

DIARY OF A BEGINNER

Somehow, I'm now three months into my match. I'm not sure how many times we have met up, and to be honest, I'm really not sure whether I am making a difference. I also haven't yet managed to find the time to wade through or consult my huge folder of hand-outs.

On the one hand, everything we were told during training has been true; on the other, nothing could have prepared me for what the last few months have been like: the disjointed patterns of conversation; the monosyllabic answers; the silences.

Nothing could have prepared me for the routes my conversations often end up going down: the time I tidied up my kitchen cupboards, the latest buy one get one free offers; moaning about the hassle of getting bags of coal up three flights of stairs. Anything in other words that brings the outside world in without giving too much away. Believe it or not I'm also watching things on TV that I'd never normally watch just to make sure there's always something to discuss.

There's so much to learn: how and when to pass comment; how to maintain a professional distance; how to build up a sense of trust; how or whether to build upon the previous week's conversation. The most difficult thing is not having anything to compare my befriending experience to and not having any colleagues to discuss things with. A lot of the time I feel like I'm the only employee working alone in an office where the phone only rings twice in three months: once for a four-week review and once for a three-month review. It's ironic how isolated you can feel when your brief is to tackle isolation.

I do feel very lucky to have met my befriender and I'm looking forward to 2005. Even though we're from different walks of life, I know that we would have been friends wherever we would have met and that is something that I am really holding onto.

SPOTLIGHT ON A CURRENT MATCH



I met 'C' when she was 10 years old. When I was interviewed to become a befriender I did mention that I would prefer an older child because as a teacher I have dealt with teenagers for more years than I care to mention. Now 'C' is very much a teenager: when I

met her she had a white face and dark hair, she now has a brown face and blonde hair! I have spent quite a few afternoons trying to extol the virtues of a more natural shade of foundation and a darker shade of hair colouring ...

What has being a befriender meant to me? It has brought me immense pleasure. I decided from an early stage that my influence would be slight, if any. We discussed how difficult life sometimes is and when we were together we would plan to forget all the bad times and just have fun. And a lot of fun we had. Initially, we did all the things I thought a 10-year-old would enjoy: we drove out of town, went to parks, castles, saw animals, played games, ate ice cream, had picnics and BBQs.

She loves meeting my grown up children who make a fuss of her. We take her somewhere special for each birthday. Despite all this, she still remains, as she was when I met her, introverted and shy. I am watching her struggle with quite a few teenage problems, some of which worry me. I wish I could help her more but I have to be realistic. She is a very kind and caring girl and I can only give her mum full credit for this.

Befriending is a big commitment and at times it is trying, frustrating and very difficult. I would like to thank my project for their immense support—they always seem to come up with the right practical advice when needed. I would also like to thank 'C' for enriching my life—she has taught me so much and I sincerely hope that she still wants to befriend me in the years to come.

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