ROBERT’S PODCAST

00:00 [MUSIC]

00:13 [MARK]

DICE, a series of six podcasts about social inclusion, housing and the experiences of older people from socially diverse backgrounds. This is part three, Robert’s story, a man in his late seventies who identifies as gay.

00:31 [ROBERT]

One of the things that really stuck with me, one of the care workers said to me, and I asked her to do something particularly, making the bed up, and she said I wouldn't have time for that at home. So I said, well, this is not your home, this is my home and I’m asking you to do something, for which I’m paying.

00:49

Well she did it, rather grumpily, but then it needed saying, and then it never happened again. I'm a great one for clearing the air should we say, it helps enormously.

01:01 [PAUL]

Hello. That's Robert, a 78 year old man who lives in his own flat in an extra care scheme for older people, part of a suburban block of apartments. We'll hear more from him and his experiences in a moment. Robert’s story is one of five insights into the lives of older people, as seen through the lens of their housing experiences, which are available as podcasts on this website.

01:24

Robert and the other contributors have taken part in DICE, a study which stands for diversity in care environments. It looks at ways in which social inclusion and diversity in housing for older people can be improved, what works well and what needs more attention.

01:42 [PAUL]

My name's Dr Paul Willis and I have led the DICE research project with a number of colleagues at the University of Bristol. I'm a lecturer in social work there and I study housing and care support for older people looking at things like ageing, the experience of loneliness and social inclusion.

01:59

I'm interested, for example, in how sexuality and aging is experienced by older people in the context of their housing and long term care. So it was a pleasure to meet Robert, who came out as a gay man over 60 years ago when he was 16, and to hear his story.

02:17

We met in his favourite park on a summer's day, close to his apartment block, which was built ten years ago to a high standard. It's got gardens, a lounge, a dining room available to residents, and it's run by a large, not for profit housing provider for older people.

02:35

Robert explained that he'd been nursing his partner in their own home and urgently needed more suitable housing.

02:42 [ROBERT]

My partner didn't want to move. We were living only a mile away in 1930s, semi. We loved living there we had nice garden, nice home, but I said, we're moving for my sake, not for yours. I'd already had one heart attack looking after him, the stress of working full time and looking after someone was, I found enormous. We'd been looking for somewhere to live somewhere different, to live. The flats we looked at were horrible, totally unsuitable.

03:07

Bungalows were largely out of our reach because we would then have to spend a lot of money on them anyway. Then we were offered this wonderful flat and so I jumped at the opportunity and said, we'll moving at first possible moment.

03:22 [PAUL]

So Robert and his partner were among the first to move into the new block of flats when they opened in 2011.

03:30 [ROBERT]

They’re built to a very high specification. There's almost nothing wrong with the flats, with the building, quite frankly, there are some things wrong.

03:37

It was a joy to move in, and from that moment I was, I reckon, put ten years of my life, quite frankly. I was doing part-time work for several people, and I gave that up as soon as we moved in quite frankly, the moving itself was chaotic of course.

03:56

I had to dump my partner here and then rushing backwards and forwards with things. In the house we had not very far away from here, the bathroom was about what, eight by six or something, your standard bathroom, you couldn't get a wheelchair in there, certainly.

04:13

We'd had a level shower put in there at enormous expense, and that was still a challenge, but of course, here we've got a thing where you can wheel someone straight into the shower, they can stay in the wheelchair if they want to.

04:28

That sort of thing, all the doors are wide and you know, there's no problems whatsoever about that sort of thing. It's geared for wheelchairs.

04:33 [PAUL]

Robert and his partner were delighted to be welcomed with open arms by the manager when they moved in, but were the residents so welcoming too, I wanted to know.

04:44 [ROBERT]

We had some silly chatter from, from one resident and I just took him aside and said, look, I said look this is my life, this is our life and we're going to lead it.

04:55

You may not agree with it. I don't care, we've been together 50 years nearly, and we’re going to you know, we’re going to stay together. Like it or not, that's it. I never heard another word. The only thing I can think of is that at a, you know, a coffee morning, that sort of thing, Obviously, we haven't had coffee mornings for a long time.

05:16

But you know, if the manager, the estate manager, can actually say to people, You know, this is Fred, and he's just joined us and Fred stands up, obviously a coloured bloke there and you know, it's not going to change very much, but at least they’ll have to accept he’s there.

05:33

I know there are schemes where there are gay people who really have problems. I say, fight back for God's sake. Just tell them, you know you're a person, not a bloody woodlouse.

05:44

I don't understand it. I was out at the age of 16 and I decided there, and then I was going to look after myself and as simple as that. What do you want to hear about that? Well, my my father was told by a concerned neighbour that I'm keeping the wrong company.

06:02

Of course, I've always wondered since what the sort of company my neighbour was keeping, but my father was horrified. He was working in the civil service at the time and he was more concerned for his job, I think, rather than anything else.

06:16

I don't know what he thought about me, really, but he was very concerned for his job and I said, well, you better get on with it and I’ll move away and, you know, don’t have to have me here. You know, I've never hidden, if someone asked me if I was gay, I tell them, Yes, of course I am.

06:32 [PAUL]

Since the death of Robert's partner, he started a relationship with a man from West Africa. When we spoke, their wedding preparations were well underway.

06:42 [ROBERT]

One or two residents know his name and say, you know, nice to see you and all the rest of it. Others one could say that everything was done in a whisper. There he goes again. It doesn't bother me what they think and in fact, I've always taken the attitude if they stop talking about you, you're dead. But I rather enjoy being talked about, I think.

07:05

I know there are some people there who strongly disapprove of having a black man there, but I think he does them good really. It broaden their horizons.

07:14 [PAUL]

Can I ask you is he a similar age to you?

07:15 [ROBERT]

He’s nearly 50, so quite a bit younger.

07:20 [PAUL]

Did people ever make assumptions about, about you two? About your relationship?

07:26 [ROBERT]

I'd be amazed if they didn't make assumptions. We make assumptions about all people surely, and no one's ever discussed our relationship. I think they would feel it impertinent or something. I’m not sure.

07:39

No, I don't. I don't know what other people's views are really, and I don't care.

07:44 [PAUL]

How will you celebrate your wedding?

07:47 [ROBERT]

I'm hoping we can use our conference suite in the scheme and have a party there. That’s what we’re hoping, we’ve got to get the paperwork done first.

07:57 [PAUL]

You might well be getting the picture that Robert's not one to take it easy. He runs a ukulele group for other residents, an LGBT group, an AA group, an opera group, though he gave up the painting group not so long ago.

08:11 [ROBERT]

Yes, all that stands yes, I'm the, I am trying to give some things up. I've been treasurer of this AA group for ten years, from when we moved here and I said, look, it is time someone else did this and I'm going to stop doing it, and eventually someone did take over.

08:29

You know, I'm helping him do it, but it's not exactly hard work, not onerous. I've given up one of the what we call showtime thing. Right, it came to a grinding halt with the pandemic, obviously, but I'm not going to restart that.

08:45

But the opera group has restarted and we're actually meeting in the Methodist Church just a mile away, so they've been very good to us because it’s educational purposes. What else? Yes, the ukulele group has not restarted yet. No, you can't, obviously, but I hope we’ll be allowed to meet again.

09:06

What else are there, oh the LGBT thing? That, of course, is Zoom once or twice a month. We're meeting for different things, but I dunno I believe in keeping active and I've got some skills and I think they should be used, it is stupid not to use them.

09:24 [PAUL]

It was inspiring to meet Robert because of his outlook on life.

09:28 [ROBERT]

Well I’ve always said I’d like a banner made saying misery is optional, because some people just don’t seem to be able to enjoy life at all. Life is fun. I enjoy life enormously.

09:43 [PAUL]

And he's clear that it's the quality of his housing that enables so many of his activities that benefit not just Robert, but his fellow residents too. Beyond the thoughtfulness of the build, it's also the way the flats are run by the company. He feels that the style and personal qualities of the manager really make a difference.

10:04 [ROBERT]

We first met the manager, I applied online and someone from social services came and yes, said yes of course, you should be able to get there and then the manager came along. He phoned up and said, can I come and see you? Which I thought was rather nice.

10:18

I said it was only a mile away, from that moment on, I mean, you see his little eyes light up the idea of having out gay couple coming to live in it.

10:31

But, you know, he was obviously very happy to have an out gay couple to come live in his scheme. He has been wonderful ever since, quite frankly. He's still there. He's going to be there until he retires I'm sure, which will be in a few years time.

10:46

The company itself has changed and some policies have changed, but we've had different assistance. He has a part time assistant. Every one of them has been very good. I think we've had four, maybe five, which in ten years is not bad at all.

11:00

Because they want to get on to better things anyway, they probably want a full time job somewhere.

11:06 [PAUL]

I keep saying this one final question. But are there any other LGBTQ people living there?

11:12 [ROBERT]

I imagine there are. But I'm the only, only out one, certainly. But statistically there must be others.

11:22 [PAUL]

What would help more residents to be out like you in the scheme?

11:27 [ROBERT]

30 years I should think. I mean, we've come a hell of long way since the 1967 act, but we're still a long way to go.

11:36 [PAUL]

In terms of our findings on the DICE Research Project, Robert's experiences confirm how important supportive and responsive management and staff can be for residents at housing schemes.

11:49

We've been hearing just how enabled he is and all his activities by the inclusive environment of his home and its facilities. His positive start at the scheme continues. Ten years on, since having moved in, the gardens and outdoor spaces are as important to him as the indoor ones.

12:09

Robert's story highlights the importance of scheme managers and staff working with residents from minority backgrounds to make sure that everyone feels included. This will sometimes mean staff need to be prepared to challenge discriminatory comments from other residents.

12:25

When we spoke to Robert, he was planning a significant event, his wedding, on site at his scheme. Staff and managers need to consider how they will support him and provide opportunities for other residents to be involved in these important celebrations.

12:52

Alongside this podcast, you can listen to the experiences of four other people in the context of their housing and a sixth one about how and why we've conducted the DICE Research Project. Thanks for listening.

13:05 [END]

13:13 [MUSIC END]