

A portrait of a young boy with light brown hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a blue and white checkered shirt. He is smiling and looking slightly to the right. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. There are orange and green geometric shapes in the top left corner.

**Charlie:
'Not special,
limited edition'**



"Charlie is one of the most charismatic young people I ever have met. His personality, drive for equal rights and love of life is infectious. I've seen Charlie speak to large audiences and he's not phased; he brings everyone along with him."

Charlie: 'Not special, limited edition'

Introduction

When you meet Charlie, you don't see disability; you see a charming and cheeky young man who is full of opinions and eager to make his mark on the world.

Charlie's determination to succeed is borne out of the relationship he has with his mother, Mandy, who is optimistic, solution focused and an individual who challenges and overcomes obstacles. Individually they are formidable, but together they are a force to be reckoned with.

This book gives you a slice of Charlie's life, aged 16. Charlie first worked with Changing Our Lives several years ago now, when he was part of a challenge board led by young disabled people. As of Spring 2021, he is about to embark on a new role as an Associate of Changing Our Lives. We are very much looking forward to what he has to offer next.

Jayne Leeson
CEO, Changing Our Lives



Disabled people are people just like anyone else, and just because there is something different about a person, it doesn't mean that people should treat them as less than anyone else.

People should see *the ability* in all of us and *not* the disability.

Being "limited edition" is nothing about having a disability: I'm "limited edition" because I'm one on my own, normal but not conventional 'normal', a cheeky chap who walks his own path regardless of what others tell him to do.



Risky business...

"You were the disabled kid no one knew what to do with."

Mandy, Charlie's mum

I was four when I first learned the words 'risk assessment'. It's been a plaque I've held over my head ever since. A lot of people go through life without having to know what a risk assessment is, but I've had people trying to put it in my way from an early age.

My school tried to stop me playing out on the playground with the other kids because they said it was too dangerous: I had to sit in a classroom with one of my friends instead. To me this is health and safety *gone mad*. That was when mom taught me the phrase, 'risk assessment' and that even though I am physically disabled, it shouldn't hold me back.

Although this was difficult, I made friends really easily because the other children didn't see me as different. It was the *staff* who saw me as different: this was *their problem*, although they tried to make it mine.

Being in high school

Now I'm in high school, no one treats me as different. School is really fabulous and if I need support, they're always there to listen to me, and they don't bombard me with risk assessments anymore.

I'm doing five GCSEs, English, Maths, Science, History, and RE, as well as three BTECs, in Sport, Business Enterprise, and Hospitality and Catering. I really enjoy Hospitality and Catering, Business Enterprise, and English.

I also enjoy sport, but it really depends on what we're doing. I like to play basketball and last year I did a term of wheelchair football, but that wasn't really my cup of tea.



A single Pringle (*for now...*)

I've had a couple of girlfriends, but I'm a '*single Pringle*' at the moment. I've liked having girlfriends in the past because it gives me someone to talk to, but now I like being on my own and being independent. I've gotten used to it.

But... If there are any ladies out there that are interested, here's what you need to know:

Cheeky chap seeking loveable lass

I'm chatty, fun loving, very thoughtful, kind, and an all-round cheeky chap.

I like girls who are funny, but it's good for them to have a serious side as well. Not too *serious*, mind you. Looks aren't really important to me: it's the person's character I'm attracted to. What I'm really after is company because I love to talk (*not that I think my mother's boring or anything...*).

"Is she in your gang, or has she got her own transport?"

That's what my step-dad, Darren, used to say, which was his jokey way of asking if she was a wheelchair user also. Not that this ever mattered to me: a girlfriend's a girlfriend, *wheels or no wheels*.

"He's had others that were interested, but he wasn't interested in them!"

Mandy, Charlie's mom



Loving life (*just not in the AM*)

"He does NOT like mornings. You could do with a riot shield first thing."

Mandy, Charlie's mom

"When I first wake up, I don't like to be spoken to..."

Charlie



I'm a really positive person, and I think I get that from mom. I just *love* my life.

I'm quite the socialite: I know lots of people, I don't think I could count how many people I know. When me and mom go to the caravan, we often meet my aunt there, and I probably know all the people on the campsite.

I love karate and I've got my first blackbelt! When I first started, people thought I'd get frustrated and then leave but I've stuck with it for years now. Guess I proved them wrong!

I'm dancing down memory lane with some of this stuff, but I've been a Beaver and a Scout, and I've got my Bronze and Silver awards.



