

'We've beaten the odds'

Babies born disabled because of the drug thalidomide were given no hope of survival by doctors. Forty years on, many are leading inspirational lives

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Kevin Donellon makes his point proudly and bluntly: 'When we were born the doctors thought, "What the hell have we got here?" They wrote us off, basically, but we've managed to turn

perceptions of disabled people on their head.' Kevin is one of three thalidomide survivors featured in a moving documentary on the Sixties medical tragedy, part of BBC2's *What Your Problem?* two-week season on disability.

Thalidomide, a drug prescribed to pregnant women for morning sickness, caused 8000 babies worldwide – 800 in Britain – to be born without properly developed arms or legs and, occasionally, neither. About half died just after birth and doctors thought the remainder would be helpless and only live a few months. But 40 years on, many have confounded these dismal predictions and provide an inspiring example of the remarkable resilience of the human spirit.

Kevin was born with hands and feet directly attached to his torso, but left home at 22, to live an independent life. Now 41, he is currently working for an MA in Disability Studies and is also a part-time university lecturer. He lives alone in a specially adapted home – with a souvenir prosthetic limb as a poignant reminder of 'the

bad old days, when they wanted us all to wear artificial limbs'.

Fellow Scouser Gary Skyner, 42, who has short arms but normal legs, is married with two children and has carved out a successful career as a stand-up comic. 'I play a good round of golf. Well, I ought to, I've got a bloody good handicap!' is typical of the way he addresses his disability in his act, which he performs in some of the North's toughest clubs.

All three of the people featured have drawn on determination and sheer force of personality to carve out fulfilling lives, none more so than Janette Cooke, who in 1986 became the first person without any limbs to give birth.

Allowed some mobility by a wheelchair controlled by her chin, she is treasurer at her local church in Manchester, the current chairperson of The Thalidomide Society and a psychic medium. She also enjoys holidays in Florida, bingo and trips to see hunky male strippers The Chippendales.

'I hope this programme will show everyone that the disabled are normal people who just do things differently,' she says. 'What really bothers me is when I'm in a supermarket and a child wants to ask me what's happened to me and their mother tells them to be quiet. I'm happy to talk about thalidomide to them. It's the only way it will be remembered so it never happens



Mother's pride: Janette and Bob with their daughter, Kelli-Anne



Making the most of life (from top): Comedian Gary, lecturer Kevin and mum Janette

'I hope the programme will show everyone that the disabled are normal people who just do things differently'

again, because it's a man-made disability.'

Her husband Bob, 53, claims she has never been fazed by anything, but Janette, 40, admits to a special exception: 'The most upsetting time was when my daughter, Kelli-Anne [now 16], was born and Bob went home from the hospital and she started crying in her cot. Not being able to reach across and pick her up to comfort her was the most horrible thing in my life.'

But Janette does not want anyone's pity – in fact, she positively detests it.

'I have everything I could want – lovely husband, daughter, and loads of fun. It's funny when a woman says to me, "Recently, I've been feeling really sorry for myself, but then I saw you and realised there are people a lot worse off than me". I think, "You're joking, love, I'm not worse off than you!"'

JANE DIMOND