

One & Other Project

My name is Paula Testa. I'm conducting this interview on behalf of the Wellcome Trust for the Antony Gormley One & Other project in Trafalgar Square. The date is the 10th of September 2009 and the time is 12.20 am. Please could you tell me your name, your age and where you come from?

Yes my name is John Bishop, I'm 57 years of age and originally born in Birmingham.

Have you travelled to London especially for the plinth?

I have travelled to London especially for my hour on the plinth.

And coming to the square tonight and seeing the plinth in action has it been quite like you imagined it would be?

No it's much better actually, it's been a long time since I've been in Trafalgar Square. Last time I was here it was full of pigeons and it was quite pleasant to actually come and see it again actually, I hadn't been for a while.

And how are you feeling about going up on the plinth?

Well I was very nervous, I was, but since I've arrived I've felt quite good, I feel better.

And what was it about the project that appealed to you in the first place?

I am a practising artist outside of this project and I've been involved with arts for the past sixteen years and when I saw something going on I applied really, just gave it a crack.

What kind of work is it that you do?

I am a retired fire fighter from Birmingham. I worked for the West Midlands Fire service up until I had some major heart problems then I was released from the fire service due to the ill health and I had a couple of years when I was quite poorly after that. I didn't know what to do with myself so I went back to college and did some ... I just started with A level arts because I had never been at school other than up to sixteen then I did A level art and then I did an GNVQ and then I did graphic design and I did a BA and so on, basically, and then I just carried on really ... I finished my BA, I studied a BA in graphic design, a BA in fine art and then I finished the fine art in 2007 so I've been stooing around for the last eighteen months or so looking for something to do and I got quite involved actually with this ... preparing for this morning.

What is it that you'll be doing on the plinth?

When I was allotted my hour I was a bit surprised that I actually got it first ... when it said it was 1 o'clock in the morning I was even more like, "Oh, my god, 1 o'clock in the morning" and then, because I was a fire fighter, I didn't know what I was going to

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do anyway. I was happy to do something artistic but at 1 o'clock in the morning it's not going to be easy. So I went to my fire colleagues, one of them, Graham [Bow] who's been very helpful tonight or this morning ... and he involved me, we got involved with the Fire Service Charity and I'm helping to raise money for the fire service charity and also the British Heart Foundation because I've suffered three heart attacks since retirement and they were being very good for me.

And so how exactly will you be raising money for these?

I've got a couple of characters with me that we sort of use to entertain the children and their names are Pete and Alf and also there's a bear that the fire service sells at their open days for the children again and I'm going to, I'll be putting them on eBay so it's like the plinth bear ... now it's going to be the only one... the only fire service charity bear that would have been on the plinth, hopefully. And I've actually ... my wife has embroidered things that has made him special and also I'm going to sign him when I'm up there and they [?] for another five days and then see how that goes. Also I created two hundred pieces of art work that ... I understand we are not allowed to shake tins and things but I'm going to ask people that they can have them, they are free, but if they would give a donation that would be great and also we've got yellow helmets that the children wear on the open day and we are going to see how many people we can get to wear them in the square, see if we can go for a world record like how many people are wearing plastic yellow helmets in Trafalgar Square at the same time. I've already raised £512 at the moment through *Just Giving* and we are doing all right. I'm trying to get nine hundred and ninety-nine, which is 9-9-9.

And I can see that you are wearing an outfit but for the record could you ...

Yes, I've just got the ... at present I've got the fire service kit on. As I say, as I am retired I had to get to the stores and they issued me with ... so I look a bit more like I'm representing the fire service and I've got a t-shirt which says www.opf.co.uk (where you can go to donate your money through *Just Giving* if you go to that website you'll see there's two buttons one will take you to the Heart Foundation and the other one to the Fire Service Charity so you can choose which *Just Giving* you want to give to.

So when you knew you had your hour, did you always know you'd do it for a charity or is it something that ...

