

Outsiders 1979 - 1996
a personal history by Tuppy Owens



Outsiders Club & Integration Trust

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*"There are two kinds of beauty.
Loveliness and Dignity."*

Cicero

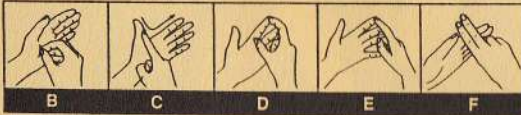
Royal National Institute for the Blind



A

The manual alphabet

for communicating with a deafblind person



B

C

D

E

F



G

H

I

J

K



L

M

N

O

P



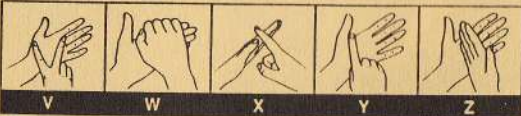
Q

R

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U



V

W

X

Y

Z

This quote and hand-signing guide are on the opening page of our *Practical Suggestions* book, so everyone understands the ethos of the Club and can learn how to converse with blind-deaf people.

Outsiders 1979 - 1996

*a personal history by Tuppy Owens
founder*

In 1978, a colleague of mine, Nigel, had finally lost his sight and all his friends in the process. Also, Patricia Gillan, the sex therapist, called me to say that a 32-year-old man, David (exactly my age), in a wheelchair had come to her with a sex problem. His problem was that he'd never had sex. Did I know of a wheelchair accessible strip club?

Thus, some of my time during that year, was spent taking Nigel to parties to keep his interest up in life, and trying to get David laid. Blindness is my greatest fear, so I couldn't bear to think Nigel could no longer see anything. Sex has always been my favourite activity, so I couldn't bear to think of anyone my age having had none. I had recently suffered a bout of panic attacks after a relationship had ended, and I knew how bad that fear of isolation can feel. It seemed very important to help these two people.

Eventually, with my help, Nigel's social and personal life perked up, and David lost his virginity.

It had been fun and pretty effortless, but made all the difference to these two. It struck me that there

must be thousands of other people with disabilities who could, with hardly any effort, have their lives transformed. I told David, who didn't have much else to do, that he should start a club, and call it Outsiders. He thought it was a great idea.

I was determined and found an amazing girl called Vieta, who was as enthusiastic as myself. She came round to my house every day for several years, helping to set Outsiders up. We wrote to Katherine Whitehorn to tell her about the formation of Outsiders. She mentioned it in her column in *The Observer*, and the response was great. We had twenty members straight away, then an article in *The Guardian* brought two hundred more. I bought a Kalamazoo filing system, each member got a strip, and coloured dots signified the type of problems and romantic aspirations they had.

All we did to begin with, was ask the members what they wanted, and discuss ways in which it could happen. They mostly wanted the same thing — love, but had their own individual approach. We heard amazing stories of past successes and ways and means of dating and seducing, from people with all kinds of disability, including people with no speech and those unable to move at all.

One of my major influences was a member called Alan Barnes, a very severely disabled young

undergraduate who wrote me pages and pages of wisdom. Everything I learnt from him, and other members, was written down and made into a booklet called PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS, which was sent to new members as they joined.

To begin with, we were quite shocking to most people. Up until that time, very little had been spoken or written about the sexuality of disabled men and women. Our willingness to address the topic and deal with it in a practical way, brought sensationalist press, which made us cower, and wonder if perhaps we should pretend we don't cater to member's sexual desires at all. Alan died long ago, but his words keep me determined not to change course one bit:

"The club's value lies, for me anyway, in providing an environment where I might resolve some of my doubts over my sexuality and its implications. Where there are people I can trust sufficiently and with whom, since they acknowledge my sexuality as a matter of course, I can speak frankly and expect from them a response which will be of use, help. Moreover, it provides an environment that does not humiliate and de-humanise, by flinging around in County Halls and social workers' files (at least, as far as I know!) my personal problems. Other organisations dealing with the problems of the disabled, and books which serve to highlight the sexual problems, may bring

the concerns to light and raise awareness, but they often shy away from doing more than raising expectations in what is little more than a clinical vacuum. Thus, the club serves an over-all enhancement. It is concerned with sex in its significant place beside emotions and sociability — the important thing is it knows it can't, shouldn't discourage, diminish or try to leave sex out altogether."

