

My Clubhouse Journey

I was first diagnosed with a chronic mental illness in 1995 after a long and sudden hospitalisation. My first in-patient admission in a psychiatric ward lasted for four months closely followed by another long admission. During my first hospitalization I was told I would never be able to work again. I began to attend the local day hospital and spent the first five years of my illness going to groups, seeing my psychiatrist and co-worker regularly, and beginning to face up to the major changes that were taking place in my life. My self-esteem and confidence was very poor.

My psychiatrist referred me to Caledonia Clubhouse in Falkirk, Scotland and I became a Clubhouse member in August 2000. When I began in Clubhouse I slowly began to spend more time there and less time at the day centre and after about two years I was able to be discharged, I still attend the day centre at times when I need more medical input when I am ill. I still see my psychiatrist, key worker and my GP and get a lot of support from them too. As well as my mental illness I have several chronic physical illnesses to cope with including diabetes and asthma.

In Clubhouse, staff and members began to engage me in the day to day work of the Clubhouse and I started to realise that I was capable of doing anything I set my mind to, with the right support. I began to engage in the Clubhouse with other members and staff and slowly my confidence and self-esteem increased and I took on more responsibility, without even knowing it!

I started to learn to use a computer, something I had never considered doing before my illness. I did a computer course in the Clubhouse with tutors from Falkirk College and I then went to a community education class in a local high school, through this I achieved my European Computer Driving License. This led eventually to me doing a Higher National Certificate in Business Administration part time over two years through Falkirk College, and my friends at Caledonia Clubhouse were there to support me with my family at my graduation ceremony. It was great having them there as they were largely responsible for me graduating – I had a long period of mental and physical illness during my second year and my doctor advised me to give up the course, but I got so much support from staff and members in the Clubhouse that I was able to finish it, my graduation was a real tribute to the Caledonia Clubhouse community.

In 2007 I began to work on a Clubhouse transitional employment placement with Falkirk Council, our auspice agency, as a part-time clerical assistant. After completing my first placement after nine months, I started to work at the Council's social work headquarters and I now work on a supported employment placement. I work for six hours a week doing mail, shredding, photocopying, mail distribution, ordering and re-stocking supplies. I really enjoy it; the people I work with are great and all so supportive. I feel that I am a real part of the team and contributing to the overall work and goals. I never thought that I would ever be able to get back to work.

I did a three-week Clubhouse training course in 2001 in Genesis training base in Worcester, Massachusetts with two Clubhouse staff, and have been very fortunate to have attended International and European Clubhouse conferences. As Clubhouse is a worldwide organisation, there is an opportunity to meet annually to discuss Clubhouse issues, network

and share ideas and examples of good practise; it is a very challenging and rewarding experience. It is great that we can come from 33 countries with all our accents and different languages but wherever you go, whatever cultural differences you may experience, Clubhouse is the same, thanks to our 36 international Clubhouse Standards.

In 2005 I had the opportunity to do my Faculty training; I went back to Worcester alone for an intensive week-long course. The Faculty is a sub-group of the International Centre for Clubhouse Development (ICCD – our governing body) and is responsible for doing certification visits to over 350 Clubhouses worldwide as part of the ICCD accreditation process. A Clubhouse member and a Clubhouse staff member of the Faculty do these visits and it involves a lot of preparation, a four day visit, verbal report and full written report and concludes with Faculty members working with the ICCD staff on the certification award. It can be very intense and tiring but it is a great experience as we can go into a Clubhouses, help them identify what they are doing well and help them with areas which need to be improved. All Faculty members commit to doing two certification visits a year as well as an annual three-day Faculty meeting. I have certified two Clubhouses in Finland, and one each in Sweden, England and Ireland. I also travelled to Australia a few months ago to do another certification visit. It is a lot of responsibility and hard work but it is such a great experience and an honour to visit other Clubhouse to help them get even stronger. I get a lot of support from Caledonia Clubhouse staff and members.

Being a member of Caledonia Clubhouse has really changed my life for the better, I am almost unrecognisable from the timid, shy, quiet person I was when I started. I now have much better self-esteem and confidence. Being in Clubhouse is a real partnership working between members and staff. We work together, trust each other, support each other and socialise together. We also go to conferences and training together as equals with equal responsibility for our own actions, we also do workshop presentations together. When I am ill, members and staff make me a card and write their individual messages, or phone me to show they care about me. When I was in hospital last year for a minor operation, I got a lovely bouquet from the Clubhouse delivered to my home; it really makes a big difference. I know I can phone Caledonia Clubhouse if I can't make it in and speak to a member of staff so there is always that support there.

Since becoming a Clubhouse member, I have been actively involved in our public relations group. I have facilitated four workshops at conferences on different subjects, and did a plenary presentation in Malmo, Sweden in front of hundreds of people and spoke for about 20mins!! When I started in Clubhouse I would barely even answer if someone spoke to me, and now I can speak up for other members and staff, a complete turn around. I have been involved in Caledonia Clubhouse public relations group since it started and I have spoken to groups of consultant psychiatrists and junior doctors, community rehabilitation teams, social work teams, student social workers, student psychiatric nurses, service user groups, voluntary agencies and church groups. During these presentations we have spoken about mental illness in general, the Clubhouse (Recovery) model and our road to recovery from our mental illness. As a Clubhouse we are working to dispel some of the myths associated with mental illness and to challenge the stigma. Other Clubhouse members and staff go to our local high school for a few days a year to do workshops on mental illness and bullying.

Because of my personal development since joining Caledonia Clubhouse I feel that I have a future to look forward to.