Pen Portraits Activity

This activity could be used as a starter activity for helping students to start thinking about and reflecting on our human tendency to have preconceptions of people, and how these preconceptions, if not challenged, can lead us to stereotyping and othering behaviour.

# Instructions:

1. Tell the students that they are going to hear four ‘pen portraits’ – mini biographies about people. They need to listen quietly and then silently reflect on what these portraits bring to mind for example – how do they picture the person in the description? What kind of person do they think they are? How would they describe them? These should be based on initial reactions, not overly thought about. Tell them that they do not need to share these initial reactions, but to keep them in mind.
2. Read out each of the ‘pen portraits’ below in turn. Give time for the pupils to form their initial impressions of the person described.
3. Once all the portraits have been read out, reveal that they are all describing the same (real) person.
4. Give the students time to reflect on what this means:
   1. How does this affect their initial impressions?
   2. To what extent are they having to alter these impressions after finding out it’s the same person being described in all the pen portraits?
5. Ask the students to share something they have learnt from the activity. It could be as simple as being surprised or maybe not surprised! It could be them realising how they had made assumptions about the person based just on a few facts. Some students may be happy to share these assumptions with the class, but it is not necessary for them to do so if they aren’t willing.

# Pen Portraits to be read aloud:

1. I used to be in the Territorial Army as an Infantry soldier and then an Engineer. I’m big into outdoor sports such as mountain biking, scuba diving and paddle boarding. I have sky-dived 33 times and trekked to Everest base camp. I want to take up skateboarding lessons.

2. I’m a 44 year old woman. I have short hair and don’t wear make-up. I In my spare time I enjoy playing board games and reading. I live with my partner, our dog and a lot of houseplants!

3. I was born in England but have lived in Thailand, Nepal, Canada and Sudan. I’ve also travelled in over 20 other countries, often by myself. I love visiting new places and learning about different cultures.

4. I enjoy going out with my friends and can often be found in a café having coffee and cake. I’m about to start a PhD at University. My husband is a musician.