**PRESS RELEASE**

**SIGHT LOSS IN THE SPOTLIGHT: TAKING CENTRE STAGE**

**Hayley Mills and Dame Judi Dench in conversation with Stephen Fry for the Vision Foundation**

Three of the biggest names in show business are coming together on 25 February 2021 to pay affectionate tribute to acting legend Sir John Mills. Taking Centre Stage*,* an exclusive free virtual event, will launch the Centenary Appeal and 100th anniversary celebrations of the Vision Foundation, one of his favourite charities.

Dame Judi Dench and Stephen Fry, two of Sir John’s closest friends, and his daughter Hayley Mills, will share their personal memories and stories of one of our most beloved stars and reflect on how he lived and worked with deteriorating sight.

Taking Centre Stage is the first in the Vision Foundation’s Sight Loss in the Spotlight centenary series of events, which over the coming year will bring together high-profile people from different industries and areas of life to challenge misconceptions and explore ways to remove the barriers to work faced by blind and partially sighted people.

For the last 20 years of his life Sir John lived with sight loss, caused by macular degeneration. Although it was gradual it greatly affected his life as he struggled to distinguish faces and watch the cricket, football and tennis that he so loved. However, he then found ways to continue his stage and screen work, keep up his spirits and maintain his independence until shortly before he died in 2005.

As a Senior Vice President of the Vision Foundation Sir John brought attention and support for the charity’s work through his huge network, which his daughter Hayley Mills remembers as being hugely important to him:

*“My father supported the Vision Foundation long before he lost his sight because he cared so passionately about those less fortunate than others.  He knew people listened when he spoke and he could command the attention of an audience.  He used that incredible power and opportunity to make a difference.  And of course when he lost his own sight that became even more powerful.  I wanted to be a part of this event, and support the Vision Foundation, because my father’s work isn’t yet done.  So, in his memory, I want to keep this camera rolling.”*

Sir John shared a sense of humour and fun with Dame Judi, whom he first met when they topped the bill of The Good Companions in 1974. She famously described him as “*the most charming and the naughtiest man I have ever met*." Like him, she has been able to continue her hugely successful career while living with macular degeneration and is delighted to be part of an event which tackles the stigma attached to the loss of sight. As she explains,

*“I can still work, millions of visually impaired people across the globe can still work.  Yet, people seem totally spooked by sight loss.  What feels special about this event and the work of the charity the Vision Foundation, is that it seeks to think about sight loss differently.”*

Stephen Fry was friends with Sir John for many years and worked with him in his final film role, “I directed Johnny in my film Bright Young Things*,”* he recalls. “*It was his last ever performance and I remember the pride and pleasure I took in telling everyone, cast and crew that they were going to work with one of the greatest screen actors Britain had ever produced, Sir John Mills!*”

Blind and partially sighted people face a double challenge when seeking work – first, the practical impact of their visual impairment, and second, the misunderstanding and stigma that prevents potential employers from seeing past the disability. The result is that only one in ten blind people were in work, compared to 8 in 10 sighted people, even before the job market was hit by the global pandemic. The Vision Foundation believes this is an unacceptable statistic. A feeling shared by Stephen Fry:

“*I fundamentally believe that we all want to live in a world where everyone is enabled to flourish.  So, I agree wholeheartedly with the Vision Foundation that losing your sight, should not mean losing your right to be seen, to be counted or to work.  Johnny epitomised someone who kept working and was very much in the public eye, whilst going blind.  I know he would want others to have that same opportunity.”*

*“What better way to launch our Centenary Appeal than with this tribute by three national treasures to a fourth, the late great Sir John Mills?”* says Vision Foundation Chief Executive Olivia Curno. “*Like so many, Sir John managed a very successful career alongside his sight loss for two decades. That was possible because people recognised his expertise and talent each time he stepped on to set and made small adjustments and adaptations so that he could continue in the job he loved.”*

*“The stigma of blindness is still the single biggest thing that stands in the way of blind and partially sighted people finding work. The Vision Foundation is determined to stop this waste of talent and potential.”* She continues, *“In 2021, our one hundredth year, there is a huge opportunity. The pandemic has shown us how working practices can adapt overnight and how flexible employers can be. We must harness this mindset to ensure that as we return and rebuild, we include and empower.”*

Taking Centre Stage*,* the first in the Vision Foundation’s Sight Loss in the Spotlight series of events to celebrate its centenary, will be broadcast online from 6.45pm on Thursday 25 February 2021. To register for this free event please follow: <https://www.visionfoundation.org.uk/spotlight>

**Ends here.**

For further information and interviews, please contact Mark Ellis, the Vision Foundation’s Head of Communications on 020 7620 4961 or [MEllis@visionfoundation.org.uk](mailto:MEllis@visionfoundation.org.uk)

**THE VISION FOUNDATION** is London’s leading sight loss charity supporting the city’s best projects for blind and partially sighted people. In 1921 the charity was set up to support and give a voice to blind and partially sighted people across London. The charity celebrates its centenary anniversary in 2021 and is launching its biggest fundraising appeal in its history; to raise £1m to fund employment projects for blind and partially sighted people in the capital.

With a mission to make London a shining example of a sight loss aware city, the Vision Foundation works to transform the lives of people facing or living with sight loss by funding projects which inform, empower and include. Over the last 100 years, they have distributed more than £30m to sight loss organisations to fund vital innovative projects that are changing lives. [www.visionfoundation.org.uk](http://www.visionfoundation.org.uk)

**USEFUL STATS**

* Only 1 in 10 blind people is in work compared to 8 in 10 sighted people.
* Only 6% of the general public think a blind person could do their job. \*
* Although the disability employment narrative has been building over the past decade, employment rates for blind and partially sighted people are actually getting worse – and that was the case even before the pandemic.
* In London alone, there are approx. 40,000 working age visually impaired people who are unemployed. Enough to fill the equivalent of 500 double decker buses of wasted potential.
* Barriers to employment include: the assumptions of potential employers, low confidence from repeated rejections, inaccessible routes to work and a lack of access to the right support and technology.

\*results based on a YouGov survey carried out by the Vision Foundation in September 2019.