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IN TOUCH – In Touch in Turkey meets Maggie Moore

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PRODUCER: CHERYL GABRIEL

Actuality – Taxi ride

[Speaking Turkish]

White

What did you ask?

Moore

So the first bit I said was I'm supposed to be showing off my Turkish, don't ask me in English. [Laughter]

White

Maggie Moore's Turkish is improving all the time. And with good reason. She needs it to fulfil her unusual role. But why is In Touch driving through Istanbul on its way to a grand ball? To tell the story of a guide dog called Star, the launch of a pioneering organisation totally new to Turkey and the Ambassador's wife who inspired it.

Well before we risk sounding too much like Round Britain Quiz let's meet the lady herself.

Moore

Okay, well I'm Maggie. I'm 52. A child of Irish parents, very important part of my identity is the Irishness. I have two grownup children and I'm married to Richard who is currently British Ambassador in Turkey.

White

And when did you start to lose your sight?

Moore

I lost my sight quite suddenly when I was 10, or I lost about 90% of it when I was 10, to a condition called Juvenile Macular Degeneration, as distinct from the Age Related variety. And then it stayed stable until I was about 30 and then I began to lose the rest.

White

I mean this must have been a bombshell for your family. Maybe more for them than for you?

Moore

Oh definitely more for them than for me. I think when you're 10 you're terribly adaptable and which kid doesn't like being the centre of attention. So really I think it was water off a duck's back for me and really quite difficult for them.

White

And what did they have to do because presumably this was a world they knew nothing about?

Moore

Absolutely nothing and they got no support from the diagnosing clinician, who just said terribly sorry in three months she'll be able to see light and dark, off you go and deal with it. So my poor dad I think thought that he was going to be encumbered with me for the rest of his natural because there was no way I was ever going to be able to work and there was definitely no way anybody was going to want to marry me.

White

Well he's in the car so he's still encumbered with you in a way isn't he.

Moore

[Laughter] He is absolutely. Absolutely.

White

You may hear him chuckling in the background. Okay so what else happened?

Moore

And then my mum, whilst reeling, set about finding out what I was going to need that was going to make me able to function in the sighted world. And very, very quickly she had me taught to touch type and that's a phenomenally useful skill, so that was great. Found out about Talking Books which I'm still massively a fan of. And then against quite a bit of opposition, a bit later down the road, got me taught Braille.

White

Why opposition?

Moore

Because integration was absolutely evangelically being preached at the time and you know you just were not allowed to have anything that would mark you out from the rest of the population, you had to be the same.

White

So were you still struggling with print?

Moore

I was struggling with print but I could manage large print in those days and I could manage with a magnifier and of course I can't anymore, so wouldn't it have been great if I had been a lot better at Braille than I am now, as a result of learning it later and why would you not teach such a fundamentally useful skill? I mean I think everybody should learn Braille, I think it should be...

White

You mean sighted people as well?

Moore

Absolutely, I think...

White

So do I.

Moore

... read it under the covers on a cold night in the dark when there's a power cut – phenomenal. It's a brilliant medium.

White

And what about schooling, where did you go to school after the loss of sight?

Moore

So I carried on, as I said, integration being the watchword of the day, I carried on at the school that I'd been at since I was four and then when I was 15, because it was coming up for public exams – O Levels, A Levels – and mum reading to me at home was no longer cutting it, we decided that really it would be a good idea to go and get the extra support that a special school could give me. And I therefore spent the last four years at Chorleywood College for Girls with Little or No Sight.

White

And what did you think of that?

Moore

Ooh mixed – mixed feelings about that. I made some nice friends and I had a phenomenally inspiring Latin teacher called Miss King – Maggie King – who I'm still very much in touch with, who recognised that I was able but idle and cracked the whip. And particularly given that now I've learnt Turkish, which is a fiendishly difficult language, I'm really grateful to her for having beaten the ablative absolute into me at an early age.

White

Ooh well that sounds very painful.

Moore

It was.

White

So how does that able but idle blind schoolgirl come now to be ushering me into the rather magnificent British Consulate building in Istanbul? The building itself was designed in the mid-19th Century by the architect who rebuilt the Houses of Parliament. The idea was to impress the Turks with the power and majesty of Britain at the height of its Empire.

Moore

Do you know what I'd kill for some more coffee. Gallons please.

White

Well the story of how she did get here begins with her meeting, while still at school, the man, Richard, she was destined to marry and who was to change the course of her life. She told me all about it over mid-morning coffee in one of the Consulate's opulent state rooms.

Moore

We met on a pilgrimage to Lourdes.

