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Interviewer: Julia Goldsmith (speaker, female)
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Complete Interview Transcript with: Vaughan Jenkins & John Seage

Summary: Vaughan features in one of Derek Evans' iconic photos taken at Wessington School, Woolhope, Herefordshire, in the late 1950s/early 1960s. In the photo with him is his old school friend, John Sage. Both boys were profoundly deaf and were sent to the school as three and four-year-olds. The regime was tough but both men appreciate what it did for them. NB: For the interview Vaughan and John were both shown the group of Derek Evans photographs from the school, primarily an image featuring the two boys and the hand of the head-teacher.

0.00

JG: Can you just tell us your name and your connection to Derek Evans in this photograph?

VJ: So my name is Vaughan Jenkins and I was in that school from 1956 in Hereford. It was a big school and I lived there until 1965.

JG: And can you tell us what age you went there from?

VJ: I was three, three when I went there and it was a boarding school and I actually lived there from the age of three until 1965. And then I passed an exam and moved to a school I Emnglnad. The school closed down in 1965 and I passed an entrance exam to move to another school when it closed down. The reason was because the head mistress was retiring and so they had to sell the school and it opened a year later, the local authority took it over and it became a boy's school. There were about 30 children there. and it stayed like that, a boy's school, until 1983. I'm very grateful to the school and I've got a lot of good memories from my time there.

JG: So can you tell us about your first day at the school and when you arrived there?

VJ: that's a good question. My first day there, I was only three,. My father had bought a new car an Austin, I don't remember the number, an Austin 4 or 5, so my mother, my grandmother, my father, myself, we drove all the way there. it was quite a windy drive, there were no motorways in those days. And when we arrived, we stopped at Brecon first on the way

because it was such a long drive, and then we got to the school. It looked enormous to me. My father said, 'this is going to be your school', and I was shocked. There were a lot of children running around and I couldn't quite believe it really. I met the headmistress and they were chatting, she was chatting to my parents and I could see the children. They called me over, 'come on, come with us', so I followed them. My parents were shown all around the school and I was just playing games with the children. I felt fine and then when it was time for my parents to go I was too busy playing and my parents had left. And then it hit me. But my father told me later that as they drove off my mother was very very upset. Excuse me, (emotional) it's bringing back a lot of memories. And you know they had left like that and my mother was upset and they drove just a short way and they kept saying, 'is Vaughan going to be alright, is Vaughan going to be alright?' So, my father stopped the car and walked back and checked in with the headmistress, 'is Vaughan ok?' They took me into a room upstairs where they could look down on the children and there I was playing around with the other children. So he got back to my mother and said, 'look, he's fine, he's playing with the other children.../'

5.00

VJ: .../he's ok. But I'll never forget that day.

JG: Are you ok?

VJ: All the memories. It was hard.

JG: Do you want to stop for a bit?

VJ: No, I'm fine.

JG: So tell us some of the good memories, about the gardening, the vegetables, chickens and geese?

VJ: oh, we had a lot of jobs in the school, lots of good memories. We had the time table and each session was set for different things, so we would be doing gardening, cleaning, picking potatoes from the farm, collecting all the potatoes, huge piles of potatoes. So we would do gardening, we had a greenhouse, we grew tomatoes, we had to feed them, pick out all the weeds. The girls, that was their job, to do the weeding and the boys would do the digging. And so we gardened all the way through school really (laughing) the biggest part of our time there was gardening. A lot of work. And then actually in the class room we would do maths, English, they were the two priorities really, different subject. But mostly it was gardening, it was such a large garden. And people would clean and people from Spain would come over to help garden as well, they would come over from Spain and they would work in the garden with us. About ten years ago I went to see it to have a

look around. All the gardens had gone, the farmer's fields have gone. But my memories are of the gardens, farm. We used to play gardening in the wet soil, would make them into weapons and throw them at each other. And then when somebody looked we'd stand still so not to get caught. We had some good fun.

JG: Can you tell us about the teachers who were there? The teacher who set it up, was hard of hearing and the nice ones and the not so nice ones.