Back in the day, I went to whatever camp was on. At the St John's camp, I was the only Badger in Sandwell who went. That's an accolade I'm pretty proud of!

I've done my fair share of abseiling, rock climbing, horse riding, zip-lining, canoeing, the mud run... You name it. I like a bit of risk... Danger is my middle name, you could say.



Gaming is another one of my passions. I particularly love classic games like Crash Bandicoot and Sonic the Hedgehog, and I'm also quite the collector: I've got every type of Nintendo gaming console and every version of the Xbox they've ever made, including an original Xbox that works in the original way. Plus an Atari!

My obsession with gaming started when I was 3 or 4, when I got my first handheld - a Nintendo DS Lite in ice blue, which I still have, although it's in pieces now.... My first game was Nintendogs: Dachshund and Friends. It's safe to say my passion for Nintendo blossomed from there.

When I was 8, I moved onto consoles. I'd never shown any interest in them before, but Darren, my stepdad, had a Playstation 3 and I played a car racing game. Not long after, I went to CEX and bought The Sims 3. This changed everything. I've been hooked on The Sims ever since; I've now got every version of game.



*"I'm not saying I'm cheap,
but I wait for the sales. I
don't like getting a game full
price, when I could just wait
for it to come down a bit."*

Charlie

My mother, Mandy

Mom and I are very positive; we always think of a way to make things work. Mom always finds a solution. She is perfect, to be honest. If there is ever a problem, she'll find a way to sort it out - she's just fab like that. There are not enough words in the English vocabulary, or in the world even, to describe my mom. If I said I wanted to do something, she's always found a way to make it happen. She's a real driving force in my life.



On being Charlie's mom

"Just because people are disabled doesn't mean they can't do things; it doesn't mean they can't be independent and have a good life. If someone tells me I can't do something, I'm determined to prove them wrong.

My dad was in a wheelchair also, and so having Charlie be independent is very important to me. I'm determined that Charlie will have a good life and I've always fought for that. I'd say I'm a natural fighter, because I've always had to be a fighter. I was six when my dad first became ill and I always had to fight for him.

Equality is really important to me, and I'm determined that Charlie will have a good life. Just because he's disabled, it doesn't mean that he should have any less of a life than anyone else. But at the same time though, I'm not overprotective of him. At the end of the day you want to protect your kids, but to a certain point: they need to learn by their own mistakes. I really want Charlie to follow his dreams and go to college and then on to university. I didn't have those opportunities, but they were different times.

I'm really keen to make sure other parents have support when they have a child, because you can start the journey of motherhood thinking that your whole world is falling apart and you can blame yourself, and think 'what did I do wrong?', 'did I not eat the right things?', 'is there anything else I should have done?'. This can be devastating but when your world falls apart, you have to pull it back together and be strong."

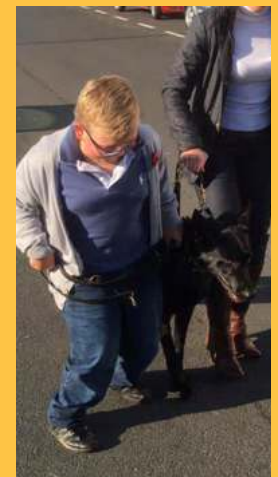
Mandy

My passions and future

I have a real passion for animals; I've had this passion from an early age. I've got a cat called Arthur, and some fish, and I'd really like some pet rats but I'm not sure mom is too keen on that.

I'd really like to get a job training service dogs and guide dogs, because I think who better to train them than someone with experience of disability. I know a lot about animals and I'd say I have a passion for all animals, but I know a lot more about dogs than any other kind.

I've been accepted at Dudley College to do a course in Animal Care. As part of the course, I'll spend a couple of days a week doing a placement at Dudley Zoo, where I'll be able to work with a range of exotic animals and learn about a range of different animal behaviours. It's going to be a great experience and it'll be really helpful for when I apply to study animal psychology, physiology and behaviours at university.



Perfection, it's a work in progress

When I was nine, I had a tendon transfer on my foot to lengthen my Achilles tendon.

I'm sixteen now. I had an operation recently, and the doctor said I probably wouldn't walk again, but six months has gone by now and I'm walking better than ever. I walk around the house but I don't walk in school at the moment. To be honest, I take what the doctor say sometimes with a pinch of salt. During this last operation I had my muscles in my hips released, the female cartilage pinned and placed, my hamstrings length, and my kneecap repositioned. I'm now waiting to have the other leg done.





**No one is too disabled,
or too affected by
mental health difficulties,
to live an ordinary life**

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