White

Were you going to be cured?

Moore

I was, I was being – and I went absolutely kicking and screaming, I really was not at all keen on this idea. And in fact my mother had come home from church one day and said look the parish priest would like to send you as a spiritual representative of the parish on the pilgrimage to Lourdes. And I said, absolutely no way, forget it. And she said, that's fine darling, you tell the priest. And being a devout moral coward off I went to Lourdes. And Richard was the team leader in my hotel and the rest is history.

White

So is he a kind of cure?

Moore

Definitely, I call him my little miracle Peter.

White

Do you, you're not teasing me, you really do, do you?

Moore

Yeah, really, really.

White

I know you went to university but I want to ask given that success was important to you what about early jobs?

Moore

Ooh well my first foray into the world of work – I still find it quite hard to believe this myself – but in my third year of university, when I should have been going off to France as my year abroad as part of my degree, Richard had just finished at Oxford and had a scholarship to Harvard.

White

Right, so what happened when you got to the States – workless presumably?

Moore

Workless, workless. So Richard was studying and we didn't have an awful lot of money to say the least. So Richard went and looked in the international students' office and saw an advertisement for nanny to baby twins. And I thought well you know there's pretty much nothing else I can do so let's give it a go. But I really knew at that point that if I'd rung up before I went and said look I should perhaps just mention that I'm – at that stage I was legally blind in America, I was partially sighted in the UK but I qualified to be legally blind in America. And I thought well you know if I ring them up and tell them that before they've met me obviously they're going to say well thank you very much, I'm terribly sorry but the position's been filled. So I did a bit of homework, I found out where they lived and I got on the bus with my white stick and I was using a symbol cane and I said to the bus driver – could you possibly tell me when we get to the right stop. And I travelled on the bus with my white stick out, got off the bus, folded up the symbol cane, put it into my handbag. Went and found the address of my prospective employers, so that I would be able to pitch up at exactly the right moment and then went off walking around the area round their house to find places that I could safely take their babies for a walk, so that when I did drop the bombshell that perhaps I couldn't see quite as well as other applicants for the post I had thought it through I was going to responsibly be able to look after their children and not push them under a truck.

So that all went according to plan. Pitched up at the front door ready for the interview and Gibb, the husband, opened the door and ushered me in and sat me down and gave me a cup of coffee. And I was really quite nervous at this stage. So I picked up the milk jug to drink my coffee out of. Oops. Covered that one over quite nicely. And then Gibb said to me – Maggie were you by any chance here earlier? And I said – ah yes I was, I said, I was just trying to find the house and I'll explain why later. And he said – oh I think we may have been on the same bus. And at that point I just thought this is it, there's no way these people are giving me a job. So he'd seen me with the white stick and then I pitched up saying can I please look after your baby twins. And incredibly they gave me the job. And we only found out a few years ago, because they have become lifelong friends, that the other applicant for the post was a trained doctor. So I have berated them heavily for being totally irresponsible and asked them what on earth they thought they were doing.

White

It's a great defence of non-disclosure I think.

Moore

Absolutely.

White

Yeah. So where does the diplomatic corps come in?

Moore

We then went back to England after that year and while I was finishing off my degree Richard was applying to the Foreign Office. And he joined in August 1987. Very quickly after that, in 1988, we went off on our first little sortie which was to Vietnam.

White

Our image of the diplomat's life is one with quite a lot of protocol, knowing who's who, recognising them, entertaining – was there ever any suggestion that your visual impairment might be a problem?

Moore

Do you know there has only ever been support from the Foreign Office, there's never been any suggestion that that might be an issue. And I would say also, on the recognising people front, I reckon I am the absolute envy of the entire international diplomatic community because I'm the person when I haven't got a clue who somebody is who can say – I'm terribly sorry, I don't know who you are, could you please tell me – and obviously I don't recognise faces and I've got the excuse and everyone is going – you're so lucky, I have no idea who that is either.

White

And presumably that identifies them for a lot of other people at the same time.

Moore

Exactly, exactly.

White

But really and truly you're telling me that this was never an issue because I mean we've been with you at the ball, last night, you have to meet a lot of people, no one ever said that's mainly what the ambassador's wife has to do for goodness sake?

Moore

No absolutely not. I've always been very upfront about the fact that I can't see because what I don't want is I don't want people to think when I'm terribly friendly when I meet them the first time and cut them dead the next time that it's because I'm rude or snooty. I want people to know that it's because I can't recognise them.

White

Do you do extra research?

