive situation.

After this session I have a break/lunch before my afternoon session which usually starts at 2:30pm and lasts around 90 minutes. The afternoon session is strength and conditioning consisting of either a weights/strength session or it could be a conditioning, performed on a bike, or a kicking conditioning session.

A recent Instagram reel of yours showed an example of a training day which included activation and mobility, kicking, sparring rounds then recovery and stretching, a sports massage, followed by a steady aerobic bike session then strength training! That is a VERY physical day! How many days a week would you do that much training?

A typical training week for me consists of training twice a day, Monday to Friday, which is usually be a mixture of kicking sessions in the morning followed by strength and conditioning sessions in the afternoon.

Taekwondo sessions are usually in the mornings and last around 2 hours. Depending on what area we're focusing on determines the content of the kicking session. If we're closer to a competition the contact is higher, and we may practise more sparring-based scenarios which are high volume and contact.

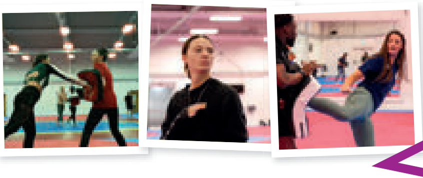
The afternoon sessions are strength-based, which is weights or conditioning on the bike.

Our sessions are planned according to what phase of training we're in and how close to competition we are, and this load is managed by our coaches and support staff.

Amy Truesdale

How do you counter the physical days? What does a rest/recovery day 'look' like?

A rest day for me is chilling with my family and maximising my recovery using my recovery compression boots. If you haven't tried them before, they are designed to target deeper muscles and aid faster recovery – they're like placing your lower leg inside a balloon and inflating it around them.



How do you manage balancing training, recovery and personal life – staying social, seeing family and friends?

As our recovery days usually fall on the weekends, I spend this time catching up with my sister and my nephew. We often get our training plans for the week so you can plan anything you would like to do in the afternoon/evening. I often listen to various podcasts about mindset and mental resilience – I've also enjoyed being a guest on various podcasts as well!

One of the podcasts… The Vergeria Life Podcast:
https://tinyurl.com/2mkabujw

How do you keep your mental health game in check? What helps you to focus?

I try and focus on everything that is within my control and not what I can't control. As a team we have done work using the chimp paradox framework which is basically understanding different parts of the brain and how they operate and how they respond in stressful situations. Having a better understanding of this framework has helped my mental health.

Read the Chimp Paradox by Professor Steve Peters:
https://tinyurl.com/ypa8emsw

How does your daily routine vary on competition days versus regular training days?

It's quite different. First of all, on the day before a competition there's a weigh-in and the event 'draws' are made, listing the opponent you will fight from the qualification matches towards the final. The match number tells you the order, and approximately what time, you need to be at competition area.

Competition days are a lot longer than a training day because there are lots of athletes competing in different weight divisions in the same ring (sometimes referred to as a court).

On the day of a competition a random list of weigh-ins will be released at 6am and this includes all the athletes who are selected for a check-up weigh-in to ensure they are within 5% of their original weight category.

As I am considered a heavyweight fighter, fighting in a plus 65 kg category, this does not apply to me. However, I still need to ensure I've fuelled correctly the night before in preparation for the long day of competing. I usually fight at around 67 kg which is an optimal fighting weight for me as I am still powerful and can move efficiently.

You will know your fight number and what ring you will be fighting in based on the draw sheets. However, the very first match starts the event around 9am.

Until Paris, the matches were a single 5-minute round, however the new rules have seen this change to 3 rounds of 2 minutes, with a 1 ½ min rest between rounds.

Depending on how many people are in your weight category you might be fighting every 2 – 3 hours and have up to 4 matches.

When you're not fighting you are refuelling and warming up ready for your next match.

After the competition there's a medal ceremony – this might be at around 8pm and then it's likely you will be selected for 'anti-doping' testing and will need to provide a sample to ensure you are competing as a clean athlete – during competition it's typically a urine sample which can be a lengthy process! After competing in Paris, I left the arena around 1am!

What motivates you to keep pushing on the difficult training days?

The thing that motivates me to keep pushing is knowing that I'm inspiring other people to achieve anything they want.

Do you do anything specific to get psyched up on big days, like say, competing at the Paralympics!?

As a training group we have all adopted the phrase, "FIGHTING" which we often shout quite loudly around the gym!! Not only do we say this at the end of a sentence it's also an encouraging buzzword to motivate individuals in sessions and it gets me in a good head-space to train.

You must have built up a great support system around you (coaches, teammates, family, etc.) – How important is such a network for a Paralympic athlete maintaining an intense training routine?

