

## JOURNEY AT ST MAUR 26.06.06 – 31.03.08

I was referred to St Maur by Linda, my care coordinator, because my difficulties were dominating my life and affecting my physical health. I struggle with anorexia and related obsessiveness; low self esteem, low confidence and related obsessiveness. I was referred to St Maur following a phone call from my mum to Linda on my return from an obsessive five mile walk which caused me to collapse on my bedroom floor. My life consisted of numerous energy consuming rituals which I felt I had to complete in a particular way in order to burn calories and remain 'in control'. I denied myself food in order to diminish myself and because doing so made me feel 'safe'. I felt utterly trapped and largely unsupported. Although I held down a six hour a week voluntary job, I didn't feel that this was going anywhere and remained terrified of the future and unable to contemplate it on my own. I felt socially isolated but too scared to take steps to change this.

My stay at St Maur was my first time away from home. It helped me to acquire the skills a person needs in order to live independently: washing and cooking, communicating and fending for myself, self-assertion, confronting my fear of living with and talking comfortably to anyone but my family. I felt very frightened to begin with and it helped me on occasions when staff were sensitive to this and encouraged me. I feared having a cook day, on which a resident provides lunch and dinner for residents and staff. The idea of this seemed impossibly huge and I was full of dread. Consequently I was hugely grateful for staff support. On my first cook day I didn't even know how to boil potatoes. Gradually I acquired cooking skills and felt more able to cook on my own. Eventually I wanted to cook on my own. The kitchen became my laboratory and towards the end I guess I quite enjoyed preparing meals, with the radio on and feeling more comfortable about taking presence in the kitchen. I am so grateful for the opportunity to prove to myself and my family that I can live independently. Mum used to doubt that I could live on my own – she thought that university was out of the question – and it encouraged me no end when she eventually said that she now believes I can live independently.

St Maur was probably most helpful to me on a social level. I had to express and assert myself in order for others to understand my thoughts. I wanted help and this spearheaded me through fear and deep upset. I wanted others to understand my thoughts so that they could react to me as an individual. I have come to feel understood by staff and this means such a lot to me. But equal to feeling understood, I find it helpful to feel accepted as a human being. It helped me to have 'normal', 'everyday' conversations and to laugh and joke with members of staff. This helped me to feel more able to relate to others in social situations than I had dared to hope was possible. I did initially fear staff changeovers and not knowing who would be on duty but I came to see this as a challenge and eventually it made me feel good to know that I could talk, in some way, to whoever was on duty. I also realised that it's okay to relate to people differently and to feel more able to talk to some than others.

There were occasions when I disagreed with staff, when I felt frustrated and misunderstood, but it is encouraging to know that we overcame those disagreements by talking and through honesty. I astounded myself in expressing my opinion. I feel that doing so is fundamental in a therapeutic environment in order to receive an informed and individual response and I guess that this motivated me to talk through fear, frustration and upset. Feeling supported through disagreements, when I feared I would be despised and abandoned, reassured me that people are not so fickle and that it's okay to disagree – and that disagreeing actually brings people together by increasing their awareness of each other. I hope I can apply this to relationships outside St Maur. I do feel like I can be a more assertive person and people have told me that I am. Groups helped me initially because they forced me to express my

opinion in front of other people. I was always terrified of talking in front of groups of people but I feel a little more able to do so now.

My relationship with my key worker, Mary, was fundamental. We now laugh about how scared of her I felt at first and how I thought she hated me. It took courage to attend our first key-working session, believing I was about to open my heart to someone who couldn't possibly like me! But I'm glad I did. I grew to trust, respect and admire Mary and I am incredibly grateful to her for her support and belief in me. I value that Mary is always honest and will tell you what she thinks so you know where you stand. I really do feel that she knows me and I value her opinion immensely.

I must also say that it helped me so much to have friends in Jess and Molly, St Maur's resident cats. Animals provide a lot of comfort.

Julie accompanied me to Opportunities to meet Matt, who later introduced me to Sarah. I met with Sarah, and subsequently Liam, to discuss voluntary work and my interests. Sarah accompanied me to the voluntary bureau in Newton Abbot where I spoke to Sue about my options. Without Sarah's support I don't think I would have initiated a visit to the voluntary bureau. It just helped to have her there and before long I felt able to talk to Sue myself and Sarah left us in order to attend an appointment. Sarah also accompanied me on my first visit to Oxfam to talk to the managers about volunteering. I felt really frightened but Sue and St Maur were encouraging and so I endeavoured to complete and submit the application form I was given. I started at Oxfam the following week. Oxfam was a huge step for me. I progressed from working upstairs, pricing records, to venturing downstairs now and then, to having a regular slot on the till. I tentatively spoke to other volunteers at Oxfam and gradually began to feel like part of the team. It makes me feel happy to say that I feel valued there and think of the other volunteers as friends. I feel more confident about talking to members of the public and (dare I say it) I feel a tad more 'normal'!

I moved to St David's Road on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008. I feel that the move itself should have been better considered but the subsequent care package I am receiving is valuable because it helps me to feel as though I have not been abandoned and it gives me something to focus on when I feel alone. During my stay at St Maur I came to think of staff as friends and so it helps to talk to people I feel I can trust and who understand me. For this reason it is incredibly helpful for me to continue to meet with my key worker Mary on a weekly basis.

I don't know if this is supposed to be a formal summary but I just have to say "thank you, guys" for everything. St Maur has changed my life for the better and equipped me with skills I truly doubted I'd ever acquire. I hope the re-modelled St Maur enables you to help many more people to come. I believe the most important thing you offer is yourselves as human beings and for that I send you lots of hugs!

*Names have been changed.*