The physically disabled members seemed to think it was very important, for them, that people with learning difficulties should not be included. This was because they'd been assumed to be so because they were physically disabled, and they wanted to have the chance to mingle in a club where this would not happen. So, we made a rule that we would only accept people who could understand and complete our application form, in writing or on tape. Those with *social* disabilities such as shyness, phobia and mental illness were thus included. Obviously, it was felt important that anyone expressing prejudice against disability, and people who were racist, should not be allowed to join. The application form was discussed, designed and re-worked, over and over, until we were happy that it asks exactly the right questions, to make sure potential members see what kind of club we are, and helps them begin to look at their attitudes to themselves, as the first step towards self acceptance. It also alerts us to applicants who are prejudiced, may have an

exploitative motive or condescending attitude. When we have too many male members, we sometimes put new male applicants on hold, inviting them to resubmit their applications at a later date.

The first Outsiders party was held at 48 Boundary Road in London, a revolutionary new residential establishment, purpose built for its disabled residents to run themselves. The party was a blast, attracting almost two hundred people: members, friends and people who were simply stunned and excited that such a club could exist. Many people came along just to celebrate our existence.

All this was costing very little. Members paid a small annual fee, and the club was run from my home. We met regularly in a restaurant where everyone paid their own bill. Parties held at Boundary Road didn't cost anything since people bought their drinks at the bar. The only cost was printing and postage. It was much too exciting to worry about all the time it was taking, and Vieta and I had plenty of time anyway. David, by this time, had lost interest, but Nigel was very supportive, although he was setting up his own tape magazine for blind people, *Soundaround*.

1981 was the International Year of Disabled People, and many of our disabled members were upset by the events being planned, with a "wheel them out, give them tea and sticky buns, then wheel them back

again" attitude. We decided to compensate for this, with three major projects.

First, we had a stand at the *Festival of Mind, Body, Spirit* at Olympia. We hung semi-translucent drapes around our stand, so people could just see inside. Visitors to the festival were treated to wheelchair rides and other experiences of disability, before they were invited to come inside and mingle. Many of those people joined up and some have stayed really supportive members ever since. It was a great moment for integration. We had lip reading classes and many disabled people who had never been able to articulate their frustrations did so with others who witnessed the pain of socialising when you're disabled, first hand.

We also mounted an art exhibition. Entitled *EMOTIONS IN FOCUS*, we collected art from all over the world which expressed the desires of people with disabilities. We got financial support from the Arts Council to produce our catalogue and help with the judging, and the Round House Gallery offered us their space. Outsiders members contributed to the organisation and design. It was our greatest gesture to IYDP, counteracting that "tea and sticky bun" aspect, by putting on an exhibition of International art which was, by and large, erotic. Some of the exhibits were highly controversial, in particular,

pieces from Simon Parritt (now Director of the London Institute of Human Sexuality, a post which resulted directly from his involvement in the exhibition), which included erotic photographs of his disabled body and a "spastics collecting box girl" which was transformed to show that some girls with disabilities start their menstruation much earlier in life than other girls. We had exhibits from famous disabled artists including Victor Willing and Steve Dwoskin. The exhibition gained much press, most of it patronising, but many of the visitors claimed they gained enormous personal insight. The exhibition went on tour around the UK, but everywhere we went, we seemed to get more and more censored. It was, nevertheless, a historic venture. Artists included people from Japan (where disabled people seldom get out of institutions) and people from Germany who had been injured in WW2. One of the artists, Pauline Leatherdale, died before the show opened, and so the exhibition became part of her funeral procession. It was profound.