I have been fortunate enough to have access to psychological support at GB Taekwondo which enables me to be in a good mindset in preparation for competitions.

Using various coping mechanisms, including the chimp framework, has been a key support system for me and is something that I use regularly.

My support network is very small, but for me, my sister and my nephew are at the heart of it, and so it was amazing to have them both in Paris cheering for me!

In terms of awareness of your sport and being a Paralympian, what would you like people to understand more about the life of a Paralympic athlete?

I would like others to understand what a day in the life of a Paralympic athlete entails. I would also like people to be educated more about the capabilities of Paralympic athletes.

We are probably way more capable than you think, we train equally as hard and we are incredibly adaptable.

How does it feel to be recognised with an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire)? What does it mean to you in relation to your contributions to your sport?

I am delighted to be recognised with an MBE. It has been a goal of mine for many years and my teammates would often joke with me and say "Amy Truesdale MBE to be."

It has been a deeply humbling and proud moment, and I am so pleased my dedication and commitment to a sport I fell in love with 28 years ago has been recognised.

THE Representation Conversation

After the recent release of the Netflix series, Toxic Town, I caught up with actor, disability activist and Reach ambassador, Melissa Johns to discuss representation, equal opportunities, and how we might reframe what representation means...

By Max Swinhoe

What is representation?

For the upper limb difference community representation means accurate, authentic and meaningful portrayal of people with upper limb difference/s in media, culture, and society. Reflecting lived experience and moving beyond stereotypes and tokenism.

Representation has been hailed the hero goal in recent years, knowing the impact it can have for people with differences to see themselves reflected in say, the TV we watch and the social platforms we occupy with the hope it will become the 'norm.'

But, Melissa suggests that we might review this way of looking at representation and instead focus on equality of opportunity to ensure that the depiction truly reflects us, and therefore representation will be the wonderful byproduct.

"TV is life, we're representing the world we live in and the world we live in is not one thing or another, and it is about getting the balance right." says Melissa.

So, should representation be the goal?

While representation is crucial, perhaps it shouldn't be the reason for hiring disabled actors, for example. The focus should be on the talent, storytelling ability, and skill of those people, with representation naturally following.

Melissa believes we've made 'representation matters' the driving force.

"I would rather that it was the byproduct. I want people to employ me because of the way I tell stories, the way that I take on characters, and hopefully, because they see a talent in me or my other fellow limb different actors, and any disabled actor. Then representation will be the result. The driving force should be that we're asking for equality of opportunity, not necessarily equality of outcome."

Melissa believes we should be looking for the best people to tell life's stories. And when telling stories about a specific lived experience e.g., limb difference, that lived experience NEEDS to be represented in the writing and casting as a minimum.

We discussed what happens when we don't see difference regularly and the impact that then has when we do. It has the potential to affect us more than was intended, when in fact it is just one story among so many.

"Toxic Town was never meant to be everyone's story," says Melissa. "There are going to be relatable bits and unrelatable bits, it doesn't make that story right or wrong."

In fact, it starts a conversation and that's a step in the right direction, we just have to be sensitive to the fact that these kinds of stories can be triggering for people.

If representation ought to be the byproduct of equality of opportunity, how do we progress?

Maybe taking a more overview approach, understanding that programmes like Toxic Town won't be the only or last thing we're going to see that represents upper limb difference, will help to give it the right weight.

"Lots of us are watching it, we are feeling heaps of different things, but I do when I watch lots of shows."

So, perhaps zooming out and seeing Toxic Town for what it is, until the next show hits our screens is the way forward, although this doesn't negate the very real feelings people are having when they're watching it.

On a more positive note, though, it *is* representing limb difference; it's starting conversations and it's stirring empathy. So, how do the arts and screen industry grow?

"We need to include more voices and when that happens, there'll be less of a spotlight on one particular story," says Melissa.

We need to continue to push the industry to change the narrative; yes the industry should evolve and ensure diversity is built into casting from the outset but it needs to be beyond tokenism and instead be based on meaningful inclusion. Equal opportunities for casting, and hiring actors with lived experience brings depth to those stories. Our TV and media ought to reflect the diversity of the real world.

When it comes to the actors, some of which are young Reach members, it sounds like it's been a wonderful experience, proud to represent upper limb difference on our screens.

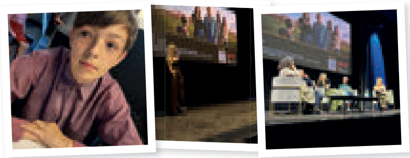
“If you'd have seen them at the BAFTA screening event! They looked dapper and their parents were so proud and, you know, they got to act. They got to do what they're actually really good at, which is just to be actors. And they were rightly cast.”

