

AMAZING STORIES

FACTFILE

NAME

Lisa Cox

ALTOGETHER BETTER PROJECT

Sheffield Community Health
Champions Network

WHAT SHE DID

Overcame self-harming and depression, triggered by traumatic memories of being abused as a child. Formed the TGI Friday support group for women and began volunteering on various health projects for older people. Trained as a Community Health Champion for Sheffield Well-being Consortium, gaining accredited group leader qualifications. Gained a part-time job with Gleadless Valley Community Forum, represented health champions by presenting at national conferences, leading workshops and contributing to advisory groups.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DID SHE MAKE?

Lisa recruited and supported 4 other Health Champions in Gleadless Valley as well as volunteering herself. The Champions worked with over 700 people, many of them elderly and put in over 1,600 hours of volunteering – Lisa herself contributing over 1,000 hours.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Sheffield Community Health Champions Network recruits and supports local volunteers to use their knowledge and experience to improve the health and well-being of their own communities. Delivered by 19 host organisations, the project is empowering Community Health Champions to share their skills where they are needed most.

Gleadless Valley Community Forum was set up by local people to give a voice to their community. It aims to build the capacity of the community working with local people to overcome barriers to social and economic exclusion and to take the lead in local regeneration.



**“IT’S BEEN AN
AMAZING FEW YEARS.
THE COMMUNITY
HEALTH CHAMPIONS,
THE FORUM, MY GP -
I OWE THEM MY LIFE”**

Picture this: a champagne reception at 10 Downing Street. Community workers, volunteers, government aides and journalists letting their hair down to celebrate Prime Minister David Cameron's Big Society Awards. Mr Cameron has just given a speech, thanking the volunteers for all their hard work. But Lisa Cox, who's there to represent 15,000 Altogether Better Community Health Champions, has decided that she wants to tell the PM her story personally. As he's about to leave for another engagement, she touches his sleeve.

"Mr Cameron? Have you got two minutes?"

To the people who meet her every day, Lisa is a capable and highly valued member of the community.

For the past three years she has volunteered as a Community Health Champion, helping with chair aerobics sessions and a swimming bus for older people in Gleadless Valley as well as TGI Friday, the support group she set up to help local women share their problems.

Her enthusiasm and dedication have made her an advocate for the Community Health Champions movement and she has spoken movingly of her experiences and the potential of community volunteering at national public health events including Altogether Better's "Championing Champions" in 2010.

But to focus only on Lisa's last three years would be to miss the point of her story, a story so compelling, she was prepared to pull the UK Prime Minister aside to tell it. It begins in 2003.

"I'd been away in Canada for ten years, working as a nanny," she said.

"And when I came back, I bumped into the man who abused me when I was seven years old. It was in the local shopping centre. He said: 'hello' and I just ran out crying. I couldn't believe it. I hadn't seen him since I was child. I got into my car and just sat there for an hour."

Later, when she got home, Lisa self-harmed – something she would continue to do for the next three years as her life gradually fell apart. She lost her job as a Ford Rental Assistant at Dixon Motors and, as she became more and more isolated, felt her confidence slip away.

In these dark days, Lisa's GP provided a lifeline, offering to see her every day for the year it took for counselling sessions to become available.

"I was at my doctor's every day because without that, I wouldn't have got any help. I could have cut myself very deeply and by the time I got my counselling referral I could have been dead."

In the mean time, Lisa also started to get to know people at Gleadless Valley Community Forum.

"I'd wanted to use their internet facilities to get back in touch with my friends in Canada" she said.

"While I was messaging my friends, one of the Learning Champions there must have noticed my bandages because she told me there was a course starting in a week's time that might help, if I was interested."

Although officially billed as a 'confidence building' course, the sessions, which were led by a qualified counsellor, soon became much more than that.

"It was clear that most people on the course were dealing with more than just confidence issues," said Lisa. "So it was decided that we would have some group sessions in talking – just getting things off our chests. And so, one day, I plucked up my courage and spoke up for the first time ever about the abuse.

"It was such a relief – being able to talk to people who didn't judge you; didn't think you were attention seeking or self-harming. So often, in mental health services, all you see is people writing things down on a piece of paper, filling in a questionnaire, asking if you're feeling suicidal – and that's it until the next appointment. This wasn't like that.

"After that very first course I went on, I figured, nobody else is going to help me except me. I've got to deal with whatever is going on inside myself. Having people to listen is the best help anybody can give but at the end of the day I had to decide on a day-to-day basis, not to cut myself and to be that stronger person."

The confidence Lisa drew from the group allowed her to tell her parents about her childhood experiences for the first time. And when the course finished, Lisa and the other women decided to carry on meeting to talk about the things that were troubling them. The TGI Friday Group was born.

"We formed a committee and got NHS funding to run the group and recruit new members," she said. "We say it's a 'local meeting of minds' – we're not there to advise but to listen." Lisa's involvement with the Forum started to grow and she began helping out with older people's projects, such as chair aerobics and swimming sessions. So she was the natural choice when Sheffield Well-being Consortium was recruiting new Health Champions for Altogether Better.



Lisa completed the Introduction to Community Development and Health training as well as a course in Mental Health First Aid and became an accredited chair aerobics instructor.

“I was still doing the self-help group as well as being involved with the swimming bus, the chair aerobics and the lunch club,” she said. “I’ve got my mum involved too. She’s had two hip replacements so it helps to get her out of the house.”

Meanwhile, Lisa’s wider role as an ambassador for Altogether Better was beginning to blossom. Gaining strength from the help she gave others, Lisa felt her confidence grow the more she spoke of her experiences.

“At conferences, I’ve had people come up to me and say: ‘I know someone who self-harms. Can you give me some advice on what I can do?’ So whenever I’m talking, I’m helping to heal other people as well, not just myself.”

Rhian Harding, Altogether Better Strategy and Partnership Manager, added: “Lisa is an inspiration. She’s a fantastic ambassador for women, communities and individuals helping themselves and other people. She speaks from the heart about her own experiences with an amazing amount of courage and she is able to represent health champions across Yorkshire and Humber. When Lisa speaks you know that everyone in the room is going to listen.”

Since she first shared her experience of child abuse more than three years ago, Lisa’s life has changed. She has recently moved on from Gleadless Valley Community Forum to new opportunities but remains very much part of the community. She still has her ups and downs but thanks to the support of her partner Joanne, family, friends, the network of Health Champions and Sheffield Well-being Consortium she is slowly putting her life back together.

“Self-harming is one of the hardest illnesses for people to understand. Each time, I couldn’t remember doing it. I’d look down and my arm would be covered in blood.”

“I knew I was doing it to punish myself. I blamed myself for being abused. It was only when somebody told me that it was 100% not my fault that I realised how much I was still blaming myself.

“If it wasn’t for the Forum, I’d be six feet under by now,” she said. “It’s been a place to go where I can be me. They looked past the bandages and saw that

I needed to get out of my rut and move forward. They opened doors for me without me even realising it.

“People think that money is the most important thing and without money the Forum wouldn’t exist but that’s just for the materials. It’s more valuable than anything because it actually saves lives. It saved my life. You don’t realise how important it is to have these services in your community until you need them yourself.”

Since visiting Canada last year Lisa feels she has now reconnected the two halves of her life – her friends in Canada and her family in England.

“I can talk to them all; they all know about my past,” she said.

She added: “Never in my life did I think that I would get to walk through famous black door of 10 Downing Street and talk to a Prime Minister. I thought that that was the end of my journey and that was a good healing ending – I spoke to him and got my story across.

“But then his PA took me into the Cabinet Office and said I had really touched the Prime Minister’s heart.”

Lisa is getting used to the limelight now. Following her visit to Downing Street, strangers often stop her on the streets of Sheffield to congratulate her on her achievements. She has also told her story on BBC Radio Sheffield and

“SO WHENEVER I’M TALKING I’M HELPING TO HEAL OTHER PEOPLE AS WELL, NOT JUST MYSELF”

has appeared on Channel 4’s Secret Millionaire, helping Gleadless Valley Community Forum to secure vital extra funding.

Despite all this exposure, she says the experience has taught her the vital importance of friendship and support from those closest to you.

“It’s been an amazing few years,” she said. “My family, my partner, the Community Health Champions, Gleadless Valley Community Forum, my GP – I owe them my life.”



COMMUNITY HEALTH CHAMPION

“YOU JUST GRABBED THE PRIME MINISTER AND TOLD HIM YOUR STORY!”

Karl James of the Dialogue Project had a memorable day with Lisa while collecting stories at the Big Society Awards event in London to celebrate ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

After a quick chat with the people running the project, I caught Lisa's eye, sat down and asked her about her story.

“I'm a bit shy,” she said.

“That's okay,” I replied.

“I've got plenty of time.”

“Okay,” she said.

And slowly she told me her story, for the first time:

“I'd been away for ten years in Canada and when I came back, I bumped into my abuser, and as a result, I started to self-harm.

“It took 18 months to get any counselling. But I had a wonderful doctor who said come in every other day until we get can get you sorted out with someone.

“So I did. And eventually. Well, I got better. And now, I run a group for young women with mental disorders.

Day-to-day life-changing things.

“I'm not on the dole any more. And I haven't self-harmed for two years.”

A short silence fell between us.

“That's an amazing story, Lisa,” I said.

“How would you feel about telling your story again? To everyone. If it makes it any easier, we could have a conversation about it, rather than you feeling you have to spill it all out.”

So, after some fabulous stories of swimming pools reclaimed, bus-shelters rebuilt and able bodied teenagers learning how to help disabled bodied teenagers, it felt like the moment to give Lisa the opportunity to speak.

And she started.

“I'd been away for ten years ... In Canada....”

[After that] Lisa was on a roll.

The reception that evening was at No 10 Downing St.

The famous black door was thrown open to everyone who'd won an award.

Champagne, orange juice and fizzy water flowed. David Cameron arrived as promised, shook hands, showed interest and made a heartfelt and witty speech.

It was all going to plan.

And then, as DC (as he's called at home) began to leave, he felt a hand reach out and grab the sleeve of his jacket.

“Mr Cameron?”

It was Lisa.

“Have you got two minutes? I'd like to tell you my story.”

And I heard Lisa's story a third time, while David Cameron heard it for the first time.

He listened and he was respectful in his reply. And then he had to go.

“What have I done?” Lisa squealed.

“You just grabbed the Prime Minister and you told him your story!” I said.

“But, I could never have done that before!” she said, tears streaming down her face.

“Well. You just did it now,” I said. “And you did it pretty well.”

So for now: thank you, Lisa. You are an inspiration – to me and many others. You seized the day and grabbed the jacket of power.

It feels to me like you are well on the way to being truly altogether better.

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Using evidenced based community engagement approaches and our community health champion model, Altogether Better works with others to unlock the full potential of people, patients and communities to improve their health and wellbeing and that of the people they live and work with.

We work with the NHS, Department of Health and national partners to prototype models which support Foundation Trusts, CCGs and General Practice to engage local people. We have models to support people with the self management of long term conditions, birth and parenting; LifeCheck, local needs assessment, relationship support and Roma health.

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