**PRESS RELEASE – EMBARGO 20.30 25th FEBRUARY 2021**

**DAME JUDI DENCH REVEALS EXTENT OF SIGHT LOSS IN ONLINE CHARITY EVENT**

**<<video clips of Dame Judi Dench available at this link:** [**https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ok2hy6cdjnnr2s0/AAB8uW9eSv20b5JNiNAh65swa?dl=0**](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ok2hy6cdjnnr2s0/AAB8uW9eSv20b5JNiNAh65swa?dl=0)**>>**

Dame Judi Dench described how she continues to work with deteriorating eyesight at an intimate online event with Stephen Fry and Hayley Mills for the Vision Foundation, London’s sight loss charity on Thursday 25 February 2021.

Dame Judi explained how she has learnt to adapt as her eyesight has changed in recent years:

*“You find a way of just getting about and getting over the things you find very difficult. I’ve had to find another way of learning lines and things, which is having great friends of mine repeat them to me over and over again. So I have to learn through repetition, and I just hope that people won’t notice too much if all the lines are completely hopeless!”*

Taking Centre Stage*,* an exclusive free virtual event which remains accessible until 6pm on Sunday 27 February 2021, brought three of the biggest names in show business together to launch the Centenary Appeal and 100th anniversary celebrations of the Vision Foundation, one of the favourite charities of the great actor Sir John Mills. The evening celebrated Sir John’s long life with his daughter Hayley and two of his closest friends, Dame Judi and Stephen Fry.

For the last 20 years of his life Sir John lived with sight loss, caused by macular degeneration which is the biggest cause of sight loss in the UK, affecting more than 600,000 people, a condition Dame Judi also shares:

*“My mother had it as well and now Finty, my daughter, goes and has her eyes checked. It is intensely irritating. But it does enable you to do one thing and that is that you have to get very close to people before you can recognise who they are. During lockdown I made a film with Ken Branagh and I was up close addressing people wearing masks during rehearsals, nothing to do with any scene I’m in. It’s kind of exquisite if you can do that and that’s the good side of it, and you have to look at that side of it.”*

She continued, *“…somebody you know very well, you can walk straight past them and not know who they are, that’s tricky, and learning lines. But you adapt to it. And I don’t want it to interfere.”*

Taking Centre Stage is the first in the Vision Foundation’s Sight Loss in the Spotlight centenary series of events. Over the coming year the charity is bringing 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.

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.

As a Senior Vice President of the Vision Foundation Sir John Mills brought attention and support for the charity’s work through his huge network of friends and industry contacts, 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.”*

The Vision Foundation is aiming to raise 1 million pounds during its centenary year to invest in projects supporting blind and partially sighted people into work as well as working with employers to break down the barriers visually impaired people face in the workplace. Vision Foundation Chief Executive Olivia Curno says, “*Like so many, Dame Judi Dench manages a very successful career alongside her sight loss. It’s possible because people recognise her expertise, star quality and talent each time she steps on to set and make small adjustments and adaptations so she can continue in the job she loves and we all love watching.”*

*“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 also features nine-year-old Eleanor Stollery (and her parents Tim and Kelly), a young blind actress who played Tiny Tim, as one of four characters sharing the role, in the recent production of *A Christmas Carol* at The Old Vic in London.

Taking Centre Stage is available online until 6.00pm on Sunday 27 February 2021. To find out more 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

**Video clips featuring Dame Judi Dench, Hayley Mills and Stephen Fry available at this link:** [**https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ok2hy6cdjnnr2s0/AAB8uW9eSv20b5JNiNAh65swa?dl=0**](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ok2hy6cdjnnr2s0/AAB8uW9eSv20b5JNiNAh65swa?dl=0)

**Video clips:**

* 01 Dame Judi Dench – age-related macular degeneration
* 02 Dame Judi Dench – doing the Winter’s Tale
* 03 Dame Judi Dench – learning new ways
* 04 Stephen Fry - Noel Coward discovered John Mills

All clips feature Dame Judi Dench, Stephen Fry and Hayley Mills

(Clip 03 also features nine-year-old Eleanor Stollery with parents Tim and Kelly)

**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**

* Age-related macular degeneration generally affects people over the age of 55 and is the biggest cause of sight loss in the UK, affecting more than 600,000 people.
* 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.