But Melissa agrees too that with the sharing of real stories on shows such as these, some responsibility has to lie with the creators. So, what responsibility do they hold for sharing these stories?

“We are right to be advocating with Netflix to have a signpost at the end. I've been advocating for the production company to support Reach… because I do think that if you take it upon yourself to write a story that talks through somebody else's lived experience, then it is your responsibility to support that community with the aftermath of it.”

> **The world we live in is not one thing or another, and it is about getting the balance right.**

I agree with Melissa, I think despite representation being a positive outcome in one regard, we cannot forget the impact that such a programme can have. As a Reach adult, I’m foreseeing more questions and queries about the cause of my limb difference… And I’m aware too from discussions in the community that parents have connected with the feelings of guilt that are portrayed in the series, and all the emotions it’s bringing up.



“We've been left with the weight of thinking, why does this feel weird for me or I don’t know how I feel, and yet I think I'm going to have to comment, and advocate, or not advocate for this. And that's really tough. But the bottom line is, you don't. You can say ‘I don't really want to discuss it.’ You can say ‘that wasn't my story.’ It’s perfectly acceptable to say, ‘I enjoyed it as a show but it’s not my lived experience, so I can't comment on that.’”

I think that’s great advice from Melissa, having been in the position in the past when it feels like I’m representing or having to answer something for the whole limb difference community. But the truth is, we are all different. And our stories in this life are different and the people asking the questions don’t always understand that.

So, what about the empathy that shows like this have the power to create for audiences?

We agreed that another aspect that could come from shows like this, is a growing empathy for the Reach community. Empathy for what the mothers and families must have gone through. The unknowing, the guilt and the heartbreak.

At the screening, Melissa saw empathy in action.

“People cried when they were meant to cry because a woman lost her baby, and that is truly heartbreaking. We saw a woman not know what to do because she didn't know what was going to happen. And it didn't show up on a scan like we would have thought. Empathy is a human response.”

For me, who admittedly didn’t know how to judge Toxic Town at first, I think understanding that the characters do not represent every person, or every story certainly helps put it in perspective, and now considering the empathy that could be borne from it, is quite amazing.

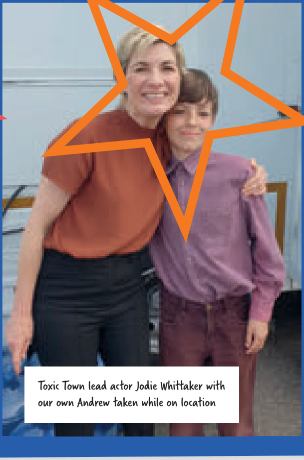
For people outside of the Reach community to actually connect with what it might feel like for a parent to have a child with a limb difference or find out that their child will be born with a limb difference – I think that could be a really powerful thing for Reach.

Melissa is aware, however, that empathy can sometimes evolve into pity.

“Our job as advocates is to ensure people don't sink too deep into it. Empathise with how somebody might feel because they're a new mum and their whole world has changed, but also know that actually in the 90s, the world was different and maybe it wasn't ready for that baby.”

And we know, too often as Reach adults, as we both recall, empathy can be replaced by pity and people feel the need to apologise for the fact we’ve been born different. But Melissa asks people not to pity our community.

“Please don’t be sorry. We have our down moments and our terrible days just like everybody else, but you haven't got to be sorry. What you can do is listen to what we have to say and what we have to say is we don't want your pity; we want equal opportunities; we want to be in the room.”



Toxic Town lead actor Jodie Whittaker with our own Andrew taken while on location

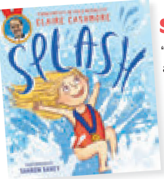
I caught up with Reach mum Siobhan, her son Andrew featured in Toxic Town and in the recent BBC drama, Adolescence.

“It's been great seeing Andrew in both dramas. When I spoke to the casting agent after TT, the chaperones and all the crew had wonderful things to say about how he conducted himself, which was really lovely, as he, unlike most of the others, had no experience on a set and doesn't normally enjoy being seen. It has helped with his confidence.
[Watching Toxic Town] I understood the ‘we blame ourselves’ part, I had so much empathy for them all. I thought it was a really good drama, I know the language used was normal for that time, so I didn't take any offence from it. Though I do think it would have been nice to have been able to see the kids on camera more, playing pool in the pub for example. Showing them having fun – the ones the mums were fighting for.

