

My King's speech: Clapton man's incredible triumph over stammer - News - Hackney Gazette

WHEN a stammering Colin Firth takes to the podium at Wembley Stadium for his

Sheena McKenzie, Reporter
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inaugural address before a crowd of thousands in the film *The King's Speech*, his fear is enough to have you squirming in your seat.

Now imagine if every encounter you had was as daunting as a Wembley Stadium speech. For George Cleary, 27, it's a fear he knows well, after suffering a lifetime of stammering.

Until three months ago the physiotherapist from Clapton struggled to buy train tickets or even tell people where he lived – "I struggled to say Hackney so I had to say places like Stratford instead," he admits.

That was until George, much like King George VI in the award winning film, began a unique speech therapy programme which changed his life forever.

The Starfish Project, run by Anne Blight in East Sussex, uses the costal breathing method to help sufferers control their stammer.

"You take a big, quick, deep breath before you go to speak," George explained.

"We're also told to work on the 'iceberg.' Like an iceberg, you only see 10 per-cent of the stammer – the rest is under the surface. People don't see the 90 per-cent which is the emotion and fear."

The Starfish Project has been so successful it even received a letter in 1999 from the Queen Mother, wife of the late King played by Colin Firth in the film, congratulating them on their work.

Talking to George now, his speech is slow and careful. But the stammer is gone and for the first time in his life he can say exactly what he wants.

"I was a covert stammerer," he admits



From left to right, GEOFFREY RUSH as Lionel Logue, COLIN FIRTH as Bertie (King George VI) and HELENA BONHAM CARTER as Elizabeth in THE KING'S SPEECH. In cinemas Jan 7 2011

“I changed words or sounds and I’d rehearse what I wanted to say.

“Now I challenge myself on purpose, things like topping-up my oyster card with the number of pounds I couldn’t say before.”

George’s stammer emerged when he was around five, though he didn’t really notice it until he hit secondary school.

George said: “It started to affect my confidence. I wasn’t talking-up in class and I felt myself socially withdraw.

“It is frustrating because I’ve actually got quite a lot to say – I just couldn’t get the words out.

“I remember being asked to read out the Merchant of Venice or something like that and the whole class laughing.

“But I wouldn’t mind doing it now.”

George is now keen to start up a support group for students. If you’d like to get involved contact him at: georgecleary1@yahoo.co.uk

Visit the Starfish Project website at: www.starfishproject.co.uk

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