No, I didn't have a clue. I didn't expect it at all ... I didn't even dream that it would happen. I thought I would probably do something artistic, as I said, I've been doing art for the last x amount of years but 1 o'clock in the morning I just thought it was an excellent opportunity to promote the fire service charity because the fire services are always in no matter what hour of the day it is. It's also something to do with duty. I wanted to talk about the duty and care that people in uniform try to ... they take time and attention to look after other people really.

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And you say that you had to leave the fire service because of ill health and you discovered that you liked art.

No I've always done art. I've always been reading poetry so I might be reading poetry but I've always written poetry. I've drawn, I didn't ... I never thought if it was art I mean somebody said to me when I was sixteen, mentioned Vincent Van Gogh what I thought was left back for Holland.

And I know that you had to leave for ill health but would you say it has been a positive change now that you are able to be a practising artist?

No, I'd rather be a fire fighter, however I've just retired now so, I wish, I didn't want to retire, I loved the job, I didn't want to pack it in.

Would you mind telling us what it is that you enjoyed about it? What you were doing?

I just felt important ... I felt like I was doing a job that was worthwhile. I felt I belonged to just one thing that was worthwhile.

And now that you are a practising artist what's the work that you create?

I do everything; I do everything from movies to graphic design to poetry to acrylics. I do absolutely everything. I created for my degree show a [?] which is a Japanese shrine. I have in fact what I shall say? Tonight on the plinth it's very difficult to leave the fire service, very, very difficult ... my father was a fireman, my grandfather was a fireman, my uncle was a fireman, my mother was in the fire control wall and I've been brought up on fire stations. It was very difficult to leave and when I was told that I had to some people couldn't understand why I was so upset but it was ... it's just been a way of life so the [?] was a family shrine actually to my family. It showed my mother and I painted it bright red and when I finished it I cremated it so it didn't go down too well with the tutors.

You obviously raised money for them but are you still involved in any way in normal day-to-day life you talk to people are you involved in the service?

Not really because I haven't been ... the art has been really as far as I have been doing ... I haven't been well to be honest I've had like one day I could be okay and the next day I could be terrible. So ... but as regards the fire service recently with this *Facebook* thing it's been quite good because a lot of people I've been in touch with on *Facebook* are ex firemen and the chap, as I say, is coming tonight to help me Graham [Bow] is actually ... was given the MBE last year, I think, for his work for the fire charity and he's helping me a lot tonight, getting bits and bobs together.

What impact would you like to have by going on the plinth and doing this tonight?

I just want to make people have a sense of duty to, you know, it might sound like a

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bit of an old fashioned word today but a feeling of duty and commitment to other human beings, the fact that maybe it's not all about making money and just by all the nurses and the doctors and anybody really ... that Graham himself is retired himself and he has terrible health problems but he's been supporting the benefit charity as long as I can remember. He deserved the MBE and I said he should be on the plinth, he's been fantastic.

Are you able to describe what the opportunity means to you to be on the plinth doing this?

Just in a state of shock I think. I'm just a bit shocked. I've really enjoyed ... my wife would probably tell you that once I get a subject, I get my teeth into it and I become a bit obsessive and be competitive like a typical fire chap would. Everything becomes competitive but I compete myself and so I've been a bit hectic for the past ... since I found out.

Has it taken a lot to prepare?

Yes, because I didn't want to make a fool of myself and I'm standing in a uniform so I felt that I needed to do it properly. In fact putting on a uniform again felt quite strange to put it back on. I just felt like I'd never left and I should still be doing the job but I can't so, you know, other fire fighters are raising money for charity for running up Kilimanjaro and God I would love to be running Kilimanjaro and other firemen that know me would know that I would be doing it but I can't do it so I'm standing on the plinth for now.

Have you got any expectations about your hour on the plinth?

No I just want to have a laugh. I'm hoping I am going to have a laugh and not crack up; my voice doesn't crack and start making a lot of Wally of myself.

And have you got people here with you today?

Well my two sons are here, Graham [Bow] is hopefully coming, he's actually convalescing in Little Hampton and he is driving up to be here so I'm hoping, you know, I told him not to come but he insisted. He's a nut case.

What have your friends and family reactions been about you getting on the plinth?

