

# Donald Galbraith - A Befriender's Diary: Seven Years In



Donald and Michael, Leonard Cheshire, Edinburgh

To be honest, I think I was scared stiff of working with people with physical and/or learning disabilities. Not because I thought they were strange, threatening or different but because I doubted my own ability to cope in such a situation and was unsure about whether I had anything to offer.

Winston Churchill said: "Ninety percent of my worst feared disasters have never happened to me." This is what, I think, prevents more people, particularly men, from volunteering: fear; groundless, but real fear.

Leonard Cheshire from the outset were very welcoming and supportive. Under their befriending scheme, I was paired with a guy called Michael who was roughly my age. At the start, I thought I would probably do a few weeks. That was seven years ago!

In the early stages each visit was, if not an ordeal, then certainly a challenge. Generally, we went to the cinema or out to the Botanical gardens. I was initially not relaxed, fearing the responsibility for any unforeseen ac-

cident. Also, conversation was quite hard as we exhausted all the usual subjects.

But almost surreptitiously, weeks turned to months and I remember the shock of the first time that I realised I was looking forward to the next outing. It was also helpful that I was getting to know the staff at his residential home.

Inevitably, the odd disaster did come along. The chair broke on one cinema visit, we got caught in heavy rain with no waterproofs on another. But coping with these served to increase my confidence and strengthen our relationship.

The final shock came with the realisation that Michael really mattered to me and to my existence. Our friendship brought a sense of balance and meaning to my life and I was as incapable of walking away from this commitment as I was from golf, my favourite pastime.

It's a cliché (but like so many, true) that I

have got so much more from my friendship with Michael than I have given him. He has become my friend and self-appointed adviser in all kinds of ways. He has taught me some really important lessons for life.

Our activities are varied. I have gone with Michael to the theatre, done pitch and putt and we have plans to go fishing.

One tip I would give anyone embarking on such an adventure is for the person you are befriending to learn about your life too - it's not just one way. This is stimulating for everyone and provides things to talk about going forwards.

Befriending started as a challenge but has provided me with one of the most important aspects of my life. I would encourage anyone who is considering it to take the bull by the horns. Banish those groundless fears: it might just be one of the best things you will ever do.

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