Leonard Cheshire Project Resonate

File Title: Transcript of Taped Talk by Wally Sullivan – My Recollections of Leonard Cheshire

Preservation Copy

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Start of Transcription

00:00 Wally Sullivan: I have worked for the Leonard Cheshire Foundation since the 1st March 1976 until I retired on the 31st October 1994. For most of my time with the Foundation I was the Information Officer as well as a minor aide to Leonard Cheshire. As Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris, our Chairman Emeritus once said “ A good nuts and bolts man” and I am recording on this tape, some of my recollections and memories of Leonard Cheshire.

00:37 I first met Leonard in 1967 when I took my mentally handicapped son to Lourdes with the Ryder / Cheshire Raphael Pilgrimage.

00:52 This was my first time going to Lourdes with a pilgrimage, although I had been before as a tourist. I was not introduced to Leonard or anything like that, but he was pointed out to me as the man who had started the pilgrimage many years earlier. Apparently he was intending to make a small film about the pilgrimage and I do remember carrying some of his film making equipment, from the aircraft to the terminal building at Tarbes. I also recall someone telling me that Leonard had fused all the lights in the hotel whilst trying to make a film there.

01:35 How Leonard came to start the pilgrimage with Father Fuller and Bob Worthington is very interesting. One day he was invited by Bob Worthington to come to Chislehurst to see a house which Bob thought would be suitable for a Cheshire Home. Leonard did this and found it was suitable. This house later became St. Cecilia's Cheshire Home, which is still there today. However Leonard was at the time recovering from a major operation which removed his lung and he was only allowed to go to Chislehurst on the understanding that he would rest every couple of hours. After viewing the house and when he was resting at the home of Bob Worthington, Leonard told Father Fuller and Bob that he would like very much to go to Lourdes. Father Fuller promised to look into the possibility but Leonard said he would like to go that weekend. Now Father Fuller and Bob Worthington thought this would be impossible to arrange a flight at such short notice, but Leonard asked if they could arrange to hire a private aircraft to take them there. Well to cut a long story short, they did just that.

02:57 It was a 6 seater aircraft, which took off in the most appalling weather, and set course for Lourdes. Father Fuller and Bob were feeling awfully sick in the back of the plane, but Leonard was up at the front talking to the pilot and enjoying every minute of the flight.

They landed at a small private airfield, thinking this was Tarbes, the airport used for Lourdes, but they had to be redirected over the mountain to the proper airport.

03:31Just think that this was a Saturday afternoon, it was pouring with rain and they were only there for a short weekend and Leonard wanted to fit everything in. I understand that he managed to do this, but most importantly, he wanted to be immersed in the baths.

03:51 He called at the Medical Bureau and asked a man if this would be possible, as he had a large post operation wound, which was still partly open because the wound was being drained. The person he spoke to, just happened to be the most senior medical officer of the Bureau, typical Cheshire luck I suppose, who agreed to examine him.

04:16 When he saw the wound he was horrified at the idea of Leonard being immersed in the baths, but his assistant who was present said “But sir, it is faith that heals” and the Doctor relented. The wound was strapped up, very heavily strapped up, and Leonard Cheshire went to the baths.

04:40 He was so impressed with Lourdes that he felt he should do all he could to help others to go to the pilgrimage, whether sick or able bodied.

04:51 This was 1953 or 1954 or somewhere about there and the Ryder / Cheshire Raphael Pilgrimage started by him has been every year since.

05:04 About this time Leonard Cheshire, Father Fuller, Bob and others used a bus in central London to show to the general public, films and displays about the Holy Shroud of Turin. During this time people visiting the bus expressed interest in Lourdes, so they set about organising flights. As it turned out, they hired 4 Dakota aircraft that year, each with 60 pilgrims. This is about the same number we take today, over 40 years later.

05:41 As the years went by and Leonard became so busy with his Foundation and other things, he was not able to go to Lourdes with Raphael very often, but he always tried. As it was so difficult for him to go to Lourdes, he would try to see the pilgrims off at Heathrow, but this was not always possible either.

06:07 Just before he died, Leonard told me how important it was to him that the Raphael Pilgrimage should continue and I feel that we must do all that we can to see that it does.

06:23 I came to join the Foundation through the Pilgrimage really. It was 1973 on a visit to Lourdes that I met Ben Worthington, no relation to Bob Worthington I mentioned earlier, Ben was a Trustee of the Leonard Cheshire Foundation, who asked me what I would like to do when I retired from the Metropolitan Police. I told him I would like to work with people who are disabled, and he said I ought to work for the Foundation, which I did when I retired in 1976; so it's through Lourdes really that I came to join the Foundation.

07:06 Perhaps I can give you some idea of Leonard Cheshire's sense of humour: My very first week at Market Mews, I answered the telephone one lunchtime when everyone was out except myself and the young girl Receptionist. It was a man who said he wanted to speak to someone important. I told him that everyone was out and asked if I could help him. He asked “Are you important enough?” I said “ I doubt it as I have only been here a short while but could I get someone to call him back?” “Well” he said “ You can help me but only if you are important enough.” I started to get a little bit angry at this time and he sensed this in my voice, so he said “ It's alright Wally, this is Leonard Cheshire, I'm just teasing.”

07:57 He also enjoyed introducing me as a retired policeman and no matter who it was, Duchess or Dustman, he always warned them to be careful what they said to me as it might get them into trouble later.