I asked Siobhan how Andrew has found his acting experiences so far.

“Andrew has had loads of pupils at his school talking to him about the shows. I think they’ve opened up some very important topics for discussion. I think it shows that, if you want something you can get it.
Andrew [laughing] said his main reason was the money! He liked being part of it all and helping to show what the families went through. No one really questioned him about his arm on any of the things he's been in. He really likes acting and wants to do more with speaking parts, but if not, then he’d want to work behind the scenes on camera or sound.

Book Club



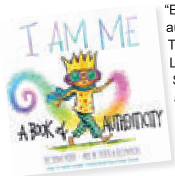
Splash *by Claire Cashmore*

“My intention in Splash is not to draw attention to my limb difference, but instead to normalise it. Growing up with one arm, I wanted to be treated exactly the same as my sisters. At times, I had to do things slightly differently, but I didn't let that stop me.”

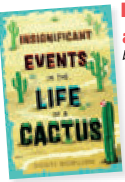
https://tinyurl.com/2awsh3tm

I Am Me: A Book of Authenticity

by Susan Verde



“Embrace individuality and being your authentic self in this companion to New York Times bestsellers I Am Human and I Am Love! Sometimes I stand out in a crowd. Sometimes I am not seen at all, and I feel alone. I start to ask myself, why can’t I blend in? Fit the Mold? But when I stop and look, I see nothing in this world is exactly the same.” https://tinyurl.com/bdn83jw7



Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus: Volume 1

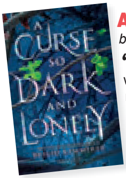
by Dusti Bowling

“Aven Green was born without arms - and by age 13 has learned how to do almost everything without them. When her parents take a new job running Stagecoach Pass, a dying Western theme park in Arizona, Aven has to leave everything she knows and face being the centre of unwanted attention at a new school.” https://tinyurl.com/3usafne6

Different Is Awesome!

by Ryan Haack

“A little boy brings his older brother, born with one hand, for show-and-tell. The students ask him all sorts of questions about how he does things with one hand and realize that he can do anything they can do, he just does it differently…” https://tinyurl.com/3u6n2es2



A Curse So Dark and Lonely

by Brigid Kemmerer

“A fantasy novel featuring Harper, a protagonist with cerebral palsy. ‘In a lush, contemporary fantasy retelling of Beauty and the Beast, Brigid Kemmerer gives readers a compulsively readable romance perfect for fans of Marissa Meyer and Melissa Albert. The first in the thrilling Cursebreakers series.” https://tinyurl.com/4c5n3jyj

What Happened to You?

by James Catchpole

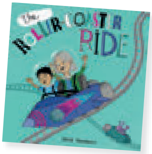
“The first ever picture book addressing how a disabled child might want to be spoken to.”

https://tinyurl.com/3sjr397p

Owning It - Tales from Our Disabled Childhoods *by James Catchpole (editor), Lucy Catchpole (editor), Jen Campbell (editor)*

“Come on a journey through childhood with this anthology of twenty-two autobiographical stories from the very best writers in the disabled community.” https://tinyurl.com/2hmm44a8

The Roller Coaster Ride *by David Broadbent*



“Vincent and Grandma are on their way to the beach. As they get nearer to their destination, his excitement grows as he imagines riding on the roller coaster and other attractions! With thanks to Reach Charity and their members for helping us to ensure authentic representation of a child with an upper limb difference.”

https://tinyurl.com/2r8rvjsj

The Clueless Club Takes on the Mary Celeste *by A. A. Roskilly*

“On November 25, 1872, ten people vanished without a trace from the deck of the Mary Celeste, leaving behind a ghost ship drifting aimlessly in a storm-tossed ocean.

Now, the Clueless Club meets every Friday after school to investigate history’s greatest mysteries.”

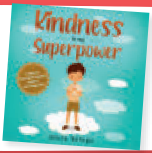
https://tinyurl.com/4x8zz856

Uniquely Me *by Trace Wilson*

“Every child worries about being different. Follow one brave little boy as he embarks on a wild adventure and learns to understand, accept, and love the differences that make him unique.” https://tinyurl.com/bdh4tx5m

Kindness Is My Superpower

by Alicia Ortego



“Teach your children the power of Kindness, one of the most important skills a child can learn.” https://tinyurl.com/a4xcmtfs

“Swimming 34,000 metres for Barnaby”

When your baby is born, and then you discover your little one has a limb difference, it can be an overwhelming surprise. You might feel alone, worried, and unsure of what the future holds.