Moore

No, I'm far too lazy for that Peter, if I'm absolutely honest. If we're having a dinner or we're entertaining at home I will make sure I know who's coming, I will do that. And then even if I don't know who it is that's just walked through the door I will be able to identify them once they've told me what their name is, if that makes sense.

White

So if you don't meet and greet people what do you do? I mean what's...

Moore

I do meet and greet people, I just do it my own special way Peter.

White

But forgive me you're a very spontaneous person, is the impression I get, and in some ways this isn't a very spontaneous role, I mean you have to do – you have to be proper, don't you, to some extent. I'm just wondering how much this fits in with who you really are.

Moore

With this being Richard's first ambassadorial role I will be honest and say that when we first started here I was very, very, very nervous and very keen not to let my husband down. And actually I would say I've relaxed into the role because of the way people respond to me and how lovely people are.

White

I mean how have people reacted? We talked about that you have never really had a problem so far as your – Richard's employers are concerned but what about just the local people, because they probably aren't expecting the Ambassador's wife not to be able to see very well?

Moore

They're not but you know people take it wonderfully in their stride and...

White

And is that wherever you've been culturally?

Moore

Yes, I mean this is the first place I've been with a guide dog, I've only had a guide dog for the last four years and that has been very different and particularly coming to a country where there is no tradition of guide dogs – why would people know why you wanted to bring a dog into a concert with you or into a restaurant with you or into a hotel with you? So that has taken explaining but you know as soon as you do explain it's amazing how welcoming people are.

When we arrived, fairly early on in our time here, Richard was invited on to a programme on CNN Turk, a Saturday morning magazine programme on television, and the presenter Hakan Celik knew about me and Star and invited us on as well.

Actuality – CNN Turk

And we did a little spiel about Star and that and the fact that every reception we went to Star had her photograph taken and it was in the paper excited a lot of interest. And following that I was at a reception and met a rather lovely Turkish lawyer, who is also visually impaired, named Nurdinez, and Nurdinez said to me – gosh I've seen your dog on the television and in the papers, I'm terribly interested, where can I get one and how much would it cost. And I had to say – Well look I'm terribly, terribly sorry but as far as I know there is no Guide Dog Association in Turkey and certainly Guide Dogs for the Blind in the UK their remit doesn't stretch to training dogs for people in other countries, so I'm sorry but I don't think you can. Unless of course we were to start a Turkish Guide Dog Association. And Nurdinez being Nurdinez she said yeah okay then let's. So we have. And here we are two years later, two and a half years later, to my absolute astonishment really because having looked into it and how complicated and difficult it was going to be, having thought no there's just – there's no way, in the timeframe that we're going to be in Turkey there's no way I can make this happen. But we are about to launch our first fully trained home grown Turkish guide dog any minute now. We've got a Turkish guide dog mobility instructor who has been to the UK to train with Alan Brooks in Devon and we've just had our big fundraising event last night which hopefully will have raised us enough funds to send another couple of people to train

because each guide dog mobility instructor can only train a maximum of 10 dogs a year, so we really do need a few GDMIs to get us really moving.

White

What do you do when you're not being Mrs Ambassador?

Moore

I'm a massive fan of the life changing nature of accessible technology, so I love being able to use a computer and an iPad and an iPhone and access stuff that I want to know about and that I'm interested in.

White

And hobbies?

Moore

Hobbies – this is a really weird one, it's a bit like being a nanny – is I really – I really love interior design and do you know I'd love to be an interior designer and I just wonder if you could pitch up at somebody's house with a guide dog and tell them you'd come to design their house. [Laughter]

White

Well you go away with the nanny thing.

Moore

Well exactly, the sky's the limit.

White

You haven't tried it?

Moore

Haven't tried it yet.

White

I'm surprised. You sing as well I think.

Moore

I do, yes I do. But I don't have a wonderful voice but I do love comic songs, in particular, that's my thing really. I'm a massive Victoria Wood fan of course. I love songs with clever funny lyrics.

White

Have you got a favourite?

Moore

Well it's got to be Let's Do It hasn't it.

Clip – Victoria Wood Let's Do It

White and Moore joining in

White

Is there any sense in which you feel in this kind of job that to some extent you get subsumed because it is a role rather than as you as a person and I just – thinking of what you described at the beginning – the high ambitions, what you wanted to achieve – to some extent you could argue that you're an appendage?

Moore

I'm very happy to be an appendage. I have a fantastic husband who has been a. the complete feminist, really does genuinely to his core believe that women can do whatever men can do and who is a great advocate for diversity. And actually – actually with this guide dog thing he's been utterly supportive of that. And some other men might not be. So I feel very, very lucky.