

## Headway Member's Story

After spending some considerable time in various hospital wards the Doctors and medical staff said 'going home is probably the best thing for you'. They had done the medical stuff associated with stroke recovery and now I (and my parents) had to get into gear and move forward. Good but pretty scary!!

The scary feeling was combated by the staff of the Headways Group and their idea of befriending.

It sounds a very simple idea to try and encourage someone who has been in hospital for some time to get back out into society, safely in a stimulating, responsible and fun manner.

Take it from me the staff involved deserve lots of praise for sticking with it. They have to deal with shy individuals (myself!!) with pretty specific interests and get them into safe, fun and stimulating environments with the right folk. I can't help but admire what they do.

In theory it sounds simple but in practice must be really hard.

I guess the Befriending staff must have a selection of folk to recommend but what they achieve is nothing short of a lottery win. Wouldn't we all love that!!

The people that volunteer their time to take part in the Befriending service should also get huge thanks; without their help the whole process wouldn't work.

The first meeting must be pretty stressful for all concerned. From the Headways point of view they must want things to go smoothly; the Befriender must feel like they are preparing to attend a work interview and the befriender must feel a little tense to say the least, even nervous I guess.

In my experience after a few days of stressing the meeting day arrived. To be honest I always feel slightly shy and nervous. You'd never guess by the way I act!!

I always have concerns; will I struggle with something to say and make myself and the befriender uncomfortable; will I remember to talk and listen to what they have got to say; what will they think of me?; what am I going to think of them?

After the initial slightly bumbling five minutes the befriender and I didn't shut-up for about an hour!! In retrospect it all felt very natural and not clinical in any way; just like two mates chatting. I could almost imagine an inaudible sigh of relief from all those present, success.....

Our first proper trip out was cycling on a side by side trike on a local cycle path that was part of a country park. I'm sure it was probably stressful for those who evaluated it but, to me, it felt really natural.

On the afternoon of the bike ride I had few worries; I was trying to persuade myself to enjoy myself. After the initial getting to know the bike, the befriender and I headed off. Around two hours passed and we didn't stop chatting or laughing. In fact it was surprising just how fast time passed by. Another huge success.....

Our next trip came about as a result of a great suggestion by my Befriender; a visit to a local motor-bike show room!

To say I was really looking forward to it is an understatement.

My Befriender and I are huge fans of bikes, be they of the human powered variety or combustion powered style.

The trip began with a drive to the show-room; we were both doing the navigating which in itself was a laugh. I think we both thought we were wearing the trousers!!



Once we found the place we both went into that 'little kid' mode of being unbearably excited! That only got worse when we were inside. I pity the poor sales person!!

In a very natural manner we both wanted to look at different things. My Befriender went one way, I went the other but I noticed that he was always keeping an eye-out to see if I needed any help. Having my own space to look at things was exceptionally natural and really significant for an individual who has pretty much always got someone around. The motor bike showroom was a real treat; being free to have a look around with help if you needed it. It was a great release as well and highlighted the significance of befriending. Being able to do fun and interesting things but with a safety net.

The car journey home was interesting. Anyone observing would have had a field day! My Befriender and I didn't shut-up for 30 minutes!! Excited would be an understatement!

After our trip to the motorbike showroom and our bike ride we've been cycling together a lot as I now have a recumbent 3 wheeled trike.

Just being outside with an individual who knows me and what I can and can't do is so good. Although we both think the cycling is a great physio for me, it feels like we are heading out for a spin and a chat. I think we both get lots from it. Above all from an entirely selfish point of view, I feel it is a very normal thing to do, something that is often taken for granted when you've been recovering from a serious medical condition.

I have to admit the whole process was aided by myself and the first befriender being interested in many similar things. The next matching process would perhaps not be so straightforward.

The Headways befriending co-ordinator and I had a good chat about what I thought I needed and perhaps that a slightly different type of person would be good. I think I used the words 'I need to be challenged'; I really need to keep my mouth shut sometimes!!

On the second meeting I still had the same umpteen mental questions. Here was me trying to prepare myself not to expect success the second time round.

We met at a local cafe. After the 'to be expected of me' 5 minutes of trying to second guess a person, the same thing happened as last time. An hour or so felt like a few minutes. I noticed a collective relaxation of shoulders and neck muscles, between myself and the Befriending coordinator. I think we both had that 'a cat that got the cream' look.

Our first proper meeting was at Scottish Parliament building that was hosting a photo exhibition; this was going to be different.

As there were other folk looking at the exhibition, conversation needed to be respectfully quiet and this I thought might make it easier and less challenging.

We met up at the exhibition venue which in itself was an adventure, never been in the Parliament before.

Checking out the photo's was great. A full 10 minutes passed without me doing my usual 20 questions routine. Rather than getting into my usual 'sussing someone out' routine my befriender and I were discussing the photographs in an incredibly natural manner. At all of the photos the befriender bent down to explain the title of the picture and the subject matter.

I think it doesn't register for someone who is not in a wheel-chair that being at eye level when you are talking is much more natural. This didn't need to be explained to my befriender; she just did it without thinking.

A fantastic way to put someone at ease and not obvious at all.

We checked out around half of the photos and went for a chat; very considerate of the other folk looking at the exhibition.

We chatted away fine style in the manner you'd do with a good mate; amazing considering we had just met.

The whole time felt very natural. A different location to my first befriending experience but really natural and interesting.

After such an easy, natural first meeting we arranged to meet-up at a local museum.

The venue would be wheel-chair accessibly and as I'd not been there in around 10-15 years, really interesting.

After the usual 5 minutes of pleasantries we set off to explore. In a daft way it felt more natural wheeling myself around; it made me feel more normal. A consideration made by my befriender, once again obvious but not always anticipated by those not in a wheel-chair.

After going round many displays we came an exhibit that required some participation.

The exhibit required the individual to push some large glowing red buttons that would light-up randomly, response times would then be shown. As the exhibit was quite large we decided at the befrienders suggestion to divide the duties of button pressing; she would do the top half, I'd do the bottom half. It probably sounds quite obvious to do this but felt very inclusive and a great for us both to be involved.

After our success with the exhibit we checkout another couple of areas of the museum and went for a coffee and chat. It sounds so simple but the way things worked out it brought me closer to my befriender and made me feel like TOGETHER we were tackling things.

After two further trips to the museum and a couple of great games of table-tennis I feel we are both on the same wavelength. I know it sounds cheesy but that kind of problem solving and trying new things in a controlled, safe situation is inspiring. I think that it is one of the very important features of the befriending process let alone the change of scene and break for my folks. I should at this point emphasize that, along with me being out having fun, it also gives my folks some free-time where, if they want to, they can relax a bit.

I think that I've gained a lot from the befriending process.

In a way it is quite understandably that after a big medical process it is very important for an individual to do stimulating things in a safe controlled fashion.

Doing these things feels like a step back into normal life not to mention giving carers a break.

I guess I have been very lucky to have such great folk overseeing this process. I would call those people involved friends now. Not just those who help administer the process but the folk that volunteer their precious time.

I find it difficult to express how much I've benefited from my involvement in the scheme and I can never say enough about the whole scheme. Doing something so simple makes what might be a nerve wracking process achievable.

This is all made possible by the efforts of some very caring, hardworking folk.

I'd just like to say that it is such great scheme; one that can really make a difference for those involved, for patients, for family, for befrienders and befriending staff, FANTASTIC.....