

while they still are able to speak. If they have already lost their speech function, they often ask a member of their family to do the recordings for them.

“It is immensely rewarding to think how I’ve been able to help people with this debilitating disease,” says Mike. “I was partly motivated to do it by thoughts of my dad, who contracted throat cancer and had to have a laryngectomy, after which he spoke through a voice box. He left behind memoirs which he wrote using all the familiar vocal mannerisms and turns of phrase we remembered, so that when you read it back it was like he was talking to you. This helped enormously in getting over his loss, and I can’t help wondering how something like this might have benefitted him and us.”

We are privileged to care for our patients and their families, at probably the most difficult time in their lives, but we can only do this with the help of people like Denise and the generosity of our local community.

We have to raise over £20,000 every day in order to provide care, free of charge, to our patients and their relatives.

For further information about how to support Phyllis Tuckwell Hospice Care, contact our Fundraising team on:

01252 729446
support@pth.org.uk

Phyllis Tuckwell Hospice Care

Waverley Lane, Farnham
Surrey GU9 8BL

The Beacon Centre,
Gill Avenue, Guildford,
Surrey GU2 7WW

Phyllis Tuckwell Memorial Hospice Ltd.
Registered Number 1063033. Registered Charity Number 264501.

Tel: 01252 729400
Email: mail@pth.org.uk
www.pth.org.uk

Our volunteers are inspiring...

“It is immensely rewarding.”



Mike's Story

A different kind of volunteering...

Phyllis Tuckwell[®]
Hospice Care 
...because every day is precious

Mike's Story



“Volunteering can occasionally throw up some unusual opportunities,” says Mike Swaddling, who has been volunteering for Phyllis Tuckwell since 1999.

“I’ve had various roles over my twenty years but in

2018 something came up that looked a bit out of the ordinary. The Speech Therapists from the Royal Surrey County Hospital, who are based at the Beacon Centre in Guildford, were looking for a volunteer to help with a project that would benefit motor neurone disease (MND) patients.”

*“Along with swallowing, **the ability to talk is one of the first things that MND sufferers will lose.** Advances in technology have enabled the creation of artificial voices of the kind made famous by the late Stephen Hawking, but one of the more recently developed software packages, called **ModelTalker, enables the creation of a voice bank, using the voice of the patient themselves or someone of their choice, that converts typed words into artificial speech with expression.**”*

“The person whose voice is to be recorded, whether that is the patient or someone they have chosen, records a corpus of 1,600 short phrases into the ModelTalker software. These phrases contain all of the sounds or sound combinations used in the English language. The ModelTalker software can read words that are typed in and make them audible by relating the

*combinations of letters to the sounds stored in each individual tailor-made voice bank. The result is not (yet) perfect speech, but it is a quantum leap from the robotic sound of Stephen Hawking, and clearly sounds like the voice that made the recordings. **You can only imagine the pleasure this brings to MND sufferers and their families alike,** who had been resigned to losing their own voice or the voice of their loved one altogether.”*

Mike’s role was to help the Speech Therapists create a demonstration ‘tape’ to show MND patients how good the voice reproduction could be. “They already had someone to record a demo for a female voice, but had not been able to find a suitable male voice. When I heard about it I sent an email expressing my interest. I was invited along for a chat and they seemed to like mine!”



“There were some initial hitches with finding the right headphones and computer, but eventually I got going,” says Mike. “The recording itself entailed working my way through a list of short phrases. When each one came up on the screen, I was given an example of the pronunciation required, including



intonation, which I then had to do my best to copy. Fortunately, this did not include the American accent! Four boxes were beneath each phrase, each measuring a different aspect of the accuracy, and provided I got an amber or green light in each of them, I could move on to the next one.”

“This was not as easy as it may sound,” continues Mike. “Keeping a high level of concentration for much more than 15 minutes was difficult and required regular short breaks. A two-hour session was the norm, before tiredness caused too many red lights, but during that time we were able to record an average of 250-300 phrases. Over a few months, co-ordinating the availability of myself and the Therapist leading the project, I worked my way through the list and finally finished in November.”

In the two final sessions, Mike and the Therapists listened to six different versions of Mike’s synthetic voice which had been created by the ModelTalker software, and between them chose the one that they all preferred. After this Mike attended a short session to test out the final version by typing in some test phrases. “Listening to an artificial voice sounding spookily like your own is extremely weird!” he laughs.

This ‘demo tape’ is now being used to show MND patients that their own voice need not be lost entirely, particularly if they receive their diagnosis