08:13 I remember the time he introduced me to Mary Craig, the author and television commentator. He came into my office at Market Mews with her and said something like “ This is Wally. Do be careful what you say to him. He is an ex-Policeman and whatever you do say may be taken down in writing” Mary laughed. Then Leonard said “ You know Mary don't you?” I said “No sorry I don't.” He insisted “But you must do, everyone knows Mary Craig.”

08:48 Mary shook my hand, blushing slightly, and said “Take no notice of him. He's teasing again.” Leonard left Mary in the room to talk to me and he left smiling from ear to ear.

09:01 I recall in 1981, whilst driving him past the Ritz Hotel in Piccadilly, when he said “ That place brings back happy memories” and jokingly I said “ Leonard, I'm not sure you should be telling me this.” He ignored my comment by silently laughing and added “ I was enjoying a long weekend there during the war and on the Saturday morning I was sitting in the lounge reading the newspaper, when it suddenly came over me that I did not have enough money to pay my hotel bill. I only had about 10 shillings or so. I just happened to have the paper open at the racing page and I found I was almost staring at the name of a particular horse. Without really thinking, I backed the horse and it won. With the money I won, I paid my bill and returned to my RAF station a much happier and relieved man”.

10:04 Leonard of course had a very serious side. When he was under pressure, it was most noticeable. I reckoned I could always sense this. When he would call me into his office, I always went armed with a notebook so that I could note down and therefore ensure I would not misunderstand what he was asking me to do. When I entered his room, if he looked at his watch and said that he had very little time, then I would simply note what he wanted and leave as soon as possible. I could see no point in putting more pressure on him by taking up his time with idle chit chat.

10:47 On the other hand if he asked me to sit down and invited me to a coffee, as he sometimes did, then I knew he felt like a chat and I would take full advantage of this.

11:01 I have in the past been rebuked by him for being late meeting him at an airport, or for driving too fast in inclement weather or not taking a very good route to somewhere; but every time something like this happened, he was always so nice afterwards that it really did not matter that I had been rebuked at all.

11:24 Leonard of course he had a very kind side to him and I can remember one occasion particularly when he asked me if I would take his car to meet him off the train at Peterborough so that he could drive straight home to Cavendish. I readily agreed but asked if he would mind my taking along my son who has a learning disability, that's Clive. He did not hesitate to agree.

11:53 I met the train and whilst I was handing him the keys to the car, he reminded me to claim for the rail fares for my son and myself. Now I pointed out that there was only the one fare for myself to be claimed for as my son Clive was travelling for the fun of the ride and I would be paying for his fare. Before lunch the next day he had been in contact with the Treasury at Maunsell Street and insisted on paying for Clive's rail trip himself. He would not take no for an answer on that one.

12:28 On another occasion I remember in 1981, it seemed to me that I was likely to lose my job with the Foundation. This was particularly worrying as I had just bought another house. When Leonard heard of my fears, he assured me that this would not happen, he would not let it happen. He told me that he had spoken with several senior Trustees, who agreed with him that they would not let it happen either. What was so nice for me was he said “Even if they had not agreed, I would as Founder, insisted that you stayed.

13:01 I used to arrange Leonard's visits to the UK Homes and he always wanted me to arrange them as fairly as possible. He always wanted to have enough time to meet with the residents and helpers and would always ask the Home to keep the visit as low key as possible; not too many V.I.P's. He was always very distressed if he had to cancel a visit through illness or something like that. He hated so much, disappointing them.

13:42 Leonard always sent me a Christmas card and each year there was a different message but the card he sent to me the Christmas before he died if the one I value the most. It read, Dear Wally, A blessed and Happy Christmas to you all. Don't know what I'd do without you. Leonard.

14:05 Leonard’s last days were particularly distressing. His illness was diagnosed around about that Christmas, and during the ensuing months he went to some lengths to assure everyone that he did not mind being disabled. He felt that instead of being on the outside of the world of disability looking in, he was now one of those for whom he had spent the best part of his life serving. Mind you, he didn't put it quite like that , his version was much humbler.

14:42 During the course of his illness, I spoke to him quite often and he never really complained. During this time there are 2 particular occasions that I shall always remember.

The first was his visit to the Tower of London, which I am sure he knew would be his final farewell to his Trustees. He asked me to stand near him with a glass of orange juice as he had no saliva and he needed to moisten his mouth now and again. Because I was standing so close to him, I saw the emotion that flowed between him and some very old friends. I was choked with emotion myself, as was everyone there, so Heaven alone knows what he was going through.

15:29 The second occasion was when he rang me on the Wednesday before he died on the Friday. I asked him how he was and immediately felt awful for asking such a silly question, but one does this sort of thing sometimes without really thinking. He said he was alright, but had had a bad nights sleep. He said that because he had almost no flesh on him, he could not get comfortable. I said I was so sorry and wished that I could do something to help and he simply said “Oh don't worry Wally it's just a passing phase.

16:12 Two days later, Friday 31st July he died. This was my last full working day at the Foundation before I went into semi retirement.

16:26 I also remember vividly, going to Leonards funeral service at Cavendish and later saw him buried in the village cemetery. His passing is a sad loss to his family and a great loss to his Foundation. Many others miss him too, including me. Still, I have many fine memories of him and I will always be proud and privileged to have known him.

16:53 I have made this recording on Monday 31st October 1994 which is my last official day as an employee of the Leonard Cheshire Foundation and I wish this recording to replace the one I made with Jill Roberts, Leonard Cheshire Foundation Archivist which I recorded on the 27th April 1994 which I found to be too long and too fussy. Thank you.

17:23 Speech Ends

17:24 End of recording

End of Transcription

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