

Inspirational Story

Debbie Teale

Debs is someone who has experienced so much trauma in her life, both personally and to her family and friends. She has survived it and grown from strength to strength, using those experiences for the betterment and support of others who have experienced such trauma.

She is the epitome of recovery through lived experience. She has grasped her life with everything she possesses and used it to shape herself, those she supports, and the mental health system has a whole. Her bravery when sharing her story is remarkable, poignant and gut-wrenching & heart-warming at the same time.

This award for Debs would give her the one thing that she does not currently possess, the same belief in herself as those who know and love her have in her.

Debs' story started as a child when she had what we would today describe as a panic attack, but was then diagnosed as having "bad nerves". This was the start of her journey in the mental health system.

As Debs moved through the mental health process, as it itself was developing, she started to acquire various diagnoses (she calls them "labels") until finally 13 years ago she reached a crisis point. She had been told that she would always be ill, on medication, in services and would never work again. As Debs was medically retired from her last job, was on 21 tablets a day and having her children care for her she thought her life was over and took an overdose. She woke up in hospital feeling such a failure and wanting to try again but do a better job next time. She describes how she was in a bed opposite a lady who was dying of cancer, and how empathetic and compassionate people were to her, whilst they were saying things about Debs like "that bed should be for someone who deserves it" and "she is just seeking attention". She describes how no one saw her pain or the illness and suffering she was living with.

Part of being discharged meant she had to go for an assessment with another service, which she did because she wanted to get out of hospital. It was at this assessment that she saw a leaflet that completely transformed her life. "Art for wellbeing". Now Debs has never been an artist (she recalls about how her children

used to ridicule her drawings when playing “quick on the draw”), but something made her go to that art session and she describes how that’s the day her life began. As she started to draw and paint something came alive and she found something that really helped her not to just believe there was hope but to make her feel better.

She initially started talking to other service users as she felt that the psychiatrist had given up on her and offered no hope that recovery was ever possible. She wanted to tell them differently. She wanted to offer that hope where it was lacking in the “system”. Soon the experts were asking her to talk at their events, to which she was initially nervous about but did so as she wanted them to see that recovery was possible and not to ever give up on anyone. The experts and talks grew and she became known to speak at prestigious events like NHS Expo, The Kings Fund, Clarence House, The House of Lords, The Houses of Parliament and the WHO in Helsinki.

As the talks and knowledge progressed Debs wanted to make sure she was giving the right message to those experts that all Service Users (the term she was labelled as) should have a voice and a choice in their own care, something that had lacked so much in her own care. She started talking about social prescribing and using creativity as a tool for people to try while they were on the long waiting lists for services.

Debs then embarked on an MSc, despite being told that it would make her ill and it wasn’t for people “like her” (she has additional learning needs). The MSc was called Mental Health Recovery and Social Inclusion. She wanted more knowledge from the service, policy and procedures side so she could be more balanced in what she was saying and offering solutions to what people were saying were problems or those that said people were “hard to reach”.

She not only completed the MSc but passed with a **DISTINCTION** and started really promoting recovery as a concept in the NHS Trust she worked in (which happened to be the same one in which the psychiatrist who told her she would never work again worked in!) She advocated for lived experience to be fully supported as they were one of the key aspects to recovery (her dissertation was on peer support and promoting lived experience)

She became the lead for peer support development and increased the peer support services massively whilst also offering a progression route for them to move through the Trust (or beyond as a few have done).

She started to advocate that service users were given a voice and tried to find ways of people being heard, not just in their care but wider. She has supported and found ways to be heard at board meetings, conferences, workshops, in local and national newspapers (opening up one service user to have conversations with an American Psychiatrist) She is currently trying to develop training to support service users being supported to tell their story in a safe way, to protect them and the people listening to their story.

More recently Debs has embarked on a personal journey to promote the lived experience through going self-employed. Promoting and making sure that the lived experience voice is not only at the table, but listened to, heard and actioned at every level. She still uses art as her wellbeing tool, and has sold over 160 paintings (although it has taken her many years to call herself an artist, she embraces the labels she has now as supporting her journey not holding her back from it.

Debs tells her story in a way that is empowering, articulate and with an air of “we must work through this together to find a solution”. She does so in a way which is not confrontational or demeaning for either the service and systems or the service users within it. Although she started by trying to give service users hope she now sees that staff also need to see that hope too and promotes staff wellbeing just as importantly as service users having a voice and choice in their care.

She delivers training to multiagency mental health workers and the Ministry of Justice/criminal justice system so they are more empathetic and supportive of people with mental health issues. She helps them see the side of mental illness that staff in these areas do not often see (as people are usually in a crisis when they reach services). Mainly focusing on recovery and wellbeing as well as giving staff a chance to have open conversations about complex emotional needs and how it feels to be at the receiving end of care, insights which they find extremely valuable.

Debs has worked at local, national and international level. She was at the launch of “Beyond Pills” campaign last year promoting the use of creativity and medication reduction, which was an All-Party Parliamentary campaign looking at 6 interventions to help reduce or cut excessive medications.

Debs is a Trustee of The National Centre for Creative Health which was formed in response to the Creative Health report, the result of a two-year inquiry led by the All

Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing. Debs was in Parliament to launch the report as well as being an advocate for lived experience.

She is supporting and promoting mental health lived experience being heard in research and being valued and paid for that expertise. Debs promotes peer support/lived experience at all levels and was the keynote speaker at the Peer Support Conference, held in Leeds by Health Education England last year. She is keen to have service users know that they are valued and can recover to a level where life is worth living, and then more by giving something back. Offering that hope that was not always there in their own care.

Debs has been off all the 21 tablets a day for nearly 11 years, out of services for over 8 years and until recently she worked in the same NHS Trust as the expert that told her she would never work again. She never held any ill will for that psychiatrist and they have now changed their work practices and how they see service users and are using creativity as an additional tool to help and assist service users after seeing Debs amazing journey. They even arranged for her to speak at a psychiatric seminar with over 100 psychiatrists present. Debs speaks as eloquently in one-to-ones as she does in front of audiences of thousands, she just wants people to see mental health differently, that there is hope, there is recovery and there is empowerment that we are all experts on ourselves,

No one can go to University to learn what it is like to be us.