

## WELLBEING

# 'Comedy is a way of me reclaiming my identity'

JAMIE MACDONALD'S POIGNANT, FUNNY JOURNEY IS A UNIQUE TAKE ON HIS BLINDNESS, HE TELLS ANDREW WILLIAMS

**S**TAND-UP comedian Jamie MacDonald, 40, was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa when he 16 – a condition that causes blindness. Having lost most of his sight, he can only see light, dark and some shapes, and has now written a stand-up show for Radio 4 about his condition.

'I got into comedy as a way of me reclaiming my identity rather than being, "that poor little blind guy over there," says Jamie.

Jamie first noticed his eyesight was getting worse when he was 14. A trip to the optician and some glasses didn't improve things so he was sent to hospital where, after a series of tests, he was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic condition that leads to sight loss, when he was 16.

He says he spent the next ten years in denial.

'I moved schools to go to a unit for visually impaired children but I was carrying on as if nothing had happened which was a bit strange,' he says.

'I hung around with my same mates and I never spoke about it. I grew up in Glasgow, I didn't have an ultra-sensitive group of pals, there wasn't a lot of talking about how I felt about it. I just got on with it.'

As a teenager he started going to pubs and ended up in some awkward situations.

'I'd accidentally go to the ladies' toilet by mistake as I couldn't see the sign properly. I'd end up trying to

joke my way out of any problems it caused with the bouncers,' he says.

Jamie went to St Andrews University where he was given some resources to try to help with his sight loss but continued living in denial of his deteriorating condition.

'One of the set texts arrived in a massive sack. It was one book but it arrived as 40 audio tapes from the Royal National Institute of Blind People. I didn't know where I was with it.

'At the beginning of my degree I managed to get away with my sight loss. I could find my way around and I was determined to pretend to myself I didn't have any problems for as long as possible – even though I had someone from student services sitting next to me in lectures making notes for me.

All my friends knew I had sight loss but we never spoke about it.'

Four years later, when he went to

**'I'd accidentally go to the ladies' toilet because I couldn't see the sign properly'**

Aberdeen University to do a law course, Jamie's vision had then started to get worse.

'I'd started walking into stuff so I started using a white stick because I knew I'd have an accident otherwise. Instead of bumping into people and them thinking I was a rude weirdo, which had happened before, they now saw the stick and asked if I might need a hand.'

After he'd graduated and got a job in London working in corporate banking, Jamie found the stick a hindrance as well as a help.

'The white stick gave me a level of

freedom. I was able to get around without bumping into things. But it stripped me of my identity. I'd gone from being Jamie the student to "that blind guy over there."

Jamie would go to The Comedy Café in Shoreditch, near his office, after work with friends and signed up for a spot at the open mic night.

'A comedy club is a hostile environment for someone with sight loss – it's dark and there are tables and chairs everywhere. But they helped me up the stairs to the stage, put the microphone in my hand and faced me to the audience. I did a five-minute set and I've carried on from there.

'I've spoken to other comedians who don't have sight loss – they say they can only see the front row of the audience anyway and they still get stage fright.

'So not seeing the audience doesn't really matter. I've been doing it for ten years and I know the difference between a pregnant pause waiting for a laugh and a deathly silence where there will be no laughter coming at all.'

Jamie is now an established stand-up with six Edinburgh Fringe shows under his belt and a TV series about blindness set for broadcast later this year.

'Comedy started as being cathartic. I was struggling with my identity. I was a person with real experiences, I wasn't just "that blind guy."

But ultimately now I'm just an entertainer. I get booked because I make rooms full of people laugh, and that's what I love doing for a living.'

■ *Jamie MacDonald: Life On The Blink begins today at 11pm on Radio 4 and runs for four weeks, [jamiemacdonaldcomedian.com](http://jamiemacdonaldcomedian.com)*

## WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RETINITIS PIGMENTOSA

*Kate Arkell, 45, research development manager at Retina UK, explains what it is like to live with the condition.*

Retinitis pigmentosa (RP) is a genetic condition that a person is born with. It can be caused by a fault in any one of 200 genes. Around one in 4,000 people has it and it's the most common cause of sight loss in the working age population.

Everyone with retinitis pigmentosa will develop sight loss and it usually ends in severe sight impairment. It progresses differently in different people. In more severe cases sight loss can start in infancy but in many cases it starts in adolescence, early adulthood or in people in their 30s and 40s.

In most cases RP starts with loss of peripheral vision. The first thing people usually notice is they can't see well in the dark. It's the edge of our vision that sees best in low light and that deteriorates first with this condition. Then quite often the person's vision shrinks down into a tunnel but others will have blind patches all over their vision, it varies.

There is no treatment for the vast majority of people with RP. There is a gene therapy called Luxturna but it only works on one gene. It's a one-off injection into the back of the eye, but less than 100 people in the UK will benefit from it. But there is cutting edge research going on. Some of the genes that cause RP are amenable to gene therapy, which is a realistic prospect for potentially treating this condition in the future.

■ [retinuk.org.uk](http://retinuk.org.uk)

**Well-established:** Jamie has been a comic for ten years after initially signing up for an open mic night at his local comedy club