But when we found Reach it was like a weight had been lifted. They were a breath of fresh air, showing us that Barnaby would be able to do everything in his own way - just like anyone else. Suddenly, the worries felt lighter. Barnaby thrives every single day, and Reach has helped him see that he's never alone.

So, when Mum decided to swim for Reach, I knew she would give it her all - for Barnaby, her beautiful grandson. We cheered her on every step of the way, and what an achievement! To take on such an incredible challenge at over 60 is truly inspiring. Thank you, Mum, for supporting such a wonderful cause.

Laura Davies, mum of Barnaby

Lynne’s swim for Reach...

My name is Lynne. I am 60 years old. I am a Nana or Nini to 12 grandchildren. I work as a Phlebotomist in the NHS at Worthing Hospital where I have worked for 25 years. I was raised in the country and had never seen a swimming pool until we moved to the coast. Consequently, I never used to be able to swim but got so bored of watching everyone enjoying the sea/pool that I decided to teach myself. I have my own style of breaststroke.

When my beautiful Grandson Barnaby was born in November 2019, we suddenly were made aware of the congenital condition of symbrachydactyly as he was born with a tiny thumb and no fingers on his left hand which was a shock as it was completely missed on all the prenatal scans. We have learnt a lot about it since and realise it is more common than we at first thought. We were shocked and quite panicked at how he would cope with having missing digits.

We found out about Reach from Worthing Hospital which is our local hospital where Barnaby was born. We were told that Reach was a fantastic charity that can give so much help, advice, support and a voice to all children and young adults with the same or similar condition with upper limb differences. Barnaby is also a patient at GOSH who also recommended Reach.

I wanted to raise some funds for Reach in February 2024 so I decided to try and ‘swim the channel’ in my local pool. This worked out at a distance of 22 miles (33.76 kilometres) which was 1352 lengths of the 25-metre pool (33,760 metres). I gave myself a target of 12 weeks to complete the challenge as I had to allow for work, holiday, possible illness etc. I started my challenge on the 23rd February and swam to my heart's content, even on days when I felt like I couldn't do it, I was determined. I finished my swim in 7 weeks and 2 days and actually swam 34,000 metres - just for the fun of it!!

I had lots of support from my many friends, family and colleagues and raised a total of £1124. I am so proud of myself that I actually completed my challenge sooner than I thought I would be able to. What amazes me more though is the determination and ability that Barnaby has to ‘get on with’ the everyday tasks that we thought he may find difficult. He rides his two-wheeler bike, does up his zip and enjoys karate. We are so proud of him!

Support Lyn Here:

https://www.justgiving.com/page/lynne-stevens-1708611089969

Have you been to a Reach event near you?

North London

"This was our first experience attending a Reach event. Both Idrees and his sister had a whale of a time. Watching them both be welcomed was a feeling I can't describe. My husband and I had the opportunity to speak with many different families and we had some great conversations and we all left the event extremely happy and looking forward to attending the next reach event."

Gloucestershire

"The best part? Meeting up with other members of Reach and allowing Matilda to meet other children with a limb difference."

Yorkshire

"Great venue. Good location for us and plenty to see/ do and it was great to meet other Reach Families."

East Anglia

"My Favourite thing was playing together!"

South Wales

"Mel & Family, thank you so much as always for making such a fabulous day for us all!"

Berks & Wilts

"The kids had THE best time"

West Midlands

"Tracy is brilliant and remembered Elliot even though she hadn't seen him for a little while! Best element was that it was thoroughly focused on the Reach members."

Wessex

"Seeing other children with limb difference and talking to parents."

Northern Branch

"Absolutely love the panto and defo would love to do it again."

Find our events here: www.reach.org.uk/events-map

Write your will for free!

We are delighted to announce that Reach have teamed up with will-writing specialists Farewill so you can write your will for free.

It only takes around 30 minutes and you can do it from the comfort of your own home.

If you live in Scotland or Northern Ireland or you would rather write your will over the phone, you can book an appointment with a Farewill specialist

Reach tomorrow and beyond...

The primary focus of Reach is and always will be children, young people and young adults; supporting, enabling and empowering those with upper limb differences. We are proud to be entering an exciting period of growth and new initiatives, thanks in part to a large legacy left in a will to Reach.

We want to support Reach families in years to come and ensure the passion you have for Reach continues. There is no obligation, however once you have looked after your loved ones, we hope you might create your lasting legacy by leaving a gift to Reach in your will.

Thank you for helping build an even brighter future for Reach families!

Find out more: https://farewill.com/reach-magazine

THE BRITISH WILLS & PROBATE AWARDS

Trustpilot

In partnership with Farewill