The final contribution to IYDP was the presentation of two papers at an International Congress of Medical Sexology, held in Israel. One was presented to the main conference on our behalf by Dr Raymond Goodman, because it coincided with the *Festival of Mind, Body, Spirit* in London. After the festival, I flew straight out to Tel Aviv to present a

more detailed paper to the Post-Congress Symposium on Sexuality and Disability. Wendy Greengross, founder of SPOD, stood up to salute the brave efforts of Outsiders. The Symposium gave me enormous optimism.

I decided that so many of the members needed help with their personal lives, that I should get some professional training. Going on a course would also give me a chance to see how to run one, so I could learn how to train others to run Outsiders. I took the two-year course in Human Sexuality at London University, from St George's Hospital, and obtained a diploma. I am now a qualified sex therapist, and offer my time freely to any member who requests it. Outsiders does not supply surrogate sex workers, but I am looking at ways of getting an independent service set up within other professional organisations.

In the early '80's, we had some very dynamic disabled people supporting us. Mike Bramley was one of our biggest supporters and Christine Nocek became a leading light in the organisation of Outsiders. In 1985, the Mental Health Foundation agreed to give us a grant. Despite our protests, claiming that we hadn't really established our HQ properly in London, the grant was to expand the club all over Britain. We were to appoint a

Development Officer. Christine, being too ill by that time, declined the post and we looked elsewhere. We appointed Wendy Joy.

That was a manic three years. Wendy, Christine and I spent every weekend putting on events (trying to get local members to run them), in Bristol, Cardiff, Brighton, Cambridge, Southend, Nottingham, Birmingham and other cities. They were lovely, if small. It was as if people in smaller towns than London were reluctant to come and mingle with other disabled people they knew. Meanwhile, the London lunches flourished with members from Paris, Glasgow, Liverpool and the South Coast, attending on a regular basis and groups of people getting together for trips to Holland and other holidays.

We ran training sessions for people who were helping at the lunches and parties and we also started group therapy classes. These "Body Image Workshops" are aimed at improving the participants' chances of finding a partner by helping them learn how other people see them. First, each person says what they think is the best thing about themselves and the worst. Then others say what *they* think are their best and worst features. The contrast has always been amazing, and members have learnt important basic things that many of us take for granted. One blind member, for example, who just

moaned about his lot, was offered the suggestion that he smile more. "Smile, what is that?" he asked, never having seen a smile. "I know what laughter is, it's hee hee hee — but what is smile?"

Wendy found the job to much and resigned, so the Mental Health Foundation project fell on myself to complete. I saw it through to the end and submitted the required report. They wrote back to say it was one of the best reports they had ever received, even though it showed how very difficult it is to delegate Outsiders work.

Our reputation in the radical disabled world was not doing too well. People who had joined the club and had difficulties with partners were gossiping, blaming us rather than themselves (which happens in all singles clubs). My professional work as collator of erotic phenomena was being misinterpreted. The final blow came when BCOOP, the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People, refused to accept us because, they said, we were not run by disabled people. We claimed that we were into integration, and our disabled members already had a big say about how the club was run. However, to get acceptance in the disability world, we decided we should invite our members to elect a committee of disabled people to run the club.

I sometimes think that having a "democratically

elected committee elected from the membership" is like asking everyone who shops in Marks and Spencers to vote for the people to stand on its board. In other words, we're running a service for people all over the country, and there's no way these members can really know who would be best to organise their club. However, it is an ideal, and members can make sure it works. It's up to each individual to get involved and promote the best people. One thing is for certain, the more involved members get, the more likely they are to benefit from the club. All our most active volunteers have gained a really great boost to their lives, affairs and marriages resulting.

