

# NO LIMITS



Headshot of Cathy Low looking directly at the camera against a plain background

We speak to **Cathy Low**, Director of Partnerships at the Thomas Pocklington Trust, to find out how her incredible career has been influenced by her own vision impairment.

**B**eing told at 13 years old that you have untreatable degenerative vision loss could be the kind of experience that dictates your entire future. But when Cathy Low was diagnosed with Stargardt disease – the most common childhood-onset macular dystrophy – a combination of youthful resilience, practical parenting and Cathy’s own indomitable spirit meant that the challenge never had the chance to become a catastrophe.

“When I was told about it, my main concern was that I would go blind, but my parents’ concerns were really about whether I would be able to work. So there was something of a different set of concerns, really,” Cathy laughs.

“But I think that my parents’ attitude was brilliant. There was an expectation that I was going to carry on and achieve and succeed in all the things I was going to do.”

## BUILDING A CAREER

After school, Cathy went to university and then taught English in Italy before returning to the UK, where one of her first jobs was working for a building company.

“I was 22 years old at the time, and I was working on a building site managing 12 labourers. I learnt I was good at managing people and relationships, and I was quite organised,” Cathy says.

“From that job, I went to work with Waltham Forest Council in London. I would be in meetings with 30 people or more, and I wouldn’t know who was talking because

I just couldn’t recognise everybody’s voices. But I had an absolutely brilliant boss at the time who would go round the room getting people to say who they were.

“That’s such an easy thing to do – just getting people to introduce themselves. People think that it takes up a lot of time, especially in a big meeting, but it doesn’t and it’s helpful for everybody.”

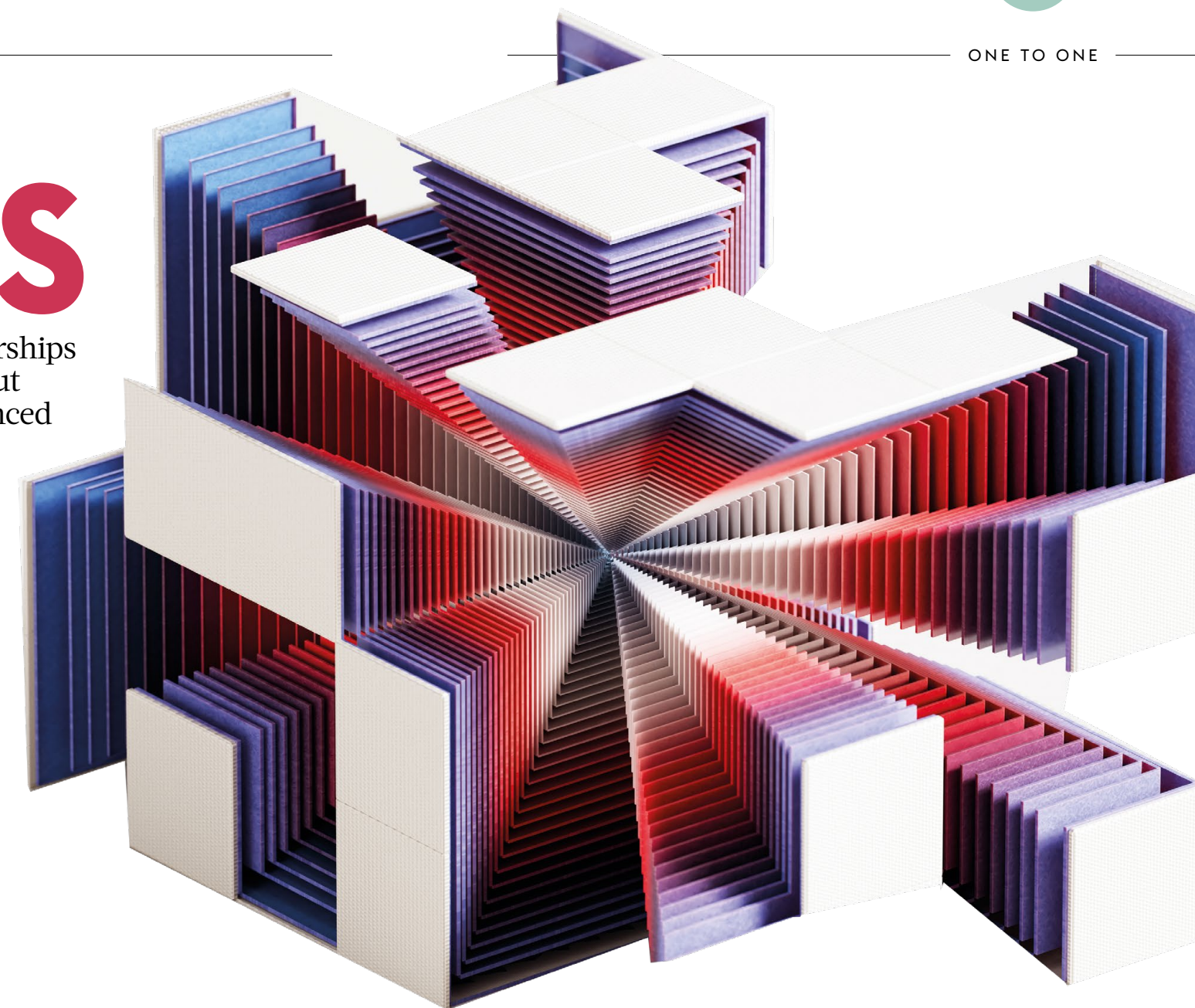
Cathy’s interest in regeneration, housing, community development and economic

