

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

MATT SINGLETON: BRINGING JOY TO READERS THROUGH COGNITIVE BOOKS

For alumnus Matt Singleton, studying Gerontology at the University of Southampton enabled a midlife career-change – and the birth of an impactful dementia initiative.

Having begun his career in marketing and communications roles in the reinsurance industry, Matt found himself increasingly interested in the interaction of health and finance in later life. His employer, Swiss Re, sponsored him to undertake a part-time Master's in 2011. Matt chose Southampton because “the distance learning option (a rarity at the time) allowed me the flexibility to be a full-time worker, as well as a dad of young children.”

Studying at what was then the Centre for Research on Ageing (now the Department of Gerontology), Matt went on to strategic roles at Swiss Re, developing new products and solutions in the area of ageing. In the meantime, an area he'd covered in depth during his studies – dementia – impacted his personal life in a poignant way. Matt's father, Brian, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2017, with the disease leaving his favourite hobby – reading – by the wayside.

Innovation process

“I'd always bought him books, and I was so saddened that I couldn't do that anymore. People with dementia struggle with focusing on the evolving plot of a story. So, I wanted to have a go at writing one he might be able to read.” Matt and his wife put together and printed their own short one-off book about The Beatles, since Brian had always loved the band. “It was just a bit of fun, but months later my stepmum said to me, ‘He can't put it down!’”

This remark, Matt said, caused his Gerontology training to kick in. “I thought, is there more I can do with this?” He added a section with Cognitive Stimulation exercises – quizzes, games and more, designed to help people with dementia maintain memory and mental functioning. During lockdown, he developed his Beatles book further, this time incorporating professional illustrations and design. “Without knowing it, I was following an innovation process and building a Minimum Viable Proposition (MVP).”



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Left: Brian Singleton, the inspiration behind Cognitive Books, with his wife Colleen

He showed this MVP to leading dementia expert Professor Gill Livingston at University College London, and on her recommendation entered the Alzheimer's Society Accelerator Programme. This provided not only funds, but crucial access to expertise and lived experience – a panel of people willing to share their firsthand experiences of dementia. “That's where this idea I'd developed for my dad began to take on a bigger and more exciting life.”

Shaped by lived experience

The input of the lived experience panel shaped everything from the colour and tactile feel of the book's cover to the decision to create an accompanying audio version, which was ultimately narrated by actor Bill Nighy. Feedback also led Matt to incorporate music into the audio content, given its power to evoke ‘memory by association’ in people with dementia. “All of this comes from speaking to people with dementia and asking what might make a difference to their reading experience.”

Cognitive Books is now a registered company (run by Matt alongside his continuing role with Swiss Re), and as well as the Beatles book, has published titles on the 1966 football World Cup and on classic episodes and characters of Coronation Street. These familiar themes are explored using techniques from Reminiscence Therapy. The books are adapted to help overcome barriers for readers with dementia, including large text presented in digestible chunks and easy to turn pages.

“Human, loved, and full of life”

Matt has seen the impact of the books on individual readers and their carers via a flood of positive reviews and personal messages. But he said that he has been surprised and moved by the impact in care homes, where activities coordinators have used the books as a springboard for creative activities, ranging from dressing up to dancing and sing-alongs. “People with dementia are often forgotten about by society – perceived as zombies, almost. And that's just not the case. These

people are human, they're loved, and they are full of joy and life. This can be enhanced with stimulative exercises, and the books are helping to do that.”

He has ideas for further titles in the pipeline, with the hope of seeing the books' impact extend to even more readers.

Looking back at the road to this ground-breaking initiative, Matt says he is grateful to the University of Southampton for facilitating his pursuit of his passion for Gerontology. “Changing career in the middle of your life is not easy, and it was the University that enabled it for me.”

Find out more:
cognitivebooks.co.uk/home