

Mr Chancellor,

I am sure that you can remember competing in the very first Great North Run back in 1981. At the time, a young BBC reporter picked up an intriguing lead from one of her local contacts. Apparently, a convicted criminal from Durham high-security prison was being allowed out for the day, unshackled, specifically to compete in the race....and his number would be 432. Hungry for a story, Dianne Nelmes made her way to South Shields, eagerly registering the numbers as they crossed the finish line. Then, ten minutes later, number 432 appeared. Dianne ducked under the boundary rope and ran towards him, camera man in tow. She opened with the respectable line: “very good time”, and then, “how do you feel....being....outside.....you serving life for murder?” An exhausted, puzzle face stared back at her. “What do you mean pet, Im a fitter from Byker”. Of course, the Police had switched the number to avoid press coverage – and the piece never made it to the screen – but this story illustrates the tenacity and conviction of Dianne Nelmes, who, from a very early age, wanted to broadcast the “real-life” experiences of every section of society.

Educated in Wokingham, Berkshire, Dianne travelled “up north” for the first time to read Politics and Economics at Newcastle University in 1970. Several of her lecturers remember her clearly, such was the impact she made. Despite performing well in her studies, she held several key roles as a student, and produced highly influential work of civic importance. A journalist with *The Courier*, the Newcastle University student newspaper, she reported on social issues for the first time, including homelessness and poverty in Newcastle, a topic that remains close to her heart.

First and foremost, Dianne is interested in people. Her early articles were based on firsthand experience sleeping rough on the streets of Newcastle upon Tyne. But despite the personal hardship, she wrote with no “by-line” – so many of her stories could not be directly attributed to her pen. This set the scene for her future career – a top-flight journalist, often working behind the scenes, be it as a researcher, or later as a TV producer, allowing others to take credit for her genuinely ground-breaking work.

On completing her degree, Dianne was elected president of the Newcastle University Students’ Union. This was a time of economic strife, similar to the present day, with high-profile student protests. Dianne was then a firey student leader, who led an occupation of the Students’ Union just across the road from here. You will be pleased, Mr Vice-Chancellor, that the then VC was left undisturbed. As now, the Union President and VC held each other in mutual respect.

Given her talent for leadership and dedication to addressing social injustice, it is perhaps surprising that Dianne did not chose a career in politics. Instead she began learning another skill as a Graduate Trainee Journalist, initially with the Hemel Hempsted *Evening Echo*, and then, drawn back to her second home, with the Newcastle *Journal*, before being drawn away from print journalism into live television.

Working as a BBC Look North reporter, she rapidly gained a national reputation for investigative journalism, before moving to Granada Television in double-quick time. There she became Assistant News Editor for Granada Reports, and

won a job researching for World in Action, ITV's award-winning investigative current affairs programme. She produced and directed Brass Tacks for the BBC for short period in 1987, before returning to Granada and taking television by storm.

A staunch supporter of women's issues, she fought hard to change entrenched attitudes embedded in the broadcasting industry about the relative unimportance of women as a target audience. So, in 1988 she took a huge gamble, launching *This Morning*, hosted by the then unknown Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan. And not only that, she produced the national show outside London, on the Liverpool Albert Dock. This single manoeuvre turned day-time television "on its head". Its overnight success made it a credible broadcasting medium, and led to several TV awards for the programme content and its presenters.

As Launch Editor, Dianne watched every episode live from her office. Being live television, there were....one or two....near catastrophes, each avoided by her firm and incisive intervention. I am sure she will remember her close encounter with belly-dancers who, during the course of their performance, crossed the line of decency during a live broadcast....well, almost Mr Chancellor. However, Dianne's instant instruction to the camera man to "cut away", saved many a viewer from choking on their cornflakes. And her firm grasp of the live TV whilst on-air led one Trade Union leader to call her "the iron butterfly".

During this time, Dianne launched several ITV blockbusters, including *Stars in their Eyes*, and the first script of *You've Been Framed* was written on her

kitchen table. Colleagues remember Dianne's level headedness during this frothy period. She had an eye to spot talent and get the very best out of people. Having worked as an on-screen reporter in Newcastle, she understood and was respected by many national TV icons.

But despite her innate ability to develop and deliver mass entertainment across the United Kingdom, her interest in current affairs took her to even greater heights. She returned to *World in Action* as Executive Producer, and became Controller of Factual Programmes, spanning diverse topics from sport to documentaries, before being appointed the first ever Controller of Daytime Television for ITV. There she created *Loose Women*. I'm sure I do not have to remind you about this programme Mr Chancellor, which was lunchtime talk-show that won several national awards.

In the early 2000s she commissioned several cutting-edge documentaries, including *Kelly and her Sisters*, an harsh expose of child poverty in Great Britain. This won every major television prize, including a BAFTA and the prestigious Grierson Award. She also produced *Lad's Army*, re-enacting 1950s National Service army training, whilst holding creative responsibility for all ITV Regional TV Companies and national Daytime and Lifestyle programming.

In 2008 Dianne joined Liberty Bell Productions as Managing Director, based in London and Newcastle upon Tyne, where, amongst other things, she has shown her commitment to Northern Film and Media in the practical support of independent TV-documentary making in the North East. Their recent productions include *Lakes on a Plate* about our local Cumbria, *Al Murray's*

German Adventure, Frank Skinner on George Formby, and several Grumpy Guides to food, work, and driving – topics that I suspect we can all relate to.

Despite her national profile, and extraordinary productivity, Dianne has remained committed to the North East of England. Some might say it is her second home, given her tendency to shed the odd tear as she crosses over the Tyne Bridge (and this is not just when competing in the Great North Run, in which she is now an avid competitor). She actively engages industry in our region, and has provided unstinting, enthusiastic support for Newcastle University – both in her work here with our students, and also at the highest level in the broadcasting industry. Dianne is approaching the end of her term as our Visiting Professor in Media and Journalism, but already there are plans afoot for her ongoing engagement with our University in several key domains, from curriculum development to arranging high-quality industrial placements. What better role model could our students have?

Mr Chancellor, Dianne Nelmes is quite an exceptional woman who is described by many as the “Queen of daytime TV” - but there were no media or “show-biz” connections in her family. She was the first in generations to go to University. She has been driven by a sense of “what is right”, always striving to find the best in people, with what her colleagues describe as a folk-like charm. And she has done this behind the scenes – allowing others to steal the limelight - launching household names, including Jeremy Kyle, Trisha Goddard, Vanessa Feltz, and Jerry Springer.

Mr Chancellor, it is almost certain the lives of each member of this Congregation have been touched by Dianne. Although, at the time, they

probably did not realise who was behind their favourite prime-time TV show, or who had the courage to expose politically and culturally sensitive issues through “real-life” documentaries. But in many respects, this should come as no surprise. As Union Society President and Courier journalist she demonstrated her strong sense of justice, underpinned by huge creativity, allowing her to communicate to all. A Fellow of the Royal Television Society, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and a member of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, we are honoured that Dianne strives so hard to maintain her links with the North East and Newcastle University, which she tirelessly supports. I therefore ask that you bestow upon her the degree of degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Patrick Chinnery

18th July 2011