1991 was the year when the ManCom was eventually formed and, being the 12th Anniversary of Outsiders and we decided to improve the Club's image by holding an Open Day. We invited professionals from other agencies, charities, people in the helping professions and relevant media. Despite a zoomy invite, only two of these invited people came along. We were very hurt. However, the project was useful internally, as it had forced me to prepare a report on the Club and one of the interesting things that came out of this was some statistics on our members. Here's the breakdown of problems stated (apart from rare conditions) — note: some members have more than one of the following:

Visual handicap	31
Hearing difficulties	30
Cerebral Palsy	51
Spinal injury	21
Head injury	16
Spina Bifida	8
Muscular dystrophy	6
Multiple Sclerosis	5
Brittle bones	2
Rheumatism/Arthritis	39
Post-Polio	6
Restricted Growth	6
Disfigurement	101
Ostomy	4
Epilepsy	19
Phobia	42
Depression	133
Other mental illness	203
Ill/in pain (cancer etc)	56
In care/institution	41

Following the lack of support we got for our Open Day, we decided not to bother with outside organisations, shun offers from the press, which always turned against us, and concentrate on making the club work for those people who decide to join us. We are, after all, self-sufficient.

Lots of members have taken on little jobs to help us

without coming onto the committee. Probably the most long standing are Joe Abrahams who has religiously brought gifts for our lunch raffles for the past decade, and Leslie Dorrington who has been coming into the office on a regular basis to write out the flags and place them on the membership map, almost since the club began. Both of these volunteers are well over retirement age. Roy Green never fails to hold a Midlands lunch on the first Saturday of every month. Jan Martin has always taken phone calls, especially from people who are like herself, unable to go out because of agoraphobia. Mike Groves always brings people in his car to events. There are others too, some unknown to us, silently networking, supporting and getting support. The club sometimes seems quite nebulous, as if we hardly need a central office. Or so we thought.

In 1990, the Residents Association of my apartment block decided I could no longer use my home for work. I ignored them until they threatened legal action, then quickly found a cheap office in the Caledonian Road. The Committee had already decided that the Club should be run by a paid secretary, so that it wasn't dependent on me and other volunteers. So, we needed money.

I decided to hold an annual ball to raise funds to pay for an office and the membership secretary's

salary. It is a huge event, takes two to three months solid work for me, and many other volunteers also give their time, 150 in total, on the night. As well as earning money, the Ball also promotes integration, since some Outsiders members come along, usually making friends with other guests. The ball also welcomes people with minority tastes, and therefore acts as yet another catalyst for integration.

We usually select one member of Outsiders to get a prize at the Ball, someone who has shone by making the most effort. This brings courageous people to the Ball who otherwise might not have been able to afford to come, and shows other guests that people with disabilities can be appreciated for their sexuality. The award at the 1996 Ball goes to 66 year old transsexual Joyce who moves around in a wheelchair and always looks stunning (in the hope of finding a partner), cares for everyone she meets in Outsiders and shows us warm appreciation for everything we do for her.

The Ball takes up a lot of my time now, but Outsiders has never ceased to be my chosen field of work. It survives come what may. Our London lunches have always been incredible and in 1993, when I ruptured my Achilles Tendon and had to walk on crutches, I experienced, first hand, how important the club is. Mixing with friends and colleagues outside the Club,

I experienced prejudice, embarrassment and a message that I had almost "let them down" by becoming physically weak. Yet, every time I entered an Outsiders lunch, I felt the opposite: welcomed, despite my physical condition. People offered me concern but, mixed with it, was humour and a dismissal of the crutches and plaster. They saw ME, AS I AM.

Lunches have been held at the following venues (and we appreciate their hospitality):

Pizza on the Park
The New Ambassadors Hotel
A Greek Restaurant in Mayfair
The President Hotel, Bloomsbury
University of London Union
Pizza e Pasta, Hammersmith
The Filling Station, Shepherds Bush
Fonzarelli's, Victoria
The Lantern, Ealing Common

Every August, since 1985, we've had a picnic in Russell Square

Women's Events have been held at:

A tiny pub in the New North Road
Cleopatra's (a member's garden)

Parties have been held at:

48 Boundary Road, St John's Wood
The Diorama, Regents Park
The Royal National Hotel
University of London Union
The Crypt at Deptford
The Dome, Tufnell Park
The Waterside Inn, King's Cross
The Anchor on the Thames, Southwark
The Magpie & Stump, Old Bailey

The lunches in Birmingham, under the leadership of Roy Green continue on a regular basis and other events are put on less regularly in Southampton, Manchester, Liverpool and Nottingham. All of these are put on by local members.