They've all been very supportive, they've been great, the wife has made the outfit for the two characters and everybody has been fine, they've all been donating to the *Just Giving* page and on *Facebook* it's been ... I just loved, because I do websites as well so I've just enjoyed messing around with that and going on the plinth was bloody mad but that's the way it is. I hope I don't swear when I'm up there, typical fire fighter.

And aside obviously supporting the charity who would you say you are doing this for?

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Well I suppose artists say they are doing it for themselves really. If you are an artist or if you think you are an artist, say, you've got to be doing it for yourself because artists are all selfish really... they are all very selfish but I'm just doing it for the crack and a bit of fun, hopefully.

And at any point preparing for the hour have you felt more pressure to entertain people watching?

Definitely, it felt like a lot of pressure yes, just to get it right and not make an idiot of myself really but I might freeze when I'm up there, see how it goes.

Have you taken part in anything like this before?

Yes, I did a Happening when I was at college because I'd finished all the projects and there was nothing to do and I kind of had nothing to do so I did a Happening which... I ended up showing films that was that and then I read a couple of poems but my mother had just died so it was quite difficult. I had written some poems about her and I'm taking, I'm actually taking a horse up there tonight, a blue horse, my mother collected horses and she had them on the windowsill of the house where I was born and I was always playing with them when I was a little boy and she was always telling me off for playing with them and I always kept breaking them so I've written about them and I made an art piece about them for my degree show but that fell apart and we just got the one horse left and the plinth was originally designed for an equestrian statue. I thought I'd take it, my wife is begging me not to, the horse is here.

Why does she not want you to?

Well she just thought I was taking too much stuff. I wanted to blow up a Father Christmas but she wouldn't let me bring him.

So your wife was involved in helping you?

She's been very supportive just basically putting up with my pain and I've just been a pain proverbial.

And would you describe or summarise your experience of this project?

I like creating. So as soon as I found out I had a place I wanted to create ... I just thought the hour was difficult, the time, and I thought there wouldn't be anybody to entertain. I mean I hadn't been to London for a long time apart from the Tate Modern and go home but I haven't been to this part of London for a while so I didn't know what it was going to be like on a Wednesday, what day is it? Wednesday, Thursday morning at 1 o'clock. I didn't know what it was going to be like.

When you are coming down from the plinth what do you hope to have gained from

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the experience?

I just hope I've given everybody a laugh basically, without being stupid, if that makes sense. And I might make people aware of the charities, obviously, and raise some money and just to tell everybody that the duty hasn't died, that these lads are dying in Afghanistan today, are doing their duty, I don't agree with what they are doing, I don't agree with the war but they are doing their duty.

And what are the things that are important to you right now in your life?

My youngest son is having ... one seems to be going into the fire service and I tried very hard to get him into the fire service but they are not recruiting, all the fire stations seem to be under pressure to be making less and less and closing and reducing the engines and he's tried to get into the fire service, he's got all the qualifications, but they are not recruiting so he's been doing his qualifications for the army... and I don't want him to go but he's twenty years of age, he's got no job, no prospects. I don't want him in that desert.

Do you think he will be sent out there?

Yes I do and I'm sure when he signs up which I dare say it would be in the next four months by the time he finishes his training he will be in the desert and I don't want him there ... it's my son.

He's doing his thing then?

I agree he's got to do his thing if that's what he wants to do I'll encourage him but he's known what I think. I'm a child of the seventies, fifties and sixties. I'm a post, you know, an old hippy.

Finally you put on your profile three words that describe you ...

I just put fire fighter charity, I could have put other things if I thought it would make it stand for what I'm hoping to gain, ultimately, it's for them.

And is there anything else before we finish that you'd like to add to the interview?

No I don't think so. I just hope I can hold it together and say what I want to say without making an idiot of myself. I first saw Mr Gormley's work when he put his *Iron Man* in Birmingham and I wasn't quite sure what I thought of it at the time, I was a fire fighter, not an artist, but I'm supposed to be an artist now so maybe it means different things to me, you know.

Well, thank you very much.

Thank you, love.



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