## Hab and rehab

**While a positive mental attitude is a great help when dealing with an impairment of any kind, practical measures are invaluable too. “Because I was a child when I was diagnosed, I didn’t really have rehab: I had habilitation, which is slightly different,” Cathy says.**

**“The habilitation officer talked to me about what my life was like and what I needed to be doing, and the two things that were most appropriate for me were getting a large-print dictionary – which I still have – and taking a course on how to touch-type. Both of those things were really helpful.**

**“For people who lose sight as adults, rehabilitation is crucial because it will help you do the things that you used to do. It’s about training around mobility to help you get up and about, and help to do basic tasks around the house such as cooking – all those things that everybody takes for granted but suddenly become more difficult when you can’t see.”**



development grew, and in the run-up to the 2012 London Olympics she became Project Director on a regeneration partnership in Stratford, east London.

“That was another role bringing together lots of organisations from lots of different sectors,” Cathy says. “When I look back now, I think it would have been helpful had I been more aware of the support that was available. I had to go to quite a lot of networking meetings, but I just couldn’t recognise people and I wasn’t very good at telling people that I couldn’t see very well, because I didn’t know how to explain it.

“My central vision is what has been most affected and that has effectively gone now, but my peripheral vision is relatively okay.

IMAGE: GETTY

So I was able to get around and not look like I was visually impaired until I walked past someone in the street, and they would wonder why I wasn’t saying hello to them. That was the hardest thing – perhaps I didn’t make as many connections as I could have done.”

## TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE

Since 2016 Cathy has worked for the Thomas Pocklington Trust (TPT), first as London Projects Director, then as CEO of its associated organisation London Vision, and now as Director of Partnerships. As a national organisation that works with people who are visually impaired, and the majority of whose staff are visually impaired

themselves, Cathy says it is an interesting, rewarding and fun place to work.

“One thing that really helps me in my job, and something that has allowed me to stay in work, is assistive technology. I use a screen reader and notification software so that I can use a computer. That’s the biggest life hack,” Cathy says.

“When I discovered that iPhones – and now almost all phones – have voiceover and magnification built in, and a whole host of accessibility functionality, that was game-changing. When people design apps to be accessible, that is wonderful. It allows me to use technology just like anybody else.”

Perhaps just as important as technology, Cathy says, is the need to foster a more

## The hidden workforce

Cathy says: “A lot of work that we are trying to do at TPT is about lived experience leadership and bringing people who are visually impaired into leadership positions within organisations, so that other people can learn from them and see that these possibilities are there.

“There are tons and tons of people out there who are doing really interesting jobs and also really ordinary jobs, but we don’t really hear about that. I knew one lady who was a specialist colorectal nurse. She had given up her career because of sight loss but 10 years later she reregistered and was working in training. So she was still a nurse but she had adapted how she worked and the NHS hadn’t lost all of her experience.”

accepting attitude that people with vision impairment can bring incredible value to the workplace.

“People are nervous. We run an intern programme at TPT for people who are visually impaired, and I’ve been mentoring somebody who has now gone back to university to do a PhD. She has some struggles with accessibility but the thing she struggles with most is that other students don’t want to talk with her because they don’t know how to. They’re all being very polite around her when what she really wants is the usual student banter,” Cathy says.

“I think it comes down to people having higher expectations – of ourselves but also other people having higher expectations of us. For leaders, I think it’s about not being afraid to have conversations and recognising the talent that’s there. The more that we can do to educate people in all kinds of settings, the better. Visual impairment is all that it is – you’re still a normal person like everybody else.”

## MEMBER RESOURCES

• Further information on the TPT: [pocklington.org.uk](https://pocklington.org.uk)