The Management Committee is now committed to furthering the aims of the club. Since we began to use a telephone conference system, we are joined by members from all over the country, and people with agoraphobia who cannot come out, contributing to the decision making and the progress of the Club. In February 1995, the Management Committee Chair, Annette Taylor, and myself, travelled to Israel to take part in yet another International Symposium, this time entitled, Women and Disability. I was reluctant to go, reflecting how little impact the last Symposium had had since it was held, almost eleven

years ago. We were pleasantly surprised to discover that some serious research is now being done on the sexuality of disabled women. It was also heart rendering to observe that, internationally, Outsiders is still regarded as an amazing, unique phenomenon. Yet, we were still unable to inspire anyone to follow in our footsteps. The starter pack I wrote in 1991, entitled *So You Want to Start a Local Outsiders?* has hardly ever been requested.

Things have changed since we began. They have actually become easier in a couple of respects. It is much, much easier to find venues to hold our lunches, both from the access angle and being made to feel welcome. Secondly, disabled people are more aware of their rights and less likely to lean on the club for support. However, they are also much more stuck for cash and less optimistic about finding a lover. Although society accepts disabled people more readily in the 90's, people are less willing to have a relationship with somebody disabled. Money, looks and image now seem to be more important than happiness.

Recently, Outsiders has suffered severe personal tragedies. Through deaths, we lost Nick Finden, Chairman of the Management Committee and the Ball, and Dave Murray, who used to organise the holidays. In 1994, Christine Nocek, Mike Bramley,

our accountant, Norman Wand and several other key members died. It's really surprising that the club survived. And yet we have.

Our Caledonian Road office was a temporary site, a small, leaking room on the fourth floor. Eventually, in 1993, we moved to a wheelchair accessible space in a warehouse in Shoreditch. This also leaked, wasn't very comfortable, and was unsatisfactory in many ways, but only cost £25 a week. We've now found a beautiful new self-contained office in Holland Park and just hope that funds will continue to be forthcoming to pay the rent.

As well as running the Ball and video distribution, I edit, publish and distribute *The Organ*, giving half the proceeds to the Trust. And I still take overall responsibility of the Club, hiring the Membership Secretary and renting the office. I currently go to the Outsiders office at least once week to help sort out problems.

I deal with much of the press, collaborating with journalists who want to do articles and programmes on our work, finding members who are willing to talk about their personal experiences. There is one proposal at present with the BBC at present, which is a documentary about the club.

I collate the PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS book, and

edit and produce the quarterly club magazine, INSIDE. I handle running of the Integration Trust, submitting its Annual Report to the Charity Commission, and begging funds in from people I know will donate money, when we need it.

I do all this in my spare time. In recent years, my frantic business schedule, desperate personal finances and desire for a little personal space, have made spare time a bit hard to find. As a Trustee, according to the Trust Deed, I am not allowed to take any money for my work, not even the work arranging the distribution of the video, ball organisation, therapy offered to members, or admin. However, I would never, ever, abandon Outsiders. I do sometimes wonder why more people don't help me.

Recently, Sheila, our Membership Secretary, said to me, when our computer broke down, "You can't expect people to just drop everything and come into the office and help us for nothing."

"Why on earth not? I do!" I responded.

But times have changed. Many people say they can't afford, or don't have the will or energy to give their time. Things seem harder today than they were in the late 70's, but people are also more spoilt — they expect more out of life, which cost money and time,

with less left to give.

I feel Outsiders is worth any sacrifice. We have seen people with no hope find lovers and spouses, bringing meaning to their lives. All members move on, in some sense. Outsiders should be an eternal process of gaining support, offering support, and seeing that support bringing its own immeasurable happiness to others.

I know I'll not be the first and last to believe in Outsiders. I have a really small, but strong team around me now, but we feel as if very few people understand what we are doing, and even fewer wish to lend us a hand. I never thought that we would feel this wobbly, so long after our initial explosive beginnings.

If you think the club has a future, can you help us thrive? If you can't help in any concrete way, please back us in any way you can. If you believe in love, you will.