As fresh as a daisy

A WI based in a psychiatric hospital is giving new hope to women ahead of their return to the community – and inspiring another to follow in its footsteps

Words HEATHER DAY Photography LOUISE HAYWOOD-SCHIEFER

Daisy Change WI is a unique opportunity for the patients of Fulbourn Hospital in Cambridge and its early success means that another hospital WI looks set to blossom.

The hospital specialises in helping women with mental-health problems, from depression and bipolar disorder to schizophrenia and eating disorders, as well as learning disabilities. Some are inpatients, others visit for treatment and therapy.

Daisy Change opened in July 2014, with three hospital staff on the committee, along with one carer and two service users. President Deborah Hunt is a consultant clinical and forensic psychologist.

‘We wanted this to be a vehicle for women to meet other women and ultimately help them take their place back in the community,’ she says.

Members meet twice a month at the Chitra Sethia Autism Centre, and can choose a daytime or evening slot to fit in with how they’re feeling.

‘We hope that eventually there will be mostly mental health service users and carers on our committee. We will be able to mark its real success when perhaps there’s just one staff member left on it,’ says Deborah.

Treasurer Emma Green has been amazed at the changes she’s seen in some of the women. She’s worked as an occupational therapist in mental health for many years and says, ‘They step in and are members, not patients of a psychiatric hospital.

‘There is a level of acceptance and this is a safe haven. There’s a buzz at these meetings that I’ve never seen before as a health professional.

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“I’ve helped run therapy groups for years but I’ve never seen this kind of excitement, with people wanting to get so involved. No one judges us here, no one stares.’

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difficult to make friends, but here they feel accepted for who they are and have been forming friendships, gaining self-confidence and learning new communication skills.’

There are already signs that Daisy Change is helping many of the service users adjust to making the transition from this safe haven back into the outside world.

‘Experiencing how it feels to walk into a room with 10 or more people they don’t know helps them think about how they’ll cope outside and build a future when they are back in the community,’ says Emma.

One of Daisy Change’s founding members, who does not wish to be named, says: ‘I really appreciate the way the WI has accepted me and the social life it provides, which I hope will continue when I return to living in the local community.’

Another member, who also wishes to remain anonymous, says: ‘I didn’t know much about the WI before I joined Daisy Change. I thought it would be full of old women and be boring, but a friend talked me into coming along, so I did and I have made new friends and become much more confident. Now I think the WI is a great thing!’

Joanne Croxford, a founder member of both Daisy Change and Cambridge Blue Belles WI, both in Cambridge Federation, had personal reasons for suggesting setting up a WI at Fulbourn Hospital. ‘I’m a recovering addict and I know what feeling different from everyone else is like. I’ve been clean for five years and I wanted to do something to help others, so I got a job here as an assistant to the CEO of the hospital trust,’ says Joanne.

It’s not just hospitals in which the WI has taken ground-breaking steps. Ruth Bond was instrumental in helping set up Bronzefield during her time as NFWI Chair, the first-ever WI within a prison. Speaking to me at the Arty Farty Tea Party, Daisy Change’s official launch party, she says: ‘I have seen what the WI can do for ordinary women, prisoners, and now this. If it helps just one woman it is worth it.’

Recalling how she addressed a meeting of Cambridge Blue Belles WI, Ruth says: ‘I was talking about how much the women of Bronzefield Prison had been helped by having their WI and asked the Blue Belles to think about where else it might work.

‘Joanne knew there was a need here at Fulbourn and rallied people – you have to wait until there is the need, not the other way around.’

Susan has been a Daisy Change member since it began. ‘I have bipolar disorder and epilepsy. I crept into that first meeting and just looked at the people knitting and crocheting and didn’t say a thing. But I gradually became more confident and it’s wonderful finding people who don’t care that you’re unwell.’

It’s a remarkable case of history repeating itself as there was a WI based at Fulbourn Hospital in the 1950s. But there’s one big difference – Daisy Change is outward facing, encouraging patients to get involved in the community. Members of other WIs attend Daisy Change meetings, and when women leave the hospital it is hoped that they will join their local WIs.

One member attended the WI Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace last month. Deborah says: ‘She received a great deal of support and enthusiasm for what we are doing. Members also attended the federation’s centenary dinner and thoroughly enjoyed mixing with our local WI sisters.’

Tea and Tarts WI, West Yorkshire Federation, is twinned with Daisy Change and turned out for the launch party, along with Cam City WI and LadyBirds WI.

Aidan Thomas, Chief Executive of the hospital trust, addressed the partygoers before cutting a cake strewn with edible daisies: ‘My views about the WI have changed completely. This is an astonishing WI. It is all about finding strength without being under threat. You signify optimism. The Trust realises how important this is and now plans to open a new WI in a Peterborough hospital.’

Daisy Change needs no help in making its presence known, but WI knitters and crocheters have been yarn-bombing the Trust with signature white daisies and are now asking the rest of the WI to help them raise awareness across the hospital site. 

If you would like to contribute, your daisies can be sent to Joanne Croxford, c/o CPFT, Elizabeth House, Fulbourn Hospital, Cambridge CB21 5EF.

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