

Volunteering @ Headway Tunbridge Wells – Donna Bruxner-Randall

I have been a volunteer at Headway Tunbridge Wells for over three years now and go to the centre in Tunbridge Wells every Wednesday, never quite knowing what to expect, but always coming away with a smile on my face and a sense of fulfilment!

I started when Headway was based at Pembury Hospital, and it has been good to see the successful move to Culverden Park and all the blood, sweat and tears that were involved, but what a lovely new home we now have, of which all involved are very proud.

So I arrive every week at 10am in time for a cup of coffee and chat with all the members, staff and other volunteers, most of whom I have got to know well over the past few years. There is a great mix of personalities who come to the centre on Wednesdays and I can truly say that I have become very fond of them all, despite some of them never remembering who I am, and a great chap who thinks I look like Dougal from the Magic Roundabout!

Some of the members go out on a day-trip every Wednesday to various places all over Kent. Once the staff have sorted out who is going, they all set off in the Headway mini-bus and then I help out with various activities in the centre. This can be anything from arts and crafts, a game of scrabble, cards or backgammon – one of these days I will beat you at backgammon, Baz!

Many of the members are very skilled and talented (more so than myself!) and sometimes need just to be encouraged and improve their confidence in something that they can do but may have just forgotten! Often the activities are based around seasonal events, for example Christmas, Easter, St Georges Day, Valentines, Chinese New Year etc. I have helped make Christmas cards, love hearts, hot cross buns and dragons; there is lots of variety at Headway!

Quizzes are a great thing at Headway and if I can, I often take something along that I think we will all enjoy and get our brains ticking. Recent quizzes I have found, have been identifying advertising slogans and lyrics from songs. I am amazed at what some of these guys can recall if they dig deep enough and are given a few clues!

A two course lunch is a bonus, Headway members take their food seriously and lunchtime is a lively occasion with lots of chit-chat.

I always look forward to my day at Headway. I am made to feel welcome and valued, and it is great to see members improving in their abilities after their injuries – hopefully I have helped in a small way, and there are certainly plenty of laughs along the way!

Donna Bruxner-Randall



Tunbridge Wells & District

3 Culverden Park,
Tunbridge Wells
Kent. TN4 9QT
Telephone – 01892 619001

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Volunteering @ Headway Tunbridge Wells – Mel Wickenden

Hi, my name is Mel Wickenden and I thought that I would share with you my starting experience of volunteering at Headway.

The first question that you have to ask yourself is why become a volunteer?

Volunteering is something that everyone can do, yet very few actually participate. It is easy to put your hand in your pocket or purse and give a donation to a charity, and when this happens the individual should feel good that they have given to someone who is less fortunate than themselves.

Volunteering for an organisation is one step beyond this, but the gains to you as the individual and to the charity concerned is without doubt, enormous.

During my life I have been involved with various organisations in the role of volunteer. I assume that my parents who have always been volunteers have given this trait to me.

Having worked for the same organisation for the past 38 years and now finding myself without employment I decided that I should take a 'Gap' year. This is something that many youngsters do when they have been to University prior to settling down to a lifetime of employment. OK my 'Gap year' is a bit late, but this is not uncommon with working practices today.

In true tradition of a 'Gap year' I thought it appropriate that I should do some sort of voluntary work on a regular basis. The quest was to find out how my time could be best spent. The remainder of my week is a mix between decorating/DIY, meeting friends and chilling out.

I decided that for the next year I would volunteer for one day a week. I 'surfed' the Internet for local opportunities for volunteering and then paid a visit to the Volunteer Bureau in Tunbridge Wells. I was asked to try to narrow down whom I thought that I might like to help, to three possible options. These options were The Citizens Advice Bureau, The Princes Trust and Headway.

The reason that I was attracted to Headway was that when I was very young I suffered a very serious bang to the head and was unconscious for some time. I was lucky whereas others are not.

The Volunteer Bureau put me in touch with Headway and on the 16th June 2008 I was asked to attend to have a chat with Lisa at Headway. Prior to this meeting I had supplied Headway with details of my past and my reason for wishing to become a volunteer.

Headway's home used to be at Pembury Hospital, but in early 2008, moved to its new home at Milestones in Culverden Park.

During my chat, Lisa explained what Headway was about and showed me the facilities that were available. I was able to meet some of the members who were at Headway on that day, and it seemed a place that could benefit from me volunteering.



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It was agreed that I should commence volunteering on the 30th June 2008 for a period of six weeks when I could decide if it was right for me, and that Headway could also decide if I had fitted in OK. This is really important with volunteering, as there may be a reason why things have not worked out as expected and this gives both parties an opportunity to make a decision about the future.

For my first day at Headway I arrived at about 09.45 hours and it was not long before the members visiting on that day started to arrive. The most daunting thing about the day was being introduced to so many people and trying to remember their names. This was an impossible task, and one that gave me some concern. On my way home from Headway I remember writing down as many names as I could remember. The people whom I met could be divided into three, staff, members and volunteers. In all, there must have been about 24 new people who had suddenly stepped into my life. Everyone was so friendly, and it was not long before I was able to join in the various activities that were happening.

My first day at Headway had been a strange but amazing experience. Listening to how some of the members had gained their acquired brain injury, and their stories before the incident and consequently afterwards and their road to recovery. It really does make you stop and put your own life into perspective. Having spent a day at Headway, I did have some doubts!

I do not give up easily and had agreed to the probation period. In life, it is too easy to walk away from something without giving it a fair chance. After the second/third week of volunteering at Headway I realised that I could make a difference by helping at Headway. I realised that it was not just about helping the members who had suffered from acquired brain injury, but in some cases giving help to their families by providing somewhere for the members to go and hence giving them a regular break.

Just sitting, talking and listening to the members provides an opportunity for them to share what is going on in their lives. You have to be patient, as some have difficulties in communicating. It is amazing that after a short while your communication improves and you start to understand their individual needs. At the end of the day, you have to remember that they all have to face the same daily challenges as the rest of us, as well as coping with their additional problems.

Some members show physical signs of their problems whereas others do not. My first few weeks at Headway were all about getting to know everyone and understanding their various needs. This is why it is very important to talk with them and try to understand their problems.

On a daily basis Headway is always in my thoughts. Trying to think of new activities those members could undertake.

I have set myself some small targets. Some members cannot remember things too easily. For example birthdays or where they live. By repetitive questioning and providing the answer hopefully they will remember – and yes it does happen!

Headway Tunbridge Wells is without doubt an amazing place. The staff and volunteers are all fantastic.

Anyone at any time can suffer an acquired brain injury. The members who visit Headway have all had something happen to them, which has changed their lives. As volunteers we can provide



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something that money cannot buy - time. The ability to sit down with either an individual or group of people and share an activity in whatever shape or form will either help their recovery or maintain their current standard of living.

You cannot believe what it feels like to have someone meet you on a Monday morning crying his eyes out. To ask that person what's wrong, to then be told – 'I am just so happy to see you.

Makes you think doesn't it?



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