

Jamie looks to a brighter future thanks to VisionPK



According to a Scottish government report the definition of Rehabilitation means different things to different people.

The 2022 report Rehabilitation and recovery: a person-centred approach refers to a wide range of approaches that include activities, interventions and information resources being available to support individuals to recover or adjust to achieve their full potential.

For Jamie Fitchie (pictured, left), born in Edinburgh, the fact it recommends approaches on early intervention for prevention, prehabilitation and supported self-management meant only selected parts of these national recommendations had any impact on the shape of his colourful visual rehabilitation journey.

“I didn’t have much chance of encountering something to prevent what happened to me. I have Retinitis Pigmentosa and was diagnosed when I was very young, so I do not really remember life before sight loss,” says Jamie.

Prehabilitation or ‘prehab’ means getting ready for treatment as part of a rehabilitation programme but for Jamie there was no clear path to a clinical solution and coping with the challenges of daily life were the first hurdles to scramble across.

“One of the hardest parts of growing up was never being able to see at night. I always had to make sure I was home before the light started fading, which meant missing out on a lot, especially in winter. As a child who loved being outside, that was hard.”

Jamie’s rehabilitation journey started at the Royal Blind School in his home town, where he started long cane training to help build his confidence and enable him to take steps towards living a life like so many of his friends and family.

“It helped me start to navigate surroundings independently and safely. Most people can walk a path in easy forward steps, but I have to detect obstacles, changes in terrain, drop-offs (like stairs or curbs), and to be aware of my position in the environment at all times.

“At the time I was at the Blind School, I did not appreciate the long cane at all. I hated the way it felt like an instant label of disability, and I did not want the pity that often came with it. Looking back now, I know I was stubborn, but I am so grateful the staff did not give up on me.”

Support for Jamie had to be about much more than mobility and that was exactly what the school delivered for him.

“I learned new skills such as route planning and safe travel, but I also learned cooking, laundry, ironing, touch typing and how to use technology to read and write. I was being given the tools to live independently as my sight continued to deteriorate. They were invaluable, a visually impaired person should not face inequalities in daily living, and I was determined to overcome them.

“As I got older, my peripheral and distance vision deteriorated more, and the skills I had learned became even more important to me. However, I knew I needed more support.”

Jamie’s personal ambition was to contribute towards society by being employed to prove how barriers for those with a visual impairment can be broken down. He moved to Perth in 2018 and started looking for job opportunities.

“Where you live shouldn’t determine the support you receive. Perthshire is a beautiful county and quite rural, but I was mindful of the need to be near an accessible point for support if I needed it. That should apply really to where anybody chooses to live.”

“When I moved to the Fair City VisionPK helped me learn new routes, buses and how to get to Perth College safely. This specialist rehabilitation was essential in enabling me to get around, continue my education and familiarise myself with new surroundings.

“Having VisionPK as a local support made a real practical difference. When my long cane was damaged, I was able to get a replacement within 20 minutes. Without that support I would have been stuck at home and my rehabilitation progress derailed. Being scared to interact with the world is not something I would wish on anyone.”

VisionPK’s role in Jamie’s life heightened further when he turned from service user to employee and became their Health and Wellbeing Coordinator. The role involves Jamie devising activities to support the physical and emotional health for those with sight or hearing loss.

“Joining in activities like accessible swimming, live music, art and woodland walks helped me rebuild my confidence and feel part of life again. Now I am delivering those sessions to enable other people to regain their independence and feel part of a supportive community.”

“My life would be very different without these skills and support network, having the job and helping others has been some of the most important parts of my rehabilitation.

I have stopped feeling helpless when the sun goes down, and that means everything to me.”