VJ: they were very strict. The head mistress was a very strict woman and we weren't allowed to sign. None of us could use BSL, we were taught aurally/orally. If we were caught signing, we would have to write a hundred lines. And there were only four teachers in the school: the headmistress, a maths teacher, a woman Mrs Lucas, a cook, just a small kitchen. We had to travel to Hereford to get the ingredients for the cooking and we had to do woodwork. There was actually on equipment in the school so we used to go to a hearing school, I don't remember the name of the school, but we used to go there to do woodwork. And we'd meet in Ross-on-Wye and then travel back to school. And that's how I learned wood work and I enjoyed that, I learned a lot. They were basically the four or five teachers there, that was all.

JG: So why did you, and some other boys, travel from Port Talbot to school in Woolhope, Herefordshire? Why did you go all that way?

VJ: I believe we went to that school because Glamorgan County Council.../

10.00

VJ: .../advised my parents that it was the best school, that Hereford was better than Llandindrod Wells. So my father accepted the advice of the Council, and another boy, Christopher Charles, their parents were given the same advice. And there were four of us and so they said it would be better for you all to go and share transport. And then another boy John came, he was from Port Talbot. We used to have lifts back and forth together. And I think Glamorgan County Council wanted us to go to Hereford rather than Llandindrod Wells, I'm not sure why. The teachers were very good. But very strict. One teacher, a really big man had thick hands and long fingers. Oh, we were terrified of him. When we would do school theatre, school plays, you can see from photos he's one of the Ugly Sisters and oh, he was terrifying to look at. The other teacher was thin and quiet. It was like Laurel and Hardy.

JG: So Vaughan, can you tell us what you remember about Derek coming to take that photograph? And what was going on in the photograph?

VJ: I must have been about six and I remember having a photograph taken. I was fighting with John in school and the prefect caught us and took us to the head mistress, and that's when the photograph. Both of us are being told off and we're looking at her, the head mistress. And I remember that photograph because we had been fighting and we went to the head mistress. So I definitely remember that photo.

JG: You both look so angelic in the photograph.

VJ: the photographer, Derek, caught a brilliant shot. It was just a perfect time because we were both looking up at the teacher. It was just a perfect shot.

JG: you said you thought the day the photo was taken that perhaps that was a day the governors and parents were visiting the school?

VJ: I remember the photographer coming but I don't remember if it was a special day. I remember the fireworks and the photograph of the fireworks, I'm holding a sparkler and it was on the front of a newspaper. It was a festival or an open day, I don't really remember what the special event was but it was in the afternoon that I was fighting with John and something had happened and everyone was there for this festival. So when the teacher was trying to teach me maths she was asking what does one plus one equals two, and I was trying to work it out and I kept getting it wrong and I was getting so frustrated and I lost my temper. And you can see in that photo, my hand is on my head, and oh, and finally I understood it and I smiled. And that happened a lot.

JG: So you didn't feel self-conscious that the photographer was there?

VJ: we didn't know he was taking photos. We didn't make eye contact with him. He was coming around and doing it.../

15.00

VJ: .../quietly. He was walking around the desks. He was obviously looking for a good shot.

JG: Tell us about the hearing aid packs. In the photos looks like you've got a fat tummy, like you've been eating too much porridge!?

VJ: yes, the hearing aids had a huge battery and it was really heavy to wear it around our chests, and you'd put it and it looked like you had a fat tummy, and you'd pull your jumper, over it and it made you look enormous. But they were the old-fashioned hearing aids then you know. They didn't help me at all. Because I'm profoundly deaf and they were trying to teach

me to speak, but I had very poor speech and then I moved to another school and my speech did improve while I was there. the head mistress was hard of hearing and so I don't know if her speech was clear herself. It was hard to understand her. Maybe the other teachers with better speech we could understand more clearly. But she was very good at writing things on the board and drawing and she would explain to us and every day she would tell us the news, get the newspaper and tell us what was in the news. This is awful, this is what's happening. We were very interested. We picked up a lot of news. And then when she'd finished looking at the newspaper we'd look at the pictures.

JG: Did you ever do any secret sign language and what happened when you got caught?

VJ: we'd be behind our desks and we'd lift the desks up and sign to each other and secretly community through sign language. And then the teacher would walk around and she would bang the desk on the top of our heads and'd say, don't sign! Oh, it used to hurt your head, the whack on your head. And she'd throw chalk at us, sometimes it would hit you on the head, sometimes it would miss, and everyone would laugh at each other and tease each other. And then she would throw the board rubber. We weren't allowed to sign. We weren't allowed to use BSL at all. It was all oral/aural. And if they caught us signing we'd have a hundred lines and we'd have to write, I must not sign, I must not sign a hundred times. The head mistress was very strict. She wanted the children to speak but the problem was she was hard of hearing herself and it was very difficult to have a conversation with her, she couldn't use the phone. Her partner, another teacher, would give her messages and say, look, we've had this phone call. She would have to take all the phone calls. She would relay the message to the head mistress. Because she couldn't use the phone herself. And we would just watch. To see them talking on the phone we wouldn't understand that at all.

JG: What about when you were up in the dormitories and away from the teachers, did you use sign language then?

VJ: oh yes, I the dormitories, in the bedroom we had two bedrooms, one for the boys and one for the girls, there were about five in each room, something like that, five or six, or maybe eight, sharing the rooms and we'd play about, and sign and talk to each other non-stop. And then one boy would be by the door to warn us and as soon as he'd say, 'teacher is coming'.../

20.00

VJ: and we'd all get into bed and pretend to be asleep. Used to sign the torch to check we were sleeping. It was good, we were free to sign and talk to each other as soon as the teacher go we'd all be back signing and chatting to each other. Sometimes we'd play about.

JG: You said you were surprised when we got in touch with you. It bought back a lot of memories. Can you tell us how it felt to revisit some of those memories?

VJ: I had retired from work and had finished and I'd had an email from someone in work saying someone was looking for me? And I was really surprised. So I looked at the website and there was some questions on there and I was looking for my name, Vaughan Jenkins, and it was me and I wasn't sure, was it a scam, a fake person trying to contact me, so I was checking to see what the job was and making sure it was the right person and not a scam and then I contacted them by email and had a response really quickly. And I said I am Vaughan, I am the right person you're looking for, and that's how we started to communicate with each other. And we'd be talking about the school and I said I had a lot of memories about my time there and so now you're interviewing me and filming me about all these memories.

JG: Tell us about reconnecting with people who were at school with you?

VJ: my friend Christopher moved to a school in London and then a year later I moved to the same school. But our friend John stayed in Port Talbot he went to a mainstream school. And Christopher and I stayed in touch because we were in the same school but we didn't keep in touch with John because we were in completely different schools. Then as we got older the three of us met again because we were all members of Bridgend deaf club so we're still in touch with each other. We play bowls, indoor games, and years ago we used to play football and cricket, so we've kept in touch all these years. And you've found me now!

JG interviewing John Sage

JG: So can you tell me your connection with the school?

JS: My name is John Sage and I went to school in Hereford.

JG: Can you tell us about your first memories of the school, do you remember your first day?

JS: I was born in 1954 and I went to the school to the school when I was four. I didn't have a clue what was going on. I didn't know anyone at all.

JG: So what was your first day like? Can you remember?

JS: I don't really remember the first day. My friend had given me a lift in their car and dropped us off at the train station – it was a steam train I think – and then we had to go on a coach, it was a long long way to go, and then eventually we got to the school. I saw the children but I didn't know any of them. They

were all new to me. I didn't know anyone at all. And I felt panicky, I didn't know what was happening.

25.00

JG: Did you know that it was a boarding school and that you were going to be living there?

JS: When I came home I can remember crying a lot. I cried my eyes out that I didn't want to go back. And every month I was taken back.

JG: Do you remember meeting Vaughan for the first time?

JS: Yes, I remember meeting Vaughan. But then when I got home I didn't realise that they lived in Port Talbot, that we were all actually living in the same place.

JS is holding up a newspaper with Woolhope story in it.

JG: So John, can you tell us about that original press cutting with the Derek Evans' photograph in featuring you and Vaughan?

JS: I didn't know anything about the newspaper and I found it and was really pleased to see it. A deaf friend of mine from Neath showed me the newspaper and gave it to me. It's the original one. It's about three years ago that they gave it to me. I'd never seen the photo before, I'd never seen the newspaper before until three years ago.

JG: How did the come across the copy?

JS: it was a deaf friend, you know I play bowls with a group, and we were talking about the old schools that we'd gone to and started talking about the old photographs and he said, I've got an old newspaper cutting would you like to keep it and gave it to me to keep.

JG: Do you remember Derek coming to take the photographs, do you remember what was happening in the photographs?

JS: I don't remember having the photograph taken. I don't remember the man Derek Evans I was very young and don't remember any of it.

JG: Tell us some of the stories from the school days.

JS: I've got lots of memories from school and the time we'd all go to bed and chat, it would be a great time. I have this idea of using the pillows as like shields and we would be throwing things bac and forth at each other. And I threw one and it smashed the window. It went right through the glass and everyone

was panicking. We got into bed and pretended to be asleep when the teacher came. And then they realised it was my pillow that had gone on out the window. And they said, whose slipper is this? And everyone said, oh, we don't know whose it is. Sometimes we would jump on the beds and the teachers would hear the noise and they'd come in and call us out. They'd take us downstairs, it was a huge house, and we'd have to go and sleep in a room on our own on a really hard bed. And then the children would come and laugh at us for being put in there for your punishment. I was a very naughty boy in school and they would always laugh at me. I was a soldier in the school play. I had no idea what was happening. Vaughan Jenkins gave me this L plate to put on, I had no idea what it meant but they put it round my neck and everyone laughed at me.

30.00

JG: Tell us how you communicated, because you didn't learn sign language?

JS: the old-fashioned hearing aids were really heavy and didn't help at all. I'm profoundly deaf and couldn't hear at all. The teacher was teaching us orally/aurally and they would cut up strips of paper and make us say (puffing sounds) we'd have to blow out to make the pieces of paper move, and then she's put a finger on her nose or my nose and go mmmm, mmmm, and they kept on and on trying to do speech with us, but it was no good at all, I can't speak at all. I've got no voice whatsoever.

JG: So how did you communicate with the other children if you didn't know sign language?

JS: well in school we had desks and I talked to the child next to me and the teacher would throw the board rubber at me and say, don't sign, and then go back to the front. And that was it really. Only secretly signing. Sometimes a teacher would call me out and smack me. I had lots of punishment. I'd have cane on my hand, about five times. Really hurt.

JG: What happened when the school closed down?

JS: so once the school closed I had no idea what was happening. I just thought I would go home. I wasn't aware of what was going on so I came home to port Talbot and they showed me a school close to home, but I was the only deaf child there, everyone else was hearing, so it was really difficult. And then my moved me to another school, a bigger school, and they found a unit for me there where the teachers would try and teach me. I left school when I was 17 and looked for a job. The social worker came and asked if I would like to work with other deaf people. And I was so shocked when I got there. my old school friend Christopher Charles was there and he was able to help me, he taught me to be an electrician, we were able to communicate

really well. Then Christopher asked me if I would like to go to Bridgend Deaf Club? So I said, oh yeah, that would be good. And I asked my parents and they said no. they didn't want me to go. But my other friend said, oh come on, let's go. So we went to Bridgend Deaf Club, I decided to ignore my parents and I would go. So we got to the old Bridgend Deaf Club, it was in town then, and there was Vaughan Jenkins and other people I knew, but they were all fluent BSL users and I really struggled to understand them. So They taught me sign language and my life is much better now.

JG: so how did you feel when Vaughan got in touch and coming along and talking about your old school days?

JS: well talking about school well I suppose there were good times, but really now the three of us here in Port Talbot is better now I'm older. I play darts, bowls, I used to play football, cricket. I broke my hand playing cricket years ago. I was I A& E five hours once when I broke my thumb playing cricket. Because the gloves that you wear are quite hard but they are all left handed and I'm right handed.

John and Vaughan in the same frame talking about Derek's Photo.

VJ: So this is me Vaughan.

JS: and this is me John.

VJ: I remember this well. John and I had been fighting, we were very naughty and the prefect had dragged us to the teacher and we're both looking at her while she's telling us off. I think the fight was about sweets. I can't really remember.

JS: I know I was naughty in school but I can't remember what it was over (laughing).