

Gateshead Access Panel

A VOLUNTEERS JOURNEY

Two years ago I was introduced to Gateshead Access Panel (GAP), at the time I was a mature student at Northumbria University. My self-esteem was practically non-existent. I thought I was not likely to be able to graduate. In fact, I rather thought the staff at the university had made a mistake by even allowing me to join one of the degree courses in the first place. I was living on what was very much a day-to-day basis and giving little if any thought towards the future. When I did consider it I found it seemed to be unremittingly bleak. The extent of my planning for the future was the somewhat vague idea that I would like to do work which somehow involved working with books. When life did present me with a choice I was paralysed by decision and would just wish that someone else would take responsibility for taking the decision off my hands. Looking back I probably missed out on several opportunities to help myself simply because I thought that I was not 'worthy' of being considered an equal to the 'normal' people that I would have had to come into contact with. I was worried that even the sight of me would have caused them offence. When strangers tried to speak to me in the street I would put my head down, continue walking and pretend I had not heard them. If anyone tried to physically approach me I would run and hide. At this time I lacked any vocational and interpersonal skills whatsoever.

In less than two years with the help of the others in the GAP office my life has been completely turned around. I started there as a volunteer working one day a week updating the office's files. I recall when I was new to the group being asked if I wanted to contribute to an article concerning volunteers' experiences at GAP and declining. I was afraid to do anything that would attract attention to my presence. The idea of speaking to strangers produced in me an unreasoning fear.

Since the first time I met everyone at GAP they have treated me like any other member of the community. That is, someone who is capable of learning to perform complex tasks even though I may have made the occasional mistake along the way. In the early days of my association with GAP my inability to make a decision must have been exasperating for the others who worked there. Looking back I practically needed permission from one of the others before I picked-up a paperclip from the floor.

Over time they have given me more responsibility for my work. Also the extent of my duties has increased. I now work on the reception desk two days per week and my duties include answering the phones and welcoming callers to the offices, as well as basic office administration and finances.

Gateshead Access Panel

In addition to these duties I also participate in the Focus Group, which normally meets on Fridays for the purpose of giving service providers information about how the services they provide effect the lives of people with impairments.

I have recently started helping out in a charity shop in Newcastle two days per week. This requires me to have more contact with members of the public than I would have been able to imagine myself doing before I started at GAP.

I have completed my university degree obtaining a 2-1 and I am looking forward to a career. I do not think I would have been likely to even have completed my course at university had I not had the support of my friends and the people at GAP to rely on. Although it is unfair to single any one person out for praise when everyone has been so generous with me, I have relied on Julie Earl the Volunteer Coordinator at GAP, who given me support and advice continuously throughout my volunteer placement.

Outside the office I am now finding it easier to become involved with community activities. To choose just one example I have recently joined a book group that meets in Newcastle's town centre. I had always wished I could join one of these groups but before finishing university and my association with GAP I did not have the confidence to apply. I had imagined that they would reject me at once as being beneath their notice. My future has never looked brighter than it does nowadays.

This is largely as a result of my association with GAP and is the reason I hope that GAP will continue to exist and to improve the situation for other